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## **Socio-Economic Status of Tibetan Muslims in Kalimpong** **Rubia Biswas**

*Research Scholar, Department of Geography Aliah University, Kolkata*

**Hassan Momin**

*Research Scholar, Institute of Development Studies Kolkata, University of Calcutta, Kolkata*

### **Abstract**

*Islam is an important essence in the Indian Himalayas that continuously maintained over a time. So, the Darjeeling Himalaya region is no exception. About these Muslim communities Tibetan Muslims is one of the important migrant ethnic communities in Darjeeling Himalaya. They are migrated from Tibet. They are survived various migrant problems but lastly they overcome those entire situations. Now a day they are known one of the development Muslim communities in the Darjeeling Himalaya. Their social, cultural and economic conditions are not same towards the other Muslims in India. For the separate cultural and ethnic identity among the same religion and other religions of the entire area, they faced a problem of identity and personality crisis. In spite of, the Tibetan people (especially youngsters) are carefully exceeding their struggle with the presence of modernity and remain themselves with their natives and their neighbours. However, they are practicing their cultural and religious orders, rituals and traditions under given in the Holy Quran. Other non-Muslims communities support them to celebrate and enjoy their occasions by attending their home. The present paper is discussing a profile of the socio economic conditions of Tibetan Muslims, in Kalimpong hills of West Bengal, India.*

**Keywords:** *Muslim communities, Tibetan Muslims, Socio-economic conditions, Darjeeling Himalaya, Kalimpong.*

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**Introduction:** Muslims of Darjeeling are primarily a minority group not only in religious sense but also in their numerical strength (5.69 per cent as per 2011 census). The colonial history of Darjeeling expresses that during the 19<sup>th</sup> century a large number of Muslim groups, particular in various occupations flocked in the town to serve the Europeans and their native companions. They came from various parts, both inside and outside India and later married the local girls and settled down permanently in the hills (Chatterjee, 2015). Their ethnic, regional and theological variations have neutral. Within these variations they also adopted some life styles of hill people. Thus, native as well as local influences on Muslims in Darjeeling hills are strong that reflected in their variety of cultures. The Muslim

populations are concentrated mainly in the urban pockets in hill region and they are mostly concentrated in the Mosque area. The hill Muslims have diverse ethnic and regional variations and are classified in four broad categories—

- *Bihari Muslims*, the Muslim groups migrated from various districts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. They are of varied occupational background.
- *Kashmiri Muslims*, the Muslims migrated from the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Kashmiri Muslims are of different ethnic backgrounds and occupational specializations especially trading of handicrafts made of wood and pashmina.
- *Nepali Muslims*, they are permeated caste families of varied Nepali origin and their culture is a combination of both Islamic and Nepali tradition.
- *Tibetan Muslims or Bhutia/Bhote Muslims*, who took shelter from Tibet after 1962 and they are accustomed to Tibetan culture (Chatterjee, 2015).

The Muslim in Kathmandu and others parts of Nepal are divided into five groups. They are Kashmiri Muslims, Indian Muslims, Tibetan Muslims, Tarai (plain land) Muslims and hill Muslims (Haque, 2013). Many researchers Mondal (1983, 1997 and 2005), Chatterjee (2015), Hossain (2012), Roy and Sarker (2016), and Haque (2013) studied on the Muslim community, a minority and a less developed social group in India. They also discussed their socio-economic life, religious status, political positions and also the status of Muslim women in the society. They also defined that the Holy Quran and Hadis provides an equal rights and responsibility both men and women. But, the society has created a wide gap between text and context. This widening gap between text and context has had devastating outcome on the Muslim society that has exposed in all aspects of their life like as politically, socially, culturally, economically and has brought fragmentation, economic backwardness, social injustice, intellectual stagnation, etc. Poor and illiterate conditions of Muslim women are actually responsible for such situation.

