

## The rise and rise of Muslims in West Bengal

*In West Bengal, the share of Muslims in the population has risen by 7.5 percentage points since Independence and Partition; and, much of this accretion has occurred after 1971. Proportion of Muslims in the State was 19.5 percent in 1991 and 20.5 percent in 1971; it has reached 27 percent now. Their share before Partition was around or less than 30 percent. During Partition, this region did not witness as complete a transfer of populations as happened in the northwest; but Muslims still lost about one-third of their share. Much of that loss has now been made up, and the share of Muslims in the State is likely to soon reach the pre-Partition levels.*

*Muslims have a significant presence of at least 10 percent everywhere in West Bengal, except in Darjiling, Bankura and Puruliya districts. But their presence and growth is particularly high in two regions: Dinajpur-Maldah-Murshidabad-Birbhum region lying to the west of Rangpur and Rajshahi Divisions of Bangladesh and in 24-Parganas-Kolkata-Haora region lying to the west of Khulna. Muslims now form a majority in the former; their share in the population there is 52 percent, it was less than 40 percent in 1951 and around or less than 48 percent in 1941, before Partition. This region forms part of an eastern border belt of very high Muslim presence and growth that stretches to Purnia and Santhal Pargana regions of Bihar and Jharkhand on the west and to Lower and North Assam on the east. Muslims now form a majority in this whole belt, and there are large pockets within it, where they have an overwhelming majority.*

*The share of Muslims in 24-Parganas-Kolkata-Haora pocket is now near 28 percent; it was 19.6 percent in 1951 and 20.6 percent in 1971. In 1941, it was nearer 27 percent.*

*Christians in West Bengal are largely concentrated in Darjiling and their share there has increased from less than 3 percent in 1951 to 7.6 percent now. In the last decade alone, there has been an accretion of 1.5 percentage points to the Christian share in the district.*

*West Bengal, like Assam, seems to be witnessing a quickening of the process of change in religious demography that has picked up pace since 1971.*

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## Religious Demography of West Bengal

Of the total population of 9.13 crore counted in West Bengal in 2011, 6.44 crore are Hindus, 2.47 crore Muslims and 6.6 lakh Christians. There are 9.4 lakh persons counted under the category of ORP; these belong mainly to the tribes of Bankura, Puruliya and Pashchimi Medinipur, many of whom are counted as followers of Sari Dharma, similar to Sarna Dharma of neighbouring Jharkhand. West Bengal has 2.83 lakh Buddhists; of these 2.60 lakhs are in the northern districts of Darjiling and Jalpaiguri. Besides them, there are 63.5 thousand Sikhs and 60 thousand Jains. The absolute number

	2001	2011	%GR
Total	8,01,76,197	9,12,76,115	13.84
Hindu	5,81,04,835	6,43,85,546	10.81
Muslim	2,02,40,543	2,46,54,825	21.81
Christian	5,15,150	6,58,618	27.85
Sikh	66,391	63,523	-4.32
Buddhist	2,43,364	2,82,898	16.24
Jain	55,223	60,141	8.91
ORP	8,95,796	9,42,297	5.19
RNS	54,895	2,28,267	316

of Sikhs in West Bengal, as at many other places in the country, has contracted during 2001-11. The number of persons counted under the category of Religion Not Stated has increased rather sharply from about 55 thousand in 2001 to 2.28 lakh in 2011; numbers under this category have increased abnormally in most parts of the country.

*Widening gap between the growth of Hindus and Muslims*

As seen in the Table above, during 2001-11, Muslims have grown by 21.8 percent compared to the decadal growth of 10.8 percent registered by the Hindus. The gap between the growth of Muslims and Hindus here is not as high as in the neighbouring Assam, where the growth of Hindus during this decade has been very similar at 10.9 percent, but Muslims have grown at a much higher rate of 29.6 percent.

Year	Growth Gap in Hindus and Muslims		Relative Gap in %
	Decadal Growth % Hindu	Decadal Growth % Muslim	
1951-61	32.63	36.48	11.8
1961-71	25.75	29.76	15.6
1971-81	21.37	29.55	38.3
1981-91	21.09	36.89	74.9
1991-01	14.23	25.91	82.1
2001-11	10.81	21.81	101.8

Yet the gap between the two growth rates is rather wide in West Bengal; the decadal growth of Muslims during 2001-11 has been 102 percent above that of Hindus. This gap has remained fairly wide and has kept widening since 1971-81, as seen in the Table.

