

The Dynamics and Distribution of Religious Landscape of South 24 Parganas District, West Bengal, India

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Abstract:

Background:

The manuscript is to present the dynamics and distribution of religious composition of population of South 24 Parganas District from 1981 till 2001. This is viewed as a traditional Hindu based region, though contemporary district is faced with quantitative declining of Hindus with accelerating trend of Muslims and a little role is contributed by other communities for the overall demographic change of the district.

Objectives:

The main objective of this paper is to explain the changing trajectory and patterns of existing religious communities, their diversity of growth and inter-religious variation by residence and gender.

Materials and Methods:

According to the availability of secondary data sources obtained from Primary Census Abstract of District Census Hand Book has been systematically presented by some cartographic methods with the help of average annual growth rate and some percentage distribution techniques.

Results:

In spite of having a major proportion of Hindus, the findings highlight about the accelerating trend of Muslims than Hindus, although all religious groups have experienced their diminishing trend in terms of average exponential growth rate. Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains have been concentrated in few pockets of the district.

Conclusion

The present article demonstrates the dynamics and distribution of religious groups over space and time. With the changing socio cultural landscape, religious diversity has been going through a remarkable extent of transformation where Hindus are being numerically weaker by the overriding growth of Muslims for making demographic balance and other communities are tracing their attendance only.

Key Word: Religions, Growth Rate, Spatial Patterns, Hindus, Muslims.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Religion is one of the basic socio-cultural and demographic features, has long been a magnet for academic enquiry observed from the first Census 1872 till now. It is a central component of religious identity and articulate behavioral norm with a bearing on fertility behavior (McQuillan, 2004). People understand and express religious identity in their own way. Beyer argued that religion is a part of person's identity as well as "a variety of communication" (Beyer, 1994). Economic, social and political matters are directly and indirectly associated with the religion. The inter-block variation of Hindus and Muslim is caused by their inter-block shifts and changes. The changes in the relative balance between various groups of religions within a population play a crucial role in the rise and fall of a nation in all aspect. Paucity of detailed religious data makes difficulty to assess the intra and inter-block changes in the religious landscape. Both the Hindus and the Muslims have performed an active role in considerable out-migration from rural areas to urban areas. The majority of Hindus in some blocks have led to the higher rate of in-migration than the rate of natural increase. The gradual deterioration of the agricultural economy under the pressure of increasing population has influenced the people to out-migrate. Some of the Muslims in the working age group are seen to have a tendency to go to the western part of the country for constructional and jewellery work. The high concentration of both the Hindus and the Muslims has led to the development of numerous towns as agricultural markets and centers. In addition, the industrial and commercial activities in Thakurpukur Maheshstala and Budge Budge have been emerged due to the concentration of multi religious groups of population. The Hindus constitute a majority of the population and the Muslims tend to hold the second largest position in the district.

II. STUDY AREA

South 24 Parganas district, the largest and 2nd most populated district in West Bengal is located in the southernmost part of the deltaic plains of Bengal. The district is situated between 21° 29' 00" North to 22° 33' 45" North latitude and 88 ° 03' 45" East to 89° 04' 50" East longitude. On the 1st of March, 1986, the southern part of erstwhile 24 Parganas was carved out separately to form a new district named South 24 Parganas. Kolkata and North 24-Parganas lies to its north and north east and Bay of Bengal to its south. The study area is constituted by twenty nine blocks, bounded by an International boundary with Bangladesh to the east. On the west, the river Hooghly has demarcated the boundary proceeding from north to south separates it from the district of Howrah and East Midnapore.

Objectives

- To track the changing scenario of all religious groups in the district during 1981-2001.
- To find out the people's inter-religious variation by residence and gender.
- To explore the spatial distribution of existing religious communities with respect to 2001 Census.