Muslims in Darjeeling hills engaged in various marginal occupations are still engaged in their traditional occupations as per their traditional caste occupations and are self-employed. Economically, Bihari and Nepali Muslim groups are not well off. Only the Kashmiri and Tibetan Muslim families are well to do (Chatterjee, 2015). During the colonial period, these two groups have remained engaged in the business of woollen garments and pashmina. Tibetan Muslims are also engaged in business and in hotel industry. They had their contributions to the Tibetan society and culture. They have been able to preserve their social and cultural ethos while simultaneously assimilating the new and outer cultural trends. This community has undergone change and development over times along the lines of industrialisation, modernisation and westernization. The present study are empathized on the socio-economic position, cultural life and also well-being life style of the Tibetan Muslims in Kalimpong.

**Historical Background of Muslim Community in Kalimpong:** The growth of Muslim population in Kalimpong hills has a historical background and the largest section of the Muslim is comprised of second and third generation migrants from the plains. The

transitory history of the Muslims in Kalimpong town can be traced back to the colonial period. The political penetration of Mir Jumllah and Hussain Shah into the Terai and Doors area fetched lots of Muslim Subedars, Faujdars and Laskars. The political relationship with the local kings and jotedars later on encouraged numerous Muslims officials, thinkers, artesian and other work-related groups to migrate. After freedom of India, a huge number of Muslim populations either from eastern or western Pakistan took shelter in this place. Consequently, Islampur subdivision of Uttar Dinajpur district turned into Muslim concentrated area. Most of these people were seasonal migrants, wage labourers, Imams and servants of households. They were not permanent resident of the town. The legal domicile happened to be the result of marriage between the migrated single bachelor and the local girl. Such marriage also gave such people the right to be the permanent resident in legal terms. It is interesting to note here that a large number of Muslims of Kalimpong town is actually the descendents of early migrant's families and they even have the history of inter-caste marriages with the hill people. Furthermore, the Chinese occupation of Tibet also necessitated further migration of Muslim families (124 families) from Tibet to Kalimpong after 1960s. Since they were of Indian origin, they got instantly the Indian citizenship and settled permanently in Kalimpong (Roy & Dulon, 2016).

**Objectives:** The basic objective of the study is to present the socio-economic and cultural life of the Tibetan Muslims of Kalimpong hill in Darjeeling. The study show that they are different in ethnic but not in religion as well as culture to other Muslim people.

**Database & Methodology:** To assess the socio-economic condition and cultural life of the Tibetan Muslim community in the study area, data have been collected from both primary as well as secondary sources. The primary data was collected through observation, questionnaire and interview methods by simple random sampling. Secondary information was obtained from Census report (2011), different occasional papers, relevant literature from different journals and various local & national newspapers. After collecting of relevant data and information, some statistical techniques have been applied on the extracted data. Finally, Social Status Index (SSI) and Economic Status Index (ESI) describe the percentage of values of social and economic status.

Social Status Index (SSI) and Economic Status Index (ESI):

$$\sum \frac{wi}{m} \times 100 \quad (\text{Islam, Ali, Salehin, \& Islam, 2008})$$

