

# WEST BENGAL COMMISSION FOR BACKWARD CLASSES

## REPORT ON HAJJAMS

### 01. Hearings and meetings

01.1 Shri Firoz Ahmed and Shri Akhtar Hossein, both sons of Shri Tazamul Hossein of Bharat Saloon, Satyen Bose Road, Banipur, Howrah-711304 had applied to the National Minorities Commission alleging that the local Block Development Officer had refused to entertain their request for grant of a certificate declaring them as an OBC as they belong to the barber community, which according to them, has been declared by the State Government as an OBC for the Hindus. They claimed that they belonged to Hajjam community and worked as barbers. They tried to draw the analogy that if barbers belonging to Hindu community are eligible to get OBC certificate, they should also get similar benefit. The District Magistrate, Howrah intervened and their application was forwarded to the Backward Classes Welfare Department seeking instructions on the issue. This finally reached the Commission. Thereafter as per requirement of the Commission, the applicants were asked to fill in the prescribed proforma for consideration of their case. The proforma was inadequately filled in and thereafter, the Cultural Research Institute of the Backward Classes Welfare Department was consulted.

01.2 Having examined the contents of the application of the two brothers, information furnished both in the proforma and those furnished by the Cultural Research Institute, the Commission felt that there was a prima-facie case for investigation into the claims of the applicants to find out whether people belonging to Hajjam community were actually backward – educationally and socially and accordingly, whether they deserve to be recommended as a backward class to the State Government.

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01.3. The information furnished by the Cultural Research Institute (CRI) was based on a sample survey conducted by them on a small number of Hajjam population (1222 in number) consisting of 256 families scattered in the districts of Howrah, Burdwan, Hooghly, Murshidabad and North & South 24-Parganas. The information furnished by Cultural Research Institute (CRI) after the survey was rather sketchy and suffered from self-contradiction at places. While analysing family size, it has been stated that the average family size is lower than the State average, but in the concluding part, large family size has been cited as one of the reasons for their backwardness. Similar contradiction has been noted when the educational status of the community has been analysed. However, in its report, the shift in traditional occupation of the community has been highlighted which has been attributed to economic necessities. Their poor economic condition, including their living condition has also been narrated. Finally, the Cultural Research Institute (CRI) has concluded that poor economic and living conditions, large family size, high drop out rates, etc. have contributed to the educational and social backwardness of the community. This Commission from the information furnished, could appreciate the reasons and background for educational backwardness but failed to understand the rationale for identifying the community as a socially backward one. The analysis of the information generated by Cultural Research Institute (CRI) does not conclusively indicate social backwardness. To clear these confusions and contradictions, the Commission accordingly decided to undertake investigation on its own by visiting both urban and rural areas of a few districts where generally there was considerable concentration of people belonging to Hajjam community. In order to generate correct data and information on the community, both municipal and panchayat areas were intended to be covered by the investigation.

01.4. The Commission initiated the investigation by hearing the people who claimed to belong to Hajjam community residing in Dhaniakhali Block/Panchayat Samity of Hooghly district in the month of November, 2006. In that hearing, Block and Sub-divisional level Government officials, Panchayat representatives and villagers belonging to Hajjam Community were present. The Commission had given opportunity to members of the Hajjam community to make their submission jointly as well as severally. The representatives of Hajjam community submitted that they, at one point of time, used to be looked down upon by members of other Muslim communities. At present, things have changed and they are treated at par with other sections of the Muslim community. Though generally marriage is restricted within the people belonging to Hajjam community, there are a few instances of marriages with other sections of Muslim community. In this Block in particular, the degree of educational backwardness of people belonging to Hajjam community was not that high and was perhaps comparable to other sections of Muslims and Hindus. Economically also they did not appear to be very much backward. Some of the members of this community are employed and also engaged in business. It is claimed by the members that they generally perform circumcision and do not prefer to work as barbers. The Panchayat representatives and Block and Sub-divisional level Government officials were of the view that the Hajjam community should be included in the list of Backward Classes.

