

WEST BENGAL COMMISSION FOR BACKWARD CLASSES

REPORT ON NIKARI

An application under the signature of Abul Hossain, Secretary, U.B. Anagrasar Muslim Sangram Samity was received for inclusion of Nikari community in the list of Backward Classes. Mr. Hossain based his prayer on behalf of the Nikari class of people on the grounds that they are very poor, illiterate and backward. It was recalled by the Commission that previously the Nikari class of people had applied for their inclusion in the list of Backward Classes for the State of West Bengal. But they did not or could not furnish necessary particulars that the Commission requires for considering any prayer in this regard. They had not even attended the hearing fixed on 12.02.1996. Upon this the then Commission decided not to entertain their prayer and rejected it. This time round, on receipt of a prayer after a long gap of 14 years the Commission took cognizance of Mr. Hossain's application on behalf of the Nikari class of people as the rejection by the Commission earlier was made not on the basis of the merit of the case but because of non-appearance of the applicants at the time of hearing i.e. their prayer went a-begging by default. It was, therefore, decided that their case be reopened and Mr. Hossain be requested to submit his prayer on behalf of the Nikari class of people in the prescribed proforma of the Commission supported by a mass petition from the community.

Upon this, applications supported by mass petitions were received from the Hasnabad Block in North 24-Parganas district, Bharatput-II Block in Murshidabad district and Nadia district. What could be gathered from the applications may be summed up as follows.

The Nikari class of people mostly reside in the districts of South and North 24-Parganas, Murshidabad, Nadia, Howrah, Hooghly and Burdwan. Their total population in the State is more than 5 lakhs with North 24- Parganas registering a concentration of more than 1.5 lakhs. The Nikari class of people claim themselves to be descendants of 'Nuha Nabi' and they regard themselves as 'Gazi' or 'Crusaders'. Their traditional occupation is catching and selling of fish. And going by the contents of the proformae there appear to be no other occupation or job that they have recourse to for their livelihood. This in spite of the fact that fish-trade does not suffice to provide them with proper subsistence because a very high

percentage of people of the community run their trade on borrowed capital obtained at a high rate of interest. No member of the community possesses any land of his own.

The academic status of the Nikari class of people is very poor. Though there is rather a fair enrolment to start with the high dropout rate at the Primary level and Upper Primary level offsets the good early beginning. It almost peters out to nil when it reaches Madhyamik standard. The result is that the number of even Madhyamik qualifier is almost nil in the community. Obviously, there is no representation from the community in any service, Government, non-government or any other sector, for that matter save and except a few Primary school teachers, Municipality workers of low rank.

There is an endogamous society and they live both in urban and rural areas having as their neighbours people belonging to peasant class of Muslim community and also Hindu community. People belonging to other communities residing in their places of habitation treat them very despicably. In this respect what the study team comprising two Members vouched before the Commission deserves mention. They informed the Commission that in course of the study on social, educational and economic background of other Muslim communities, some of which have already been recommended for their inclusion in the list of Backward Classes and the cases of some of which are already under the active consideration of the Commission for such inclusion in view of their social, educational and economic backwardness treat the Nikari class of people as social inferiors. The Hajjam and the Sardar communities are cases in point. They would not have matrimonial relationship and social rapport with Nikari class of people.

Thereafter the Commission decided to conduct a study of its own as the proformae received were not adequately informative and illustrative as already pointed out. Accordingly, Syed Masudal Hossain and Dr. Parimal Karmakar, Members of the Commission, undertook an on-the-spot study in different villages in Basirhat-I Block in North 24-Parganas district for the appraisal of the social, educational and economic condition of the Nikari class of people. Their study covered more than 1500 families. The study report shows that the Nikari class of people mostly live on the bank of rivers as their main occupation is catching and selling of fish. However, they supplement their meagre income from the fish-trade often by other sources of livelihood like bidi-binding, van-pulling,

working as agricultural labourers and brick-kiln workers. The study reveals that most of the people covered have an income between Rs. 2000/- and Rs. 3000/- per month.

The literacy rate among the Nikari of class of people is very poor. Though the enrolment at the Primary level is tolerably fair the high dropout rate at the subsequent stages more than neutralizes the early good start. What is reflected in the study report about the overall academic standard of the Nikari class of people is in conformity with what has been depicted in the Proformae and already mentioned in the early part of the report.

The standard of living of Nikari class of people is quite lamentable. Their dwelling houses are all but shanties. Except some tubewells sunk by Panchayat Bodies with the financial assistance of the State Government they have no proper and adequate source of drinking water. Those tubewells are also very few and far between. The women of the community have to traverse a long distance just to fetch a pail of water. Even this water collected with this difficulty sometimes become hard to come by and they have to spend hard-earned money on buying drinking water from the market. In terms of sanitation the people of the community are very disadvantaged. Not to speak of any sanitary latrine or lavatory most of the people of the community have no service-latrines. Therefore most of them have to attend nature's call in the open air.

The Commission, thereafter, decided to give a hearing to the representatives of the Nikari class of people on 12.01.2010 in the Meeting Hall of the Commission. The hearing was attended among others by Abdul Rajjak Sheikh and Aasarul Sheikh from Bharatpur Block in Murshidabad district, Abdullah Sardar, Alamgir Islam, Md. Nur Islam Sardar from Hasnabad Block in North 24-Parganas district on behalf of the community. One after another the representatives mentioned above made their submissions on oath before the Commission as to the community as a whole and its social, educational and economic backwardness. But from their statements in course of the hearing it surfaced that they had nothing much to add beyond what has already been mentioned in the proformae and reflected in the study report. It was the same tale of agony of social discrimination, financial deprivation and educational retardation. As to the identifiable and distinguishable features of the community the representatives mentioned their residence by the riverside and their fish trade.

Therefore, taking into consideration all the facts stated, materials on record and submissions made and applying all the factors and parameters for determination of social and educational backwardness of a community in the State of West Bengal the Commission decided to recommend to the State Government that the Nikari class of people be included in the list of Backward Classes for the State of West Bengal.

Sd/-

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Shri S. B. Mandal
Member-Secretary

Sd/-

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Justice Malay Sengupta
Chairman

Sd/-

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Dr. Parimal Karmakar
Member

Sd/-

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Dr. Debjani Sengupta
Member

Sd/-

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Syed Masudal Hossain
Member