**Where,**

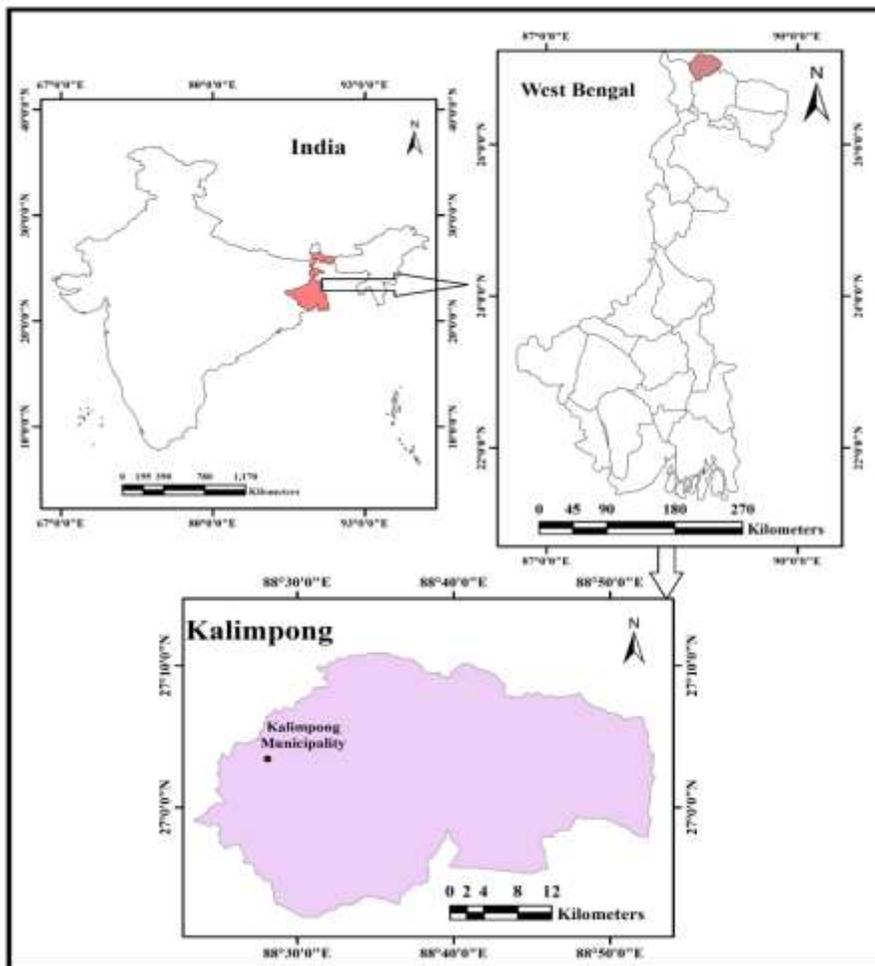
$wi$  = weight

$fi$  = respondents

$m$  = number of respondents x total weight number

**Study Area:** Kalimpong is a hill station in the Indian state of West Bengal. It is located at 27.06° N and 88.47° E with the total area of 1,056.5 sq km, an average elevation of 1,250 metres (4,101 ft). The town is set to be the headquarters of the announced district of Kalimpong. Kalimpong is known for its educational institutions, many of which were

established during the British colonial period. It used to be a gateway in the trade between Tibet and India before China's annexation of Tibet and the Sino-Indian War. The precise etymology of the name *Kalimpong* means Land of Kings. The town centre is on a ridge connecting two hills, Deolo Hill and Durpin Hill. The River Teesta flows in the valley below and separates Kalimpong from the state of Sikkim. The soil in the Kalimpong area is typically reddish in colour. The Shiwalik Hills, like most of the Himalayan foothills, have steep slopes and soft, loose topsoil, leading to frequent landslides in the monsoon season. The original settlers of Kalimpong are the Lepchas although the majority of the populace are ethnic Nepali and so many indigenous ethnic groups (the Bhutias, the Sherpas, the Limbus, the Rais, the Chettris, the Thakuris, the Gugungs, the Tamangs, the Yolmos and so on). The Tibetans are non-native community who escaped to Kalimpong after fleeing the Communist Chinese invasion of Tibet. The Hinduism is the largest religion (65.69 per cent) followed by the Buddhism (16.41 per cent) and Christianity (12.60 per cent). The concentration of Muslims in the town is only 4.27 per cent, most of the Tibetan Muslims who fled in 1959 after Chinese invasion of Tibet.