III. MATERIAL AND METHODS

To investigate the dynamics and distribution of religious communities, secondary sources of data has been obtained from District Census Hand Book of South 24 Parganas: 1981, 1991 and 2001: Primary Census Abstract and many other relevant published reports and documents. The data so obtained have been analyzed through simple but meaningful mathematical measure like the percentage distribution, average annual growth rate have simply been presented by some cartographic techniques.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

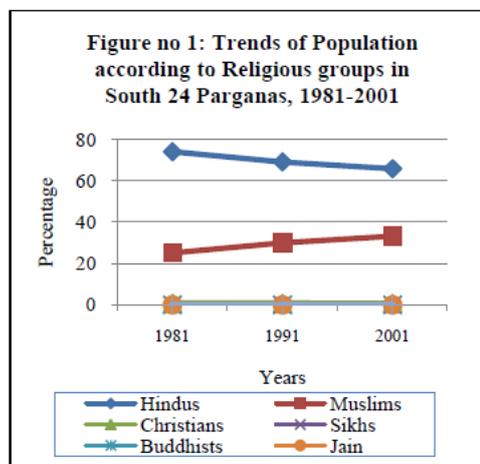
Religious Profile of South 24 Parganas: 1981-2001:

The underlying dynamic nature of multiculturalism of population is the outcome of the interreligious differentiation and intrareligious homogenization of Hindu and Muslims in India (Koslowski, 1985, Powers, 1989, Klein, 2000). The district also witnesses the scenario of multiculturalism where the proportion of Hindus has consistently been declining during three consecutive Censuses (Table 1 and Figure 1) whereas the Muslims show the reverse trend than the Hindus. They are estimated to be 25.14% (1981), 29.94% (1991) and 33.24% (2001) out of the total population. Their increasing proportion has been explained by the poverty and socio-economic insecurity which together has invoked them towards lesser adoption of family planning measure (Bhagat, 2005). The Christians shared 0.82% in total population in 1981 and by adding 0.04 points it shared 0.86% in 1991 but in 2001 it occupies 0.76% of share by declining 0.08% points. The contribution of the Sikhs has become nearly stagnant i.e. 0.02% share in corresponding censuses. The Buddhist's participation has been accelerating trend but the Jains have non traceable contribution in this respect.

Table no 1: Religious Composition, 1981, 1991 and 2001

Religion	1981		1991		2001	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Hindus	3212145	74.01	3950496	69.12	4548459	65.86
Muslims	1091222	25.14	1711297	29.94	2295967	33.24
Christians	35751	0.82	48941	0.86	52835	0.76
Sikhs	942	0.02	1035	0.02	1680	0.02
Buddhists	572	0.01	1079	0.02	1799	0.03
Jain	72	0	104	0	213	0
Others	4	0	61	0.04	1142	0.02
Religion not stated	-	-	2017	-	4594	0.07
Total population	43,40,708	100	57,15,030	100	69,06,689	100

Source: District Census Hand Book, 24 Parganas, 1981; District Census Hand Book, South 24 Parganas, 1991 and 2001, Primary Census Abstract, computed by the author



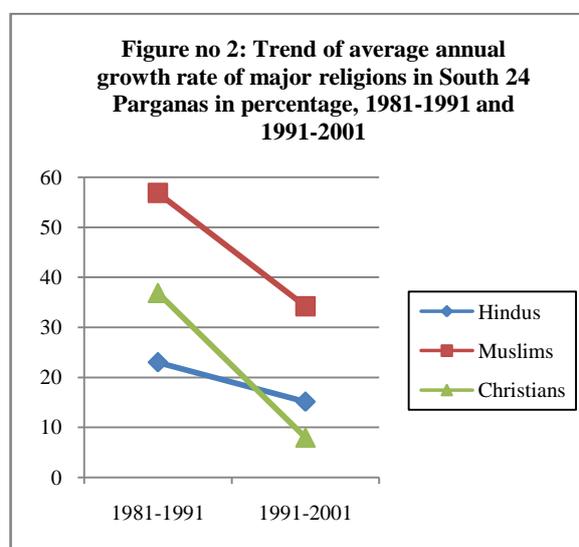
Rates of Growth of different communities in South 24 Parganas (1981-1991 and 1991-2001):