*High accretion to the share of Muslims*

Because of this gap in growth, the share of Muslims in the population of the State has been rising. During 2001-11, their share has increased from 25.25 to 27.01 percent, marking an accretion of 1.77 percentage points. This quantum of accretion is the fourth largest in India after Assam, Kerala and Uttarakhand, where the accretion in the share of Muslims during 2001-11 has been of 3.31, 2.03 and 1.87 percentage points, respectively. But compared to the average national accretion of 0.8 points, the increase in West Bengal is indeed very large.

*Muslim share is now approaching the pre-Partition levels*

This high level of accretion to the Muslim share has continued for four decades after 1971. Their share in the State has increased from 19.5 percent in 1951 and 20.5 percent in 1971 to 27 percent now. They had a share of about or less than 30 percent throughout the pre-Independence period. At the time of Partition, the transfer of populations in this part of India was much less intense than in the northwest; yet the share of Muslims in the State had declined by about 10 percentage points. Muslims have already recovered about 70 percent of this decline; and most of this has happened after 1971. At this rate, the impact of the partial transfer of populations that occurred here at the time of Partition is likely to be completely negated and Muslim presence in the State would reach the pre-Partition level in another decade or so. Incidentally, in India as a whole, the share of Muslims surpassed the pre-Partition level already in 2001; the share of 14.23 percent recorded in 2011 is about a percentage point above their share of 13.38 percent counted in 1941.

Year	Muslim Share and decadal Accretion in %age points	
	Muslim Share %	Accretion % points
1941	29.48	-
1951	19.46	1.02
1961	20.00	0.54
1971	20.46	0.46
1981	21.52	1.06
1991	23.61	2.10
2001	25.25	1.63
2011	27.01	1.77

The rise in the share of Muslims in this and the earlier decades has been much higher than the average of the State in several districts where the Muslims are particularly concentrated; in some of these districts of very high Muslim presence, the share of

Muslims now is far above their share before the Partition in 1941. Below, we look at the district and region wise distribution and growth of Muslims.

### **Distribution and Growth of Muslims across different regions of West Bengal**

Distribution of Muslims in West Bengal is shown in the Map below. Muslims have a high presence in two regions: Uttar Dinajpur, Dakshin Dinajpur, Maldah, Murshidabad and Birbhum districts that lie on the west of Rangpur and Rajshahi divisions of Bangladesh; and in North and South Twenty Four Parganas, Kolkata and Haora that lie on the west of Khulna division. In 2011, there are 99.65 lakh, or nearly a crore, Muslims in the former region and another 76.85 lakh, or somewhat more than three-quarters of a crore, in the latter region. This still leaves about 70 lakh Muslims in the rest of West Bengal; Muslims indeed have a share of more than 10 percent in all districts, except Darjiling, Bankura and Puruliya. In Nadia, their presence is as high as 26.8 percent. Below, we discuss the distribution and growth of Muslims in these two regions in detail.

### **Twenty-Four Parganas-Kolkata-Haora Region**

	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
24 Parganas	32.47	25.35	23.39	23.68	23.87	26.71	28.15	30.20
Kolkata	23.59	12.00	12.78	14.19	15.34	17.72	20.27	20.60
Haora	19.88	16.22	16.36	18.00	20.17	22.22	24.44	26.20
Total	27.24	19.57	19.35	20.57	21.57	24.09	26.05	27.93

#### *Muslims have a share of about 28 percent in the region*

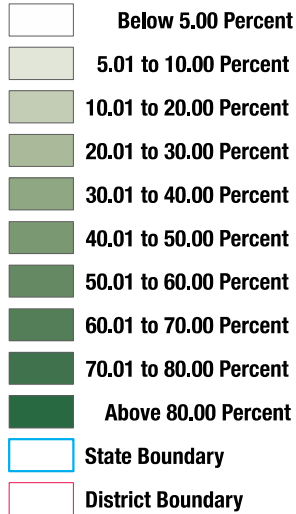
Muslims have a share of nearly 28 percent in the population of this region. Their share is much higher at around 36 percent in South 24 Parganas; it is around 26 percent in North 24 Parganas and Haora. The share of Muslims is much lower, less than 21 percent, in Kolkata; in general, the share of Muslims is relatively low in the urban areas of West Bengal. Kolkata should probably not be included as part of this region of high Muslim presence. But, we have included it for two reasons: One, the share of Muslims in this district during the last few decades has risen almost in step with the other three districts of the region. Second, there has been much interchange between the territory of Kolkata and both 24 Parganas; therefore, for getting a reliable long-term time series, these three districts have to be added together.