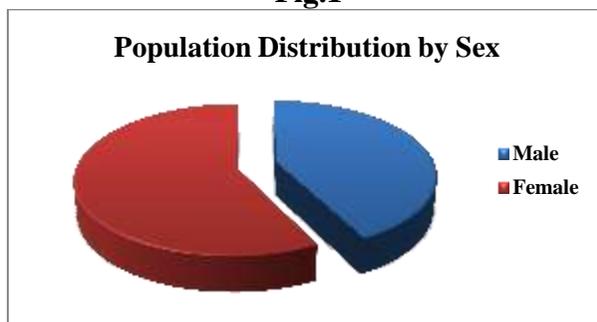


**Socio-Economical Condition of Tibetan Muslims in Kalimpong Municipality:**

Mountains, valleys and foothills covered by forests, criss-crossed by river and streams, have given the place of natural background of unique type. A part from the unique natural background, the area is the home land of a large number of indigenous and immigrant ethnic and tribal groups each with its distinct physical and culture. The people of this place are be-wildering in socio-cultural variety and ethnicity. The socio- economic condition of Muslim community of the Darjeeling Himalaya presents a dismal picture. Except the few Kashmiri and Tibetan Muslims the majority of Muslims in Darjeeling fall in lower income group. The socio-economic conditions of the Tibetan Muslim communities are better than the other Muslims in the Darjeeling Himalaya. They also engaged in tertiary economic activities. The present topic is to explore the conditions and situation of Tibetan Muslim community living in Kalimpong Municipality in Darjeeling Himalaya. 20 households are taken as samples for the study purpose. The age of the respondents ranges from 22 to 65 years.

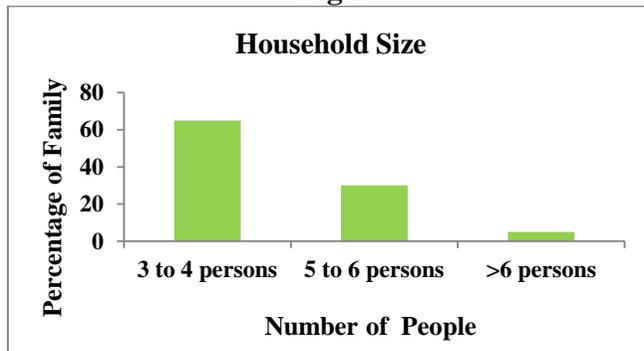
**Sex-Wise Population:** In West Bengal, the Muslim communities are under the OBCs (Other Backward Caste) group but the Tibetan Muslims are under the category of scheduled tribes. In the study area found two types of family systems like as the patriarchal system (prevailed by father decision) and the matriarchal system (prevailed by mother decision). Normally, among the tribal community and hilly areas, the matriarchal system is a very common tradition through their society. In the study area, there are total 87 Tibetan Muslim peoples where 37 male persons and 50 female persons. The male is lower than the female. In this survey have found a number of families are female headed.

**Fig.1**



**Size of Household:** Household or family is mainly measured as common social group. It is a principal group which plays a major role to develop the personality of individual and the natural history of a society. The most striking features of the Muslim families are the importance attached to their family. Traditionally Muslim families in India are in joint and extended structure that often spanning to three or more generations. The extended structure offers many advantages including stability, coherence, physical and psychological support particularly in times of necessity when a problem arises. But such kind of family structure is now under considerable threat among the Hill Muslims as formation of nuclear family is an emerging trend owing to various socio-economic reasons.

**Fig.2**

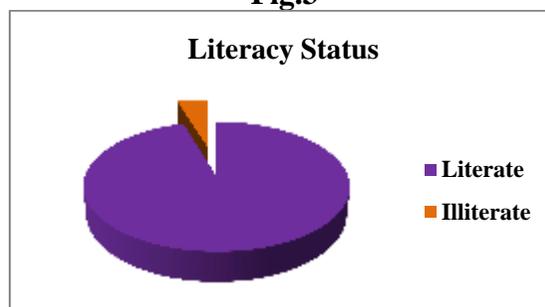


In the study area it can be inferred that families are largely nuclear in structure. A number of families (65 per cent) are nuclear in structure and only 5 per cent has joint family with 7 members. The main reason for such condition as self-independent, engaged with higher education, for better accommodation to other places and choice of their marriage. These factors are motivating a fragmentation of the traditional extended family structure.

**Educational Status:** Literacy level and educational ability are very important developmental indicators in a developing nation like India. They are the key variable of measure of development which indicates quality of life, awareness level and level of skill of people in the society. Literacy status of Muslim women has found alarming rate in society for their various rituals. However, the religious texts (Holy Quran) always support the equal position of women in pursuit of education and knowledge among the Muslim communities (Chatterjee, 2015). “Acquisition of knowledge is compulsory for all Muslim men and women” (Mondal, 2005). But in reality it often varies from region to region and group to group among the Muslim community. The majority of Tibetan Muslim community of the study area has educated and their education status up to primary and higher-secondary level. This is because of their orthodoxy in familial matters.