01.5. The hearing in Dhaniakhali Block was followed by two hearings conducted on 09.02.07 in Rishra Municipality of Hooghly district and Sankrail Panchayat Samity of Howrah district. During the hearings in the two places, two conflicting pictures emerged. It appeared that while the people of Hajjam community living in Sankrail Panchayat Samity area were financially well-off and dependents of many families had attained average educational standard, those living in Rishra Municipality area were lagging behind in both the parameters.

The reason could be that those living in Sankrail Panchayat Samity claimed to have migrated from U.P. and their forefathers used to work in Jute Mills. Their mother tongue was Urdu, though they also spoke in Bengali language. In both the places, apart from circumcision, they also work as barbers. They have not highlighted intra-community discrimination though as per their statement, they prefer to make marital relations with families belonging to Hajjam community. In both the places, elected representatives have recommended inclusion of Hajjam community in the list of Backward Classes. Interestingly, the Chairman, Rishra Municipality did express his apprehension of the problems that might arise when the question of identifying that a family really belongs to Hajjam community arises in future, when members of the community apply for grant of certificates..

01.6. To get a clearer picture of the social and educational status of the people belonging to Hajjam community, the Commission visited Bharatpur-II Panchayat Samity of Murshidabad district and heard the people on 06.3.07 in the presence of Government officials and Panchayat representatives. The people who appeared before the Commission submitted that their basic profession though remained circumcision, but on account of encroachment on their profession by qualified and village doctors, their average income had plummeted. Some of the members of the families have started working in the Biri-making factories. School dropout rate was very high. According to the representatives of this Panchayat Samity, they felt that there was discrimination towards the members of the Hajjam community by other sections of Muslims. They have remained economically weak. Like other parts of the State, here also the number of members of the community is insignificant. Government officials and elected representatives expressed the view that people belonging to Hajjam community are not given equal treatment by other Muslims and they felt that there was justification to include Hajjam community in the list of Backward Classes. They did not elaborate whether this sort of discrimination was for economic reasons or for social reasons.

01.7. The hearing in Raninagar-I Panchayat Samity of Murshidabad district was conducted on the same day. Here also, the picture was nearly similar to that in Bharatpur-II Panchayat Samiti. The people here are also suffering on account of the activities of doctors, both qualified and village quacks in the matter of circumcision and the community, as a whole, does not enjoy any respect from non-Hajjam Muslims. The people are economically weak and many of them are looking for alternative sources of income by working as day labour, in the field as agriculture labour or working in biri factory. Many of the representatives of the community appeared to be landless or marginal farmers and most of them lived in thatched houses and on Government or vested land.

01.8. On the same day the Commission had also visited Jalangi Panchayat Samiti to hear the people of Hajjam community. The picture here is also not different. Very few people belonging to Hajjam community have passed secondary and higher secondary examinations and most of the villagers were illiterate or semi-literate. Though they have stuck to their traditional profession, for the sake of earning their livelihood, they work as day labour. The villagers have remained deprived of most of the urban amenities like electricity, telephone and sanitary latrines. It has been stated by some of the villagers that socially they are not treated at par with other Muslims and a feeling of discrimination exists like other places. Their traditional profession has been eroded as the people who can afford, prefer to approach qualified or village doctors for getting their sons circumcised. Government officials and Panchayat representatives have stated that they are trying to remove illiteracy from amongst the community and also to bring down the school drop out rate.