#### *Muslim share in the region has risen above the pre-Partition level*

Muslim share in this region remained nearly unchanged during 1951-61, and rose by about 1 percentage point in each of the following two decades. In the 3 decades since 1981, however, their share has risen by more than 6 percentage points. As a result, the share of Muslims in the region has now risen above the pre-Partition level of 27.24 percent recorded in 1941. Among the individual districts of the region, Muslims share has considerably surpassed the pre-Partition level in Haora. It remains somewhat below that level in Kolkata and the undivided 24 Parganas.

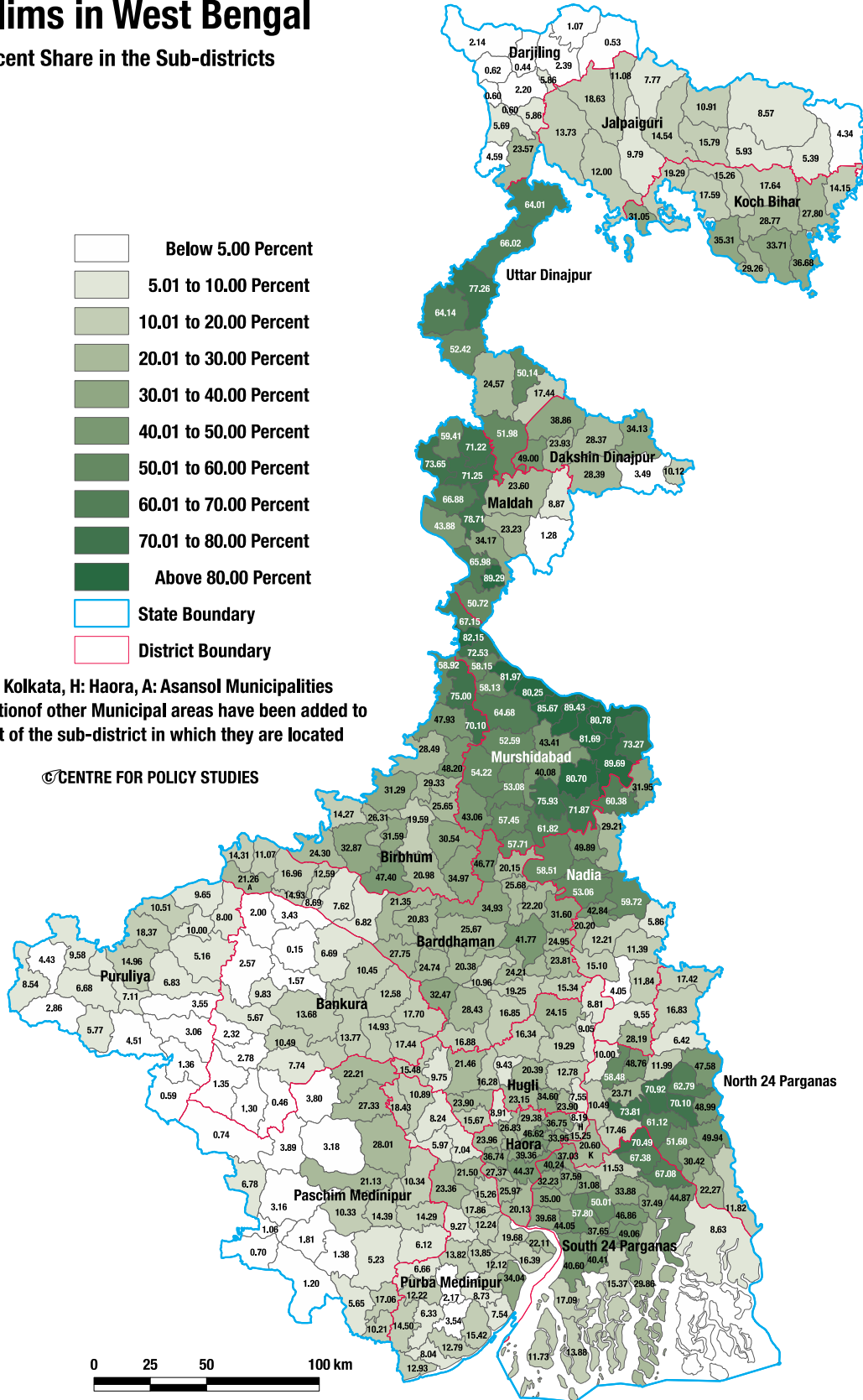
# Muslims in West Bengal

Percent Share in the Sub-districts



K: Kolkata, H: Haora, A: Asansol Municipalities  
 Population of other Municipal areas have been added to that of the sub-district in which they are located

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*Several sub-districts in the region are now Muslim majority*

As seen in the Map above, Muslims form a majority in several sub-districts in the North and South 24 Parganas. Their share is around or above 50 percent in 8 of the 22 sub-districts in North 24 Parganas; among these, Muslim share is above 70 percent in 3 and it is between 60 and 70 percent in another two. There are another 4 sub-districts, with Muslim share between 40 and 50 percent. In South 24 Parganas, Muslims are in a majority in 5 of the 29 sub-districts, and their share is between 40 and 50 percent in another 7 sub-districts. In Haora, there are two sub-districts, Panchla and Ulberia-I, where Muslims have a presence of more than 40 percent. Thus, Muslims form an overwhelming majority in some sub-districts in this region and there are several contiguous sub-districts where they form a majority or near majority.

<b>District N 24 Pargana</b>	
Sub-district	%M
Barasat - II	73.81
Deganga	70.92
Basirhat - II	70.10
Baduria	62.79
