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Name of the Scholar: Azra Saman  
Name of the Supervisor: Sucharita Sengupta  
Name of the Department: Political Science  
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### Abstract

**Keywords:** Language, Identity, Muslims, Urdu-speaking Muslims, Politics, Public Sphere, Electoral Politics.

This study explores the Urdu-speaking Muslims of West Bengal, who constitute only 1.822% of the state's population, compared to the broader Muslim population of 27.01%. While Bengali-speaking Muslims are well-integrated into the regional culture, Urdu-speaking Muslims face unique challenges in preserving their linguistic and cultural identity. The study investigates the processes and agents shaping the identity of this community within the broader social structures, emphasizing the interactions between language and politics in identity formation.

This research adopts a mixed-method approach, employing qualitative and quantitative methodologies. A case study approach was used to analyze the Urdu-speaking Muslim community in West Bengal, examining their literary, socio-cultural, religious, and political facets. Narrative research and content analysis were employed to explore community narratives, drawing from various social perspectives, classes, and religious affiliations. Literary analysis of Urdu writings from West Bengal helped uncover embedded identity narratives. Key informant interviews were conducted with institutional heads, academicians, Urdu writers, poets, bureaucrats, journalists, and publishers to understand the community's self-perception and aspirations. Quantitative data on electoral participation and Muslim representation in West Bengal's Legislative Assembly from 1951 to 2021 was collected from the Election Commission of India. Census data was also analyzed to assess the demographic composition of Urdu speakers. Additionally, data on Urdu medium education in secondary and higher secondary schools was compiled from various school boards. Urdu newspaper circulation data was analyzed to gauge readership trends.

The study finds that the Urdu-speaking Muslim community is urbanized and concentrated in specific districts, with 63% residing in Kolkata, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Howrah, and Hooghly. This urban clustering has led to socio-economic ghettoization. In the political domain, the research highlights the significance of Muslim voters in West Bengal. Historical election data suggests that shifts in Muslim electoral preferences have influenced regime changes, as seen in the 1967, 1977, and 2011 Assembly elections. However, despite their numerical strength, Urdu-speaking Muslims have failed to establish themselves as a cohesive political pressure group, leading to their marginalization within political party structures.

The study also examines the role of religious and social organizations in shaping community identity. Institutions such as the Muslim Institute, Calcutta Muslim Orphanage, and Al-Ameen Mission have contributed to community welfare, while religious leaders wield varying degrees of political influence. Interview data reveals differing perspectives on the role of Muslim clerics in politics, with some viewing them as community leaders and others dismissing their political legitimacy. The research uncovers a declining trend in Urdu language preservation. While Urdu is officially recognized, its institutional support is minimal. Urdu medium schools constitute only 1.51% of schools under the West Bengal Council of Higher Secondary Education and 1.18% under the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education. Moreover, Urdu education in CBSE and ICSE schools is nearly absent. Interviewees cited a lack of quality Urdu schools, a shortage of full-time teachers, and large student-teacher ratios as major obstacles.

The study concludes that the Urdu public sphere in West Bengal is shaped by the interplay of language, politics, and identity. Urdu intellectuals, comprising academicians, poets, and social activists, play a crucial role in shaping narratives of identity and resistance. However, internal divisions within the community hinder collective action. The study also finds a disconnect between Urdu-speaking Muslims and political parties. While electoral data shows their voting patterns influence government changes, political parties treat them primarily as a vote bank rather than as a group with distinct socio-political demands. Without a unified political strategy, the Urdu-speaking Muslim community remains politically marginalized.