01.9. The Commission came to learn that in Bhangar-I and II Panchayat Samities of South 24-Parganas district majority of the population is Muslim. Accordingly, the Commission decided to hear the people belonging to Hajjam community in these two Panchayat Samities on 20.6.07. It was also felt by the Commission that in order to take a judicious view on the issue, collection of more information on the status of Hajjam community would be helpful. In Bhangar-I Panchayat Samity, the Hajjam population is concentrated in two villages, while in Bhangar-II Panchayat Samity they are only in one village. In both the Panchayat Samities, the people are generally very poor, either landless or marginal farmers. Most of them are still following their traditional profession. But, as usual, on account of the encroachment by the medical practitioners and village doctors, the number of clientele is on the decline. Only the poor people opt for their services now-a-days. For their survival, they work as agricultural labourer or daily wage earner. Some of them work as barbers. The family size is generally large and as a result, head of the family finds it hard to support such families. School drop-out rate is very high and children are engaged in some sort of work at a very tender age. As far as their social status is concerned, two conflicting views were placed before the Commission. While one group of villagers particularly, the elderly ones, felt that there was no discrimination and for all practical purposes, they were treated at par with other sections of Muslims and got respect from them, the other section of Muslims felt that since they were poor, particularly those who were educated and affluent, avoided mixing with them and gave the impression that their social status was inferior to theirs. Of course, there were instances of marriage with non-Hajjam families like Sheiks, Saiyads, etc. But these are not very common. The Government officials and Panchayat representatives while making their points mentioned that strictly from religious angle, there was no difference amongst various sections of Muslims. On account of their economic and educational backwardness, they had failed to join the mainstream of Muslim culture. It transpired during discussions with Panchayat representatives that the Hajjam families were yet to get any benefit from the developmental schemes implemented by the Panchayat Bodies. They, however, requested for their inclusion in the list of Backward Classes.

01.10. The Commission had also decided to share the knowledge and views of eminent and leading members of Muslim community and some of them were invited as Special Invitees in two meetings of the Commission. Shri Kazi Safiulla, a practicing Advocate of Calcutta High Court and a leading Member of the Muslim community informed the Commission that in Muslim religion, there was no caste system and all Muslims were treated as belonging to the same community. Since there was no caste system, the question of respecting or disrespecting people of Hajjam community was not relevant. The Muslims of Hajjam community should not be considered as socially backward. However, on account of their economic and educational backwardness, the affluent and educated Muslims generally avoid establishing any social or marital relationship with them. Prof. Badiur Rahaman, Professor, Department of Arabic & Persian Languages and Dr. Kutubuddin Halder, Reader, both members of the faculty of Calcutta University also attended the Commission's meeting as Special Invitees. Prof. Rahaman felt that the Hajjams were considered socially backward on account of their economic and educational backwardness. Their inclusion in the list of Backward Classes might provide them with some succour. Dr. Halder while agreeing that there was no caste system in Muslim religion stated that most of these Hajjam Muslims were converts from lower caste Hindus. While some sections of Muslims were progressing very fast, converted Muslims including Hajjams had remained where they were. In the process they were getting gradually isolated from the mainstream of national life. Dr. Halder also recommended their inclusion.

01.11. Even after hearing these leading Muslim representatives, this Commission was finding it difficult to come to a definite conclusion on the social and educational status of the people belonging to Hajjam community. In the mean time, the Commission got information of the existence of this community in

Amlani Gram Panchayat of Hasnabad Block of the District of North 24-Parganas. The Commission was informed that in villages Sirajpur and Takipur, a large number of Hajjam families reside. Accordingly, with the intention of making the information on this community as broad based and objective as possible, it was decided that the Commission would visit Amlani Gram Panchayat to hear the people of these two villages.

01.12. The Commission heard the people in early February, 2008. The hearing was attended by a large number of people from the two villages. There were women, young men and the elderly ones. The Sabhapati, Hasnabad Panchayat Samiti informed that there were 91 Hajjam families in the two villages. It appeared in course of the hearing that the people were mostly landless or marginal farmers. Though many of them have been continuing with their traditional profession of circumcision, over the years, it has become a part time practice for them. This is for the reason that Muslims traditionally prefer circumcision during the winter months. During rest of the year, they engage themselves in the field as agricultural labour or catch fish in the rivers and canals. Some of them also work in biri factories. Working as barbers does not find much favour with the villagers here. Panchayat representatives stated that barbers in the area could belong to any section amongst the Muslims including Hajjams and even to the Hindu community. Instances of encroachment by medical practitioners in this profession were also brought to the notice of the Commission. Proximity of the villages to educational institutions has provided opportunity for pursuing high school and college education. Some of the members of the community are graduates while others are studying in schools. Comparatively well off members have been sending their girl children to high and higher secondary schools.