Haroa	61.12
Amdanga	58.48
Minakhan	51.60
Hasnabad	49.94
<b>District S 24 Pargana</b>	
Bhangar - II	70.49
Bhangar - I	67.38
Canning - II	67.08
Magrahat - I	57.80
Magrahat - II	50.01

**Dinajpur-Maldah-Murshidabad-Birbhum region**

<b>Muslim Share (%) in Dinajpur-Maldah-Murshidabad-Birbhum Region, 1941-2011</b>								
	1941	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
W Dinajpur	50.20	29.94	39.42	35.89	35.79	36.75	38.47	40.87
Maldah	56.78	36.97	46.18	43.12	45.27	47.49	49.72	51.27
Murshidabad	56.55	55.24	55.86	56.34	58.66	61.40	63.67	66.27
Birbhum	27.42	26.86	27.62	29.19	30.98	33.06	35.08	37.06
Total	48.39	39.89	44.02	43.21	44.96	47.14	49.31	51.69

*Muslims now form a majority in this region*

Muslim presence is much more intense in this region than in 24-Parganas-Kolkata-Haora region. In the region as a whole, their share is now 51.7 percent. Within the region, Murshidabad has the highest presence of Muslims at 66.3 percent. Maldah, with 51.3 percent, has the second highest share of Muslims in this region. West Dinajpur is now separated into Uttar and Dakshin Dinajpur. The share of Muslims in Uttar Dinajpur is higher at 49.9 percent; Muslim share in Dakshin Dinajpur is only 24.6 percent. In Birbhum, Muslims have a share of 37.1 percent.

*Muslim share has witnessed extraordinarily rapid expansion in this region*

As seen in the Table above, in the six decades since Partition and Independence, the share of Muslims in this region has risen by 11 percentage points. This or a higher level of accretion to the share of Muslims has happened in every district of the region. In West Dinajpur and Maldah, there was a decline in the Muslim share during 1961-71 following an abrupt rise in 1951-61. It seems that the populations in this region remained unsettled in the first couple of decades after Partition. After 1971, the share of Muslims has grown consistently and rapidly; in West Dinajpur, this spurt in growth has been seen after 1981.