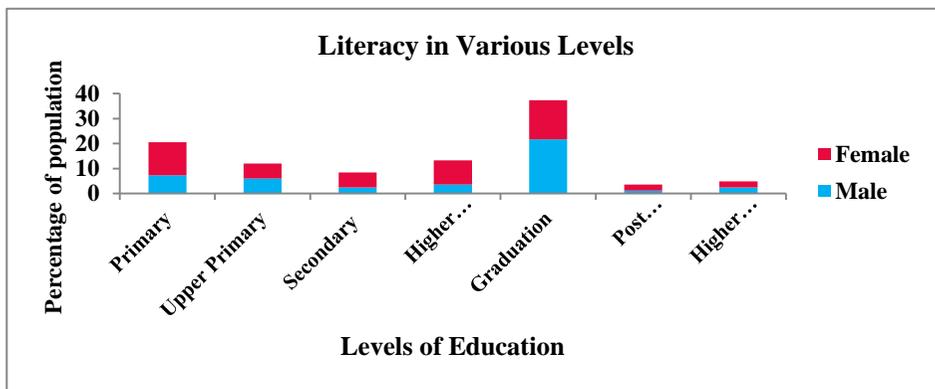
The literacy rate of the study area is above 95 per cent whereas only 4.6 per cent are illiterate in status (fig.3). Among the other Muslims in the hilly area, the literacy rate of Tibetans is higher in rate (Chatterjee, 2015). Some of them are illiterate in status, because they are faced the migration and refugees problem at their childhood age. So, they didn’t continue and complete their education life.

**Fig.3**



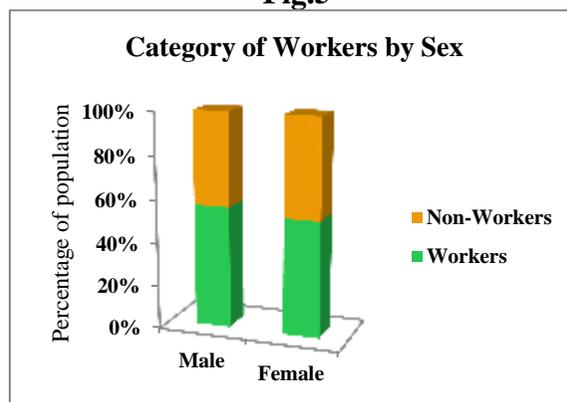
The educational levels of the study area are varies in different level (fig.4). Maximum percentage of population (37.35 per cent) found in graduation level while lowest in post-graduation level (3.61 per cent). A greatest number of aged people leave their education in primary level for their migration problems. In the case of primary, secondary, higher secondary and post-graduation level, the percentage of female persons (13.25 per cent, 6.02 per cent, 9.64 per cent and 2.14 per cent respectively) are greater than the male persons (7.24 per cent, 2.41 per cent, 3.62 per cent and 1.2 per cent respectively). Only in graduation level, the male persons are greater than the female persons (21.69 per cent and 15.66 per cent respectively). In upper primary and higher education level, male and female both are in same position (6.02 per cent and 2.41 per cent). In higher level, a number of populations engaged in research works, engineering and M.B.B.S. etc. As a result, it emphasized that the literacy rate of Tibetan Muslim communities are not like the any other Muslim communities in India.

Fig.4



**Occupational Structure:** The main source of income varies from one household to another according to the amount of land, level of skills and education of the household. The occupation has been considered more as a social phenomenon than an economic criterion. Occupation not only decides the status and position of the respondents but also nature of day to day life.

Fig.5



The main occupation of Tibetan Muslims in the study area is services and business. The major economic activity varies more or less same from one household to another. The male earning members or workers are greater than the female shows in the fig.5. Above 56 percentage of male population and 54 percentage of female population are engaged in various occupations.