01.13. As far as marriage is concerned, endogamy is generally practiced, though there are departures from this practice nowadays. It has been reported by some members that marriage with other Muslim communities generated tension

between the two families. Keenness to establish marital relation with non- Hajjam families prevails in the minds of some members. Except on the occasion of circumcision, members of other communities do not respect Hajjams. Members have tried to bring out during the hearing that they are not treated at par with other sections of Muslims.

## **02. Analysis of the information received by the Commission through the hearings and meetings.**

02.1. On the basis of available information, the Commission decided to visit those places / Panchayat Samities/ Blocks which are predominantly inhabited by Muslims. In fact, most of the Panchayat Samities covered by the hearings are Muslim dominated. In course of such visits to these areas and hearing of the people claiming to belonging to Hajjam community, the Commission has noticed that in many of the cases, the people claiming to belong to Hajjam section are concentrated in one or two villages or in pockets of such villages. Unlike other sections of the Muslim communities, they are not spread evenly all over the Block or Panchayat Samity, and they have confined themselves in one or two villages in each Block or Panchayat Samity. This implies that these people have somehow maintained or circumstances have made them to maintain a distinct identity from other sections of the Muslims. It is also clear that they have maintained themselves as a closely-knit socio-economic group. Despite the fact that marriages between Hajjam community and other sections of Muslim community have been taking place, the number of such marriages is very few and the community has retained its endogamous character.

02.2. As far as their educational status is concerned, there is no doubt of the Commission that they are educationally backward. There are certain reasons for their educational backwardness. The Commission has noted that one of the basic reasons for educational backwardness is their economic backwardness. Most of the members of Hajjam community are either landless or marginal farmers or bargadars. Some of them even are working as artisans in small factories or workshops on paltry remuneration. The Commission has come across only a very few instances where such members have secured regular employment elsewhere. In such a backdrop, a family of any community would find it difficult to afford continuance of studies in schools or colleges by their dependent wards. The other reason as the Commission has noted is that over the years, the income from circumcision has gone down sharply. Other than the Hajjams, medical practitioners or village quacks have entered the profession. There has been change of outlook of the clients too. So long they were being traditionally serviced by the Hajjam people ~~and~~ but now such clients had preferred to approach medical practitioners for accessing modern surgical benefits and also for reducing the risk of infection and other related complications. The third reason is the average family size of Hajjam families. It has come to the notice of the Commission that an average family is having 4 to 6 children. Without substantial income, it is not possible for any family to provide for quality education to such large number of dependents. Such children at a tender age leave schools and seek some sort of employment to help the family survive with a few exceptions here and there. That is why the school dropout rate particularly among the male children is abnormally high among the Hajjam families. The girl children however get some opportunity to continue with their studies up to the school level. The families are not required, under the present

scheme of school education, to spend any money towards tuition fees or other charges in the schools. All these factors have contributed to keep the Hajjam families economically and consequently educationally backward. This picture is somewhat different for those of the Hajjam families who had migrated from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar a couple of decades ago or who have got the advantage of proximity to standard educational institutions (as in the case of Amlani Gram Panchayat under Hasnabad Block). In their case, the situation is marginally different. But only few such families cannot represent the entire community who have remained educationally backward. They have failed to realize the benefits of following small family norms and have been blindly conforming to the tradition of their forefathers followed many years ago when they could afford to maintain a comparatively large family. The Commission has also noted that though many of them are working as barbers full time or during lean period, working as barber has not been their preferred or a major alternative profession.

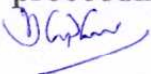
02.3 Apart from hearing of members of the Hajjam community, representatives of Panchayat Bodies and local Government officials, the Commission has also heard some of the eminent and leading members from the Muslim community by inviting them to the Commission's meetings as Special Invitees. The tenets of Islam are that all Muslims are equal. Unlike the Hindus, there is no social stratification. Hindu religion approves of such stratification from the time the Hindu religious scripts were written while in the Muslim religion, all Muslims are treated as equal. This has been amply explained by the Commission's Special Invitees. This theory has also been borne out by the