*Muslim share in the region has reached above pre-Partition levels*

The pre-Partition figures for the share of Muslims in this region are for the proportion of Muslims in the pre-Partition districts; boundaries of the districts in this region changed significantly during Partition. The share of Muslims in the pre-Partition period in the

parts of the districts that were retained in India is likely to be lower than what is indicated in the Census figures compiled above. Even with these probably higher figures, the share of Muslims in 2011 has surpassed the 1941 figures in the region as a whole. In Murshidabad and Birbhum, the share of Muslims now is nearly 10 percentage points above their share in 1941. In West Dinajpur and Maldah, there was a very large decline of about 20 percentage points in the share of Muslims at Partition; more than half of this decline has now been made up in both districts.

*More than half of the sub-districts in this region are Muslim majority*

As seen in the Map, 42 of the 77 sub-districts in this region have a Muslim majority. Muslims have a particularly high presence in Uttar Dinajpur, Maldah and Murshidabad; 7 of the 9 sub-districts in Uttar Dinajpur, 9 of the 15 in Maldah and 23 of the 26 in Murshidabad are Muslim majority. None of the 8 sub-districts in Dakshin Dinajpur and only 3 of the 19 in Birbhum fall in this category. These two districts, in a way, are on the edge of the high Muslim presence region, but Dakshin Dinajpur has to be included in order to get data for a longer time series, and Birbhum has witnessed a very high growth of Muslim share as in the rest of the region.

Among the 42 Muslim majority sub-districts in this region, Muslims have a presence of nearly 90 percent in three; their share is above 80 percent in another seven, between 70 and 80 percent in eleven, between 60 and 70 percent in eight, and between 50 and 60 percent in thirteen. In another eight sub-districts of this region, the share of Muslims is above 40 percent. Thus in large parts of this region, Muslims have a majority and near majority, and in several parts they have acquired an overwhelming presence.

Muslim majority Sub-districts	
%M	Number
Near 90%	3
80-90%	7
70-80%	11
60-70%	8
50-60%	13

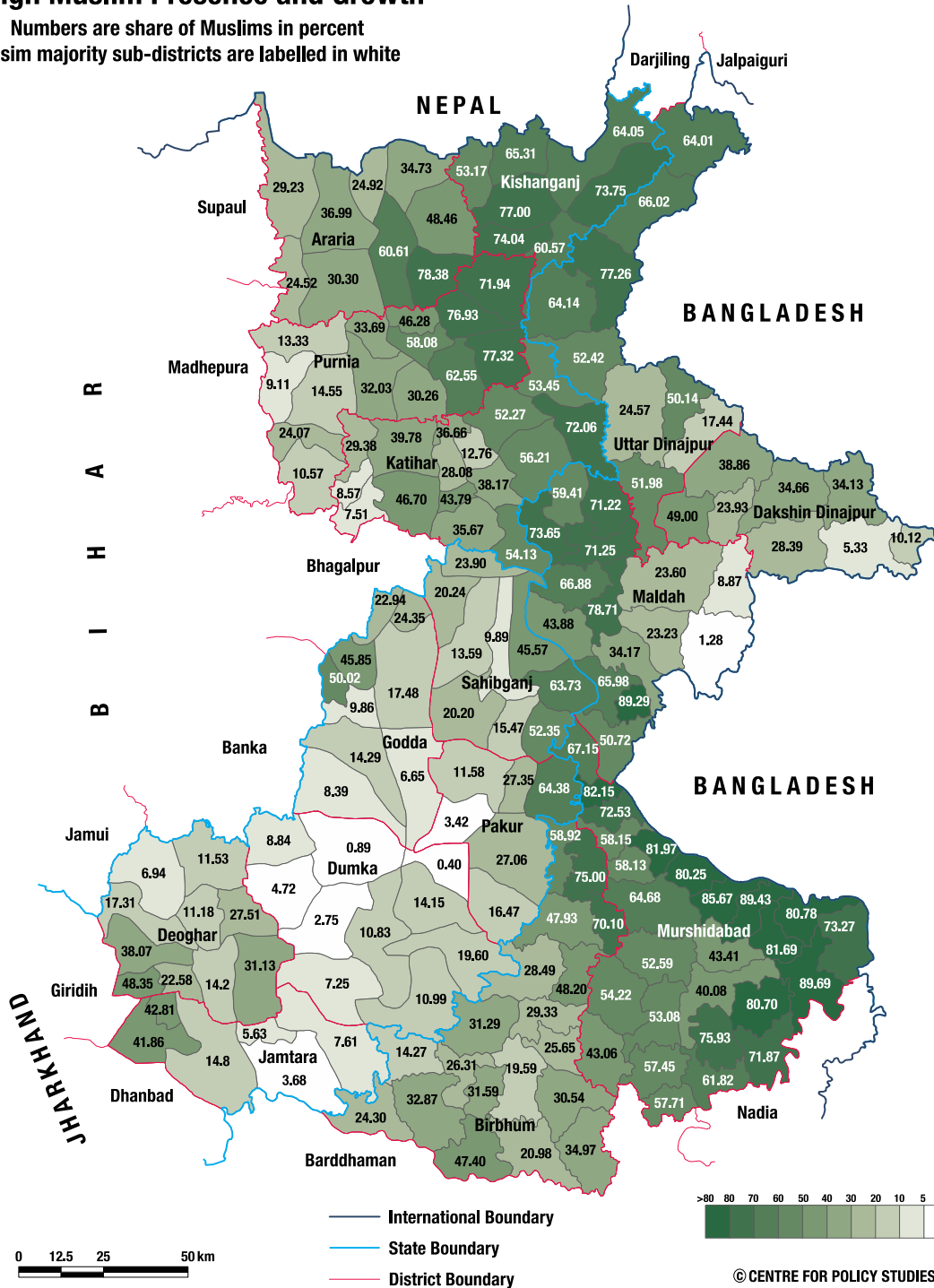
*Nadia:* Five of the 17 sub-districts in the northern part of Nadia adjoining Murshidabad also have a Muslim majority. This part of Nadia indeed belongs to the high Muslim presence region that we are discussing; but the growth of Muslims in Nadia as a whole has been relatively subdued. Their share in Nadia was 22.4 percent in 1951, 23.4 percent in 1971 and has reached 26.8 percent in 2011. During 2001-11, however, there has been an unusually high accretion of 1.34 percentage points to the Muslim share in this district.