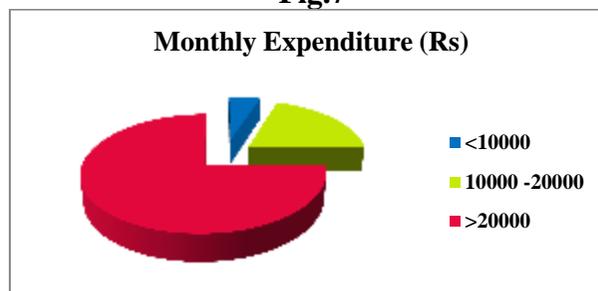
Fig.6



In the study area, half of the total population engaged in business particularly with embroidery, business, handlooms, topi making and fiber work. Some make hand bags and garment business and some are shopkeepers. This is because of non-availability of land and they are dwelling in city, so developed trade as their occupation. A number of populations (20 per cent) are engaged in services like as schools, colleges, air hostess and film industries. About 30 percentages of populations are engaged in both (service and business) categories. The women from Tibetan Muslim families are frequently looking after their businesses. They usually handle the customers during the rush hours of festive seasons. They are cannot to be ignored economic contribution to their families and also to their familial businesses (Chatterjee, 2015).

**Monthly Expenditure:** The various monthly expenditure of a family includes as a ration cost, education, clothing, health, savings etc. The main source of income varies from one family to another; therefore expenditure also differs from Rs 10000 to more than Rs 20000. According to the respondents, the expenditure that has increased over time is food items and education. Some families have more than 3 or 4 members whom are engaged with various occupations and obtain capital. Either they are couple or other members of the family.

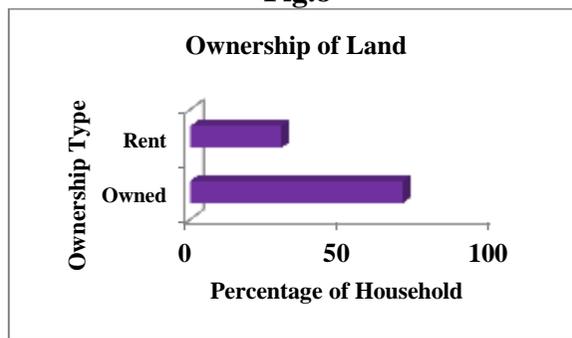
Fig.7



The figure (fig.7.) shows, more than 75 percentages of families earned more than Rs 20000; they are either engaged in services and business or in both. On the other hand, 5 percentages of families earned less than Rs 10000, these family members engaged as a driver or small shop holders.

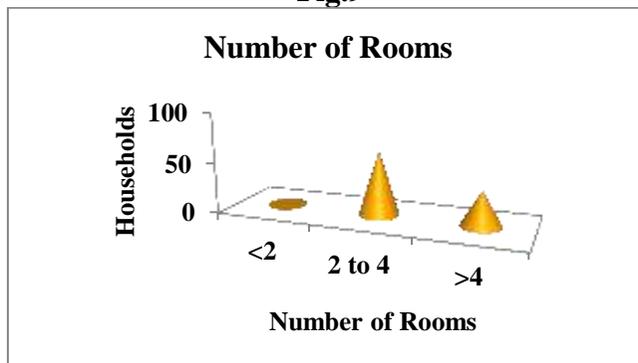
**Housing Conditions:** Housing condition is an important indicator of living standard of people and it also dependent on the monthly expenditure of the family. In this study area, monthly expenditure of the people is more or less well. So, their living conditions and quality of life is better than the other community’s people. After migration from their native land (Tibet) they faced land ownership problem. Subsequently, improved their livelihood opportunities, they settled here as an owner of land. Most of the families (70 per cent) staying their own land.

**Fig.8**



Only 30 per cent of households lived as a renter, they are coming from the neighbouring areas like Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim for the purpose of business or services. Here, all the houses are pucca types and modern multi-stored buildings. The material of house indicates a better economic condition of the households. The building materials are brick, cement, iron rods, marble, granite and glass.

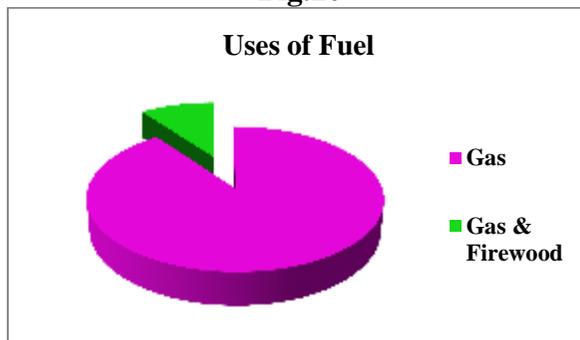
**Fig.9**



Among them, 65 per cent of families live in more than two rooms, separate kitchen and toilet facilities. Rest of the families have more than four rooms with well furnished. The drinking water facilities have also well. The sources of drinking water are owned pipe line.