submissions of many of the representatives of Hajjam community who had appeared before the Commission in course of hearing. They have clearly submitted that this community is respected by other sections for the services they give to the Muslim society. They have also indicated that this is an essential service required by every Muslim as per Quaranic prescriptions and a Muslim has to undergo the process of circumcision to remain a Muslim. Therefore, all sections of Muslims used to respect them and their profession was regarded as an honourable profession. Things have, however, changed a lot over the years and undoubtedly there has been some erosion in the social respect enjoyed by the Hajjam community. It is mostly on account of advancement of science, particularly medical science. This apart, there has been growth of general awareness among the members of the public for individual health, hygiene and the risks involved in following various traditional social and religious practices. As a result, in many areas, the Hajjams have been replaced by medical practitioners, both qualified and quack. These practitioners have provided an alternative to other sections of Muslims to get their children circumcised through a safer procedure without deviating from Islamic religious practice. This development has hit the Hajjam community adversely and might have eroded their social status and indispensability to some extent. In course of hearings, a number of people have told the Commission that they are not treated as equal by other sections of Muslims. But on critical examination of such a statement, it has been found by the Commission that such an attitude is adopted by other sections of Muslims community mostly on account of the economic and educational backwardness of Hajjam people. Though marriages in the Hajjam families generally take place amongst themselves, there are instances of marriage with other sections of the Muslim community taking place. It has come to the notice of the Commission



that while negotiating marriage, the economic and educational status of the family are the prime factors and whether any marriage will materialize or not depends on the economic and educational status of the Hajjam family. So the social status has become gradually dependent on economic and educational status. Whatever the reasons are, the fact remains that Hajjam community, as a whole has remained as a separate entity among various sections of the Muslims and with the change of time, some element of degradation has got attached to the community. Possibly, at one point of time, they commanded some social respect, but things have now turned different. Strictly from religious angle, all Muslims are equal and there exists no social strata in the community. But in practice, the picture is different. The Commission has noticed an implicit feeling of discrimination among the Hajjam people. As explained earlier, economic and educational factors are playing a major role in this area. There is no denying the fact that other sections of Muslims still do have reservations in their mind about the status of the Hajjams and that is why marriages by other sections with the Hajjams are rather exceptions and only very few instances have come to the Commission's notice. As such the Commission is of the opinion that Hajjams have continued to maintain an endogamous social structure and this is an indication of their social isolation from other sections of the Muslims. Such isolation is the result of their backwardness and a deep feeling of degradation and discrimination.

02.4. The Commission has also interacted with similar Commissions in other States to ascertain the Status of Hajjams in those States. It has been found that in some of the States, Hajjams have been recognized as an OBC and described as Hajjam/Nai/Nai Muslim/Navid/Napit, etc. This shows that in these States, apart from the work of circumcision, the profession of barber has been adopted by a considerable number of the Hajjam population. This information received from other State Commissions provides some justification to the claims of the two applicants that they belong to an OBC, as they work as barbers. The present proceeding was initiated on the basis of these applications.



### 03. Conclusion / Recommendation


03.1 The principles that the Commission follows in declaring a particular class or community 'backward' are educational and social backwardness of the concerned Class / Community. Economic factors are not taken into consideration though these have bearing on the educational and social status. The findings of the Commission after the hearings and meetings with eminent members of Muslim Community have been explained in the preceding paragraphs.

03.2 After analysing all the findings and taking into consideration all relevant facts, the Commission comes to the conclusion that the Hajjam Community has remained educationally backward. The Commission is also of the view that their economic and educational backwardness has contributed to their social degradation and backwardness. The Hajjams are still a distinctly identifiable community and if some deviations here and there are overlooked, the Community as a whole is not accepted as equal brethren by other sections of Muslims. They have, therefore, remained socially backward too.

03.3 In view of the above, the Commission is of the view that Hajjam Community be recommended as an 'Other Backward Class' to the State Government.

  
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Dr. Parimal Karmakar  
Member

  
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Dr. Debjani Sengupta  
Member

  
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Tapan K. Burman  
Member Secretary

  
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Justice Malay Sengupta  
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