**The larger eastern belt of high Muslim presence and growth**

Dinajpur-Maldah-Murshidabad-Birbhum region of West Bengal forms part of a larger belt of very high Muslim presence and growth that extends from this region towards the west to include Purnia region of Bihar and Santhal Pargana region of Jharkhand. Muslim share in this whole belt up to the sub-district level is shown in the Map below. Purnia region includes the current districts of Araria, Kishanganj, Purnia and Katihar; the four together constituted Purnia district up to 1971. Santhal Pargana region comprises the current districts of Sahibganj, Pakur, Dumka, Godda, Jamatra and Deogarh; these 6 together formed Santhal Pargana district up to 1981.

# EASTERN BORDER BELT of High Muslim Presence and Growth

Numbers are share of Muslims in percent  
Muslim majority sub-districts are labelled in white



*Muslim share in this belt has gone up by 15 percentage points since 1951*

As seen in the Table below, the share of Muslims has gone up by nearly 15 percentage points in this belt as a whole. The accretion is of more than 15 percentage points in Purnia, of 13 percentage points in Santhal Pargana and of about 12 percentage points in

Dinajpur-Maldah-Murshidabad-Birbhum region. In the last couple of decades, the growth has been more pronounced in Santhal Pargana and Dinajpur, etc., regions, while it seems to be slowing down somewhat in the Purnia region. This is probably in consonance with the slowing down of Muslim growth in all of Bihar as we have seen in an earlier post.

**Muslim Share in Percent in the Eastern Border Belt, 1951-2011**

	1951	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Purnia of Bihar	30.07	37.68	39.62	40.26	42.49	44.29	45.93
Santhal Pargana	9.44	13.77	14.62	16.45	18.25	20.59	22.73
Dinajpur Belt	39.89	44.02	43.21	44.96	47.14	49.31	51.69
Total	29.88	35.68	36.34	38.13	40.38	42.57	44.56

*A belt of very high Muslim presence*

As seen in the Map below, this region forms a belt of very high Muslim presence. The total population of this belt now is 3.71 crores, of whom 1.65 crore are Muslim. The central part of this belt comprises a large number of contiguous sub-districts, labelled in white, where Muslims form a majority of the population; in most of these, the share of Muslims is considerably above 50 percent.