But in the hilly region water scarcity is one of the important problems. So, this areas people faced the same problems like another communities. Every household have electric facility; nobody uses the kerosene as the sources of light.

**Fig.10**



In the study area, there are 90 per cent of household have used gas as a fuel. Only 10 per cent of households used gas and firewood both. They collect their firewood from the surrounding areas. But now a day's causes for deforestation the peoples are mostly dependent on the gas as a fuel.

In every house have different types of assets like as by-cycle, bike, private car, television and telephone etc.

**Religion & Culture:** Islam gave women a variety of rights. Islam ensured women's basic rights to property. Ideologically there is no distinction between men and women (Mondal, 2005). The role of religion is prominent as far as the social life of people (Tibetans) is concerned; there is religious influence in elderly men and women to a greater extent. They are simple, honest and humble, highly hospitable. The Tibetan Muslim believer belongs to the Sunni sect of Muslims. According to them migration from Tibet was purely and solely to save their religious faith, from the communist Chinese oppression. Tibetans as per observation and information available follow fundamental principles of Islam. Caste has no place; marriages are performed as per Islamic Shariah and in a simple fashion. They do not marriage at lower age. Like other Muslim communities, the widow remarriage is well accepted in this Muslim community. At the time of survey we found most of the females are married in ranging in age from 16-25 years. One to third percent of total female is married by the age of 26-30 years. According to this survey, we found some respondents they are also women who are unmarried by choice and have established themselves as a successful business women.

The main and traditional dress of Tibetans is gown like with a high collar and long sleeves. It is known as "Chuba" in Tibetan language and culture. It is tied with ribbon like piece of cloth called "Kera". Chuba is made of either woollen clothes or other cool clothes depending upon the nature of season. Underneath the Chuba, a small shirt like cloth is also worn and sometimes sweaters are used too. It is highly simple and traditional. It is usually purple in colour. Not so much difference in Chuba of males and females. But the present Tibetan community has to a great extent adopted modern dress patterns. Only some elderly

men and ladies are seen in traditional “Chuba”. Jeans, cotton cloths, pants, shirts, shalwar-kameez, dupattas, etc have been adopted by Tibetans over here. It is because of accessibility and acculturation, modernization, effect of migration, a way to escape identity and personality crisis. New environment has forced them to change. Moreover, youth are vulnerable to every new fashion and adhering to traditional ethos is deemed archaic. The community is more homogenous in nature as all shares the pain of displacement and crisis in the new setting. Caste has no significance and not treated as a bar in social institutions like family, marriage, kinship, etc. Occupations too are not so distinguished, majority of the people are either engaged in needle work, embroidery or textile business, etc. The festivals of Tibetan Muslim community are not so different from other Muslim communities. The influence of religion is clear in their lives. Festival observations and celebrations are simple and traditional and Tibetan dishes are prepared in homes. They can celebrate each festival with full spirit and every required thing is available in market to keep up their rituals. They invite non-Muslim friends and neighbours in their two important and biggest celebrations Id-ul -Fitr and Id-ul-Azha and they enjoy it with full enthusiasm. In Id-ul-Azha festival they sacrificing animals which are a ritual of its which are locally known as Bakri –Id. Tibetans celebrate Losar (Tibetan New Year); this is a most important festival in the Tibetan calendar. They celebrate this for about a week with good food like specially cooked momos. They also celebrate Muharram during the first month of the Islamic year (9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> day of the month) remembering Hasan's battle against Yezid with street procession depicting mock battles. Another important festival is celebrating Milad-un-nabi, Prophet Mohammad's birth anniversary.

**Social Status Index (SSI) of Tibetan Muslim:** There are six variables such as educational level, presence of household assets, housing conditions, availability of place of kitchen, uses of fuels and sanitation facility to measure the social status index of Tibetan Muslim communities in Kalimpong. It is found from the table (table.1) where the value of average Social Status index is 48.75 per cent. Among the various statuses, a highest percentage of family are found under the moderate group with 35 per cent while only ten per cent of respondents or families are found under the very good social status of the families.

**Table.1: Social Status Index of the families**

Type of Social Status	Weight (wi)	Number of Households	Percentage of Households	Social Status Index (SSI)
Very Low	0	2	15	<b>48.75%</b>
Low	1	5	20	
Moderate	2	7	35	
Good	3	4	20	
Very Good	4	2	10	
Total	-	20	100	

(Source: Field Survey)

**Economic Status Index (ESI) of Tibetan Muslim:** To determine the economic condition of the Tibetan Muslim communities, a dimensional index known as the Economic Status Index or ESI. This index is calculated by the four indicators such as monthly income of the family, occupational structure or livelihood pattern, number of total earning member in a family or household and saving money for future. After calculation, the table (table.2) shows the value of average Economic Status index (47.5 per cent) of the study area. As a result, a maximum percentage of families are found under the very low, low and moderate groups with percentage of 25, 30 and 30 respectively.

**Table.2: Economic Status Index of the families**

Type of Economic Status	Weight (wi)	Number of Households	Percentage of Households	Economic Status Index (ESI)
Very Low	0	5	25	<b>47.5%</b>
Low	1	6	30	
Moderate	2	6	30	
High	3	1	5	
Very High	4	2	10	
Total	-	20	100	

(Source: Field Survey)

**Finding & Conclusion:** Tibetan Muslims have been able to preserve their social, cultural and national identity despite their settlement in a new environment. Backwardness in education and economy is an essential dilemma for their development. Unemployment is a big problem in the hills. But the Tibetan Muslim community also advanced for their own character. In West Bengal all the Muslims are under in the Other Backward Groups (OBC) but the Tibetan Muslims are under in the Scheduled Tribe groups. The education qualifications are better than the other Muslims in the state as well as all over the nation. They are extremely hard working people and most of them deal with garments business. Youth are mostly associated with embroidery. Most of the Tibetan youth are in business and stitching work, needle work, brocading and other embroidery works. This community engaged in their traditional occupation like trade and they also famous for it. Males and females are also engaged in this traditional occupation. Much of the elderly stock is emancipated and well educated, especially in the area of religious education. The monthly income is better than another Muslim people in the hills. So, the monthly expenditure is also high. The socio economic conditions of the people are good. The majority of Tibetan Muslim households are composed of single family living in well-built pucca house. So, it is improved that the quality of life among the people is good. The sources of drinking water are owned pipe line, but they faced the water problem, because drinking water problem is one of the most important problems in Kalimpong areas as well as hilly areas. The life style is simple and all the occasions are celebrated in religious fervour. Talking of marriages, festivals and other rituals, only those practices are followed which fall in Islamic purview barring the emerging changes now. However the Tibetan community is in transition now,

especially youth are vulnerable to every new pattern of change. Despite separate cultural and ethnic identity, the observations reveal that identity crisis and personality crisis, problems of recognition are some of the factors which prompt Tibetan people especially youngsters to change with the advent of modernity and to keep themselves at par with natives and their neighbours. The religious rituals followed by the Muslims do reflect the traditional or ‘popular Islamic culture’ in the region. The deep rooted social customs, orthodoxy and traditions of the past will be further legitimized by the males in power in the name of *Shariat*, and the women of the Muslim community would remain deprived from their overall development needs and would be deprived from empowerment (Haque, 2013). The Sachar Committee report reveals that the Muslim dominated districts or states are far behind from the map of socio economic development. In Darjeeling hills where Muslims concentration is very low it never comes into the media hype. In the hill areas, the Muslims are almost an “entrapped minority”. Implementation of various development processes in the hilly region actually reduces the economic and social obstacles and growing mutual cooperation and respect among the entire people. It is uniformly required for Muslims also to come out and achieve their own empowerment. Muslim people themselves ought to be awakened. Like Urdu poet Iqbal says, “Allah does not change the condition of the people unless they strive to change themselves” (Chatterjee, 2015).

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