This belt lies on the strategically important feature on the Bangladesh border, where a narrow strip of land joins northern West Bengal and Assam with the rest of India. Parts of three major States, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal, and borders of Nepal and Bangladesh lie along this feature. It is in this strategically crucial area, often referred to as the Chicken Neck in strategic jargon, that the presence of Muslims has grown so rapidly as to add 15 percentage points to their share in the population in the six decades since Independence and Partition. This process of accretion to the Muslim share has only quickened during the last two or three decades, except in Purnia. But even in that region, Muslim share has increased by at least 1.6 percentage points during 2001-11.

This belt of high Muslim presence and growth further extends to lower and northern Assam belt where Muslim presence and growth is even higher, as we have seen in our previous post. Beyond Assam, and all along its borders, lie the other northeastern States, many of which have an overwhelming Christian majority. In that region as a whole, Indian Religionists are now in a minority. Thus, Indian Religionists seem to have become a minority in a large eastern belt that begins from Purnia and Santhal Pargana regions of Bihar and Jharkhand, encompasses Dinajpur-Maldah-Murshidabad-Birbhum region of West Bengal, much of lower and northern Assam and reaches up to the eastern most tip of India in Arunachal Pradesh. It is indeed surprising that this turning of the mainstream religions of India into a minority in a crucial border region has happened in the last six decades of our independent polity. The religion data for 2001-11, especially of West Bengal, Assam and also Arunachal Pradesh, the details of which we have already discussed, indicates that this process of marginalisation of the mainstream religion is showing no signs of abating; it is only becoming stronger.

*Rising share of Christians in Darjiling*

Christians in the State have a significant presence only in Darjiling and Jalpaiguri. In Darjiling, their share has increased from less than 3 percent in 1951 to 7.7 percent now;



in Jalpaiguri, there has been a more moderate rise from 2.8 to 4.3 percent. Incidentally, the share of Christians in Sikkim, adjoining Darjiling, has also risen rapidly from 0.2 percent in 1951 to 6.7 percent now. Much of this rise in Sikkim has happened after 1971; during the last decade alone, their share has doubled from just 3.3 percent in 2001.

## Summing Up

1. Rise in the share of Muslim in West Bengal has been extraordinarily high. During 2001-11, their share has increased by 1.77 percentage points, which is the fourth highest accretion to the share of Muslims in the country after Assam, Kerala and Uttarkhand.
2. In the six decades since Independence and Partition, the share of Muslims in West Bengal has increased by 7.5 percentage points; of this, 6.5 percentage points of increase has happened after 1971.
3. Muslims now form 27.5 percent of the population of West Bengal and are fast nearing their share of 29.5 percent in 1941, before Independence and Partition. The decline of about 10 percentage points in the Muslim share that occurred because of the Partition has been now largely negated.
4. Muslims have a particularly high presence in Dinajpur-Maldah-Murshidabad-Birbhum region. They form a majority of the population here; their share in 2011 is 52 percent. There has been an accretion of 12 percentage points to their share since 1951. In this region, the Muslim share has in fact risen above their share before the Partition.
5. Dinajpur-Maldah-Murshidabad-Birbhum region of high Muslim presence and growth extends to Purnia region of Bihar and Santhal Pargana region of Jharkhand on the west and to Lower and North Assam on the east. Muslims are in a majority in the whole of this eastern border belt and their share has been growing rapidly in all parts of it. In several pockets within this belt, Muslims now have an overwhelming majority.
6. Twenty Four Parganas-Kolkata-Haora form another region of high Muslim presence and growth. In this region, the share of Muslims now is around 28 percent, which is somewhat above their share before Partition in 1941. The share of Muslims in this region has increased by more than 7 percentage points since 1971.
7. Christians have a significant presence mainly in Darjiling district of the State. In this district, their share has grown from less than 3 percent in 1951 to 7.6 percent in 2011. There has been an accretion of 1.5 percentage points in their share in the last decade alone.

*Postscript:* While the share of Muslims in West Bengal has increased by 7.5 percentage points between 1951 and 2011, the share of Indian Religionists in East Bengal, which is now Bangladesh, has declined by 13.6 percentage points in the same period, from 22.9 percent in 1951 to 9.3 percent in 2011. Share of Muslims in undivided Bengal, including both West Bengal and Bangladesh, has increased from 52.5 percent in 1901 to 65.8 percent in 2011. We shall discuss the drastic changes that have happened in the religious demography of Bangladesh in some later post.