The district's average annual growth rate of all religions explicitly address declining trend i.e. 31.66% (1981 to 1991) and 20.85% (1991 to 2001) (Table 2). During 1981-1991, the average annual growth rate of Muslims (56.82%) was 2.5 times higher than Hindus (22.99%). Davis (1951) attributed to religious conversions, well accepted practice of widow remarriage, and relatively high fertility in this respect. The Christians contributes an intermediate growth rate (36.89%) between the Hindus and the Muslims. Among the very minor religious people, the Buddhists have 88.63% of the growth rate followed by the Jains (44.44%) and the Sikh (9.87%) (Table 2). In comparison to the earlier decade, the growth rate (1991 to 2001) of Muslims (34.17%) has become double than the Hindus (15.13%) and the Christians have the lowest growth rate (7.96%).

Table no 2: Average annual growth rate of religions, 1981-2001

Religions	Average annual growth rate in percentage		Percentage of Contribution to total Population increase in the district	
	1981 - 1991	1991- 2001	1981- 1991	1991- 2001
Hindus	22.99	15.13	53.73	50.18
Muslims	56.82	34.17	45.22	49.06
Christians	36.89	7.96	0.96	0.33
Sikhs	9.87	62.32	0.01	0.05
Buddhists	88.63	66.73	0.06	0.06
Jain	44.44	104.81	0.01	0.01
Others	1425	1772.13	0.01	0.09
Religion not stated	-	127.76	-	0.22
District	31.66	20.85	100	100

Source: District Census Hand Book, 24 Parganas, 1981; District Census Hand Book, South 24 Parganas, 1991 and 2001, Primary Census Abstract, computed by the author.



Among the three minor religions, the Jains have the growth rate of 104.81% followed by the Buddhists (66.73%) and the Sikhs (62.32%) (Table 2). Among the two major religions, the Muslim growth rate has been reduced by 22.65% points and the Hindu shows only 7.86% points decline from 1981 to 1991 and 1991 to 2001. Due to the influence of modernization as well as different awareness programmes i.e. family planning by the government may influence for the reduction of Muslim's growth rate.

Interestingly, Hindus and Muslims provided 53.73% and 45.22% share (1981-1991) for the overall the population growth of the district (Table 2). The others religions have very meager contribution like the Christians (0.96%), the Sikhs (0.01%) and the Buddhists (0.06%) and the Jains (0.01%). On the other hand, from 1991 to 2001 Census, the contribution of the Hindus and the Muslims have become more or less identical i.e. 50.18% and 49.06% respectively. The contribution of others is 0.33% for the Christians, 0.05% for the Sikhs, 0.06% for the Buddhists and 0.01% for the Jains respectively.

Residential distribution of Religions in South 24 Parganas, 2001

The religious composition of India's population has been the outcome of two main factors: patterns of religious conversions, and migrations (Gill, 2010). As a consequence of the improvement of the socio economic status among the Hindus, the natural growth rate has been declined to a considerable extent than Muslims. In absolute number, the Hindus are nearly double than the concentration of the Muslims and 43 times more than the Christians (Table 3). The Hindus, the Muslims and the Christians are predominantly concentrated in the rural areas whereas three minor religions like the Buddhists, the Sikhs and the Jains have concentrated in a few pockets of the urban area. Table 6 and figure 3 show the overall percentage distribution of all religious groups in respective blocks.

Table no 3: Residential distribution of Religions in South 24 Parganas, 2001

Religions	Rural	Urban	Total	Total (%)	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
Hindus	3771774	776685	4548459	65.86	82.92	17.08
Muslims	1993978	301989	2295967	33.24	86.85	13.15
Christians	49122	3713	52835	0.76	92.97	7.03
Sikhs	357	1323	1680	0.02	21.25	78.75
Buddhists	345	1454	1799	0.03	19.18	80.82
Jains	87	126	213	0	40.85	59.15
Others	656	486	1142	0.02	57.44	42.56
Religion not stated	4150	444	4594	0.07	90.34	9.66
All communities	5820469	1086220	6906689	100	84.27	15.73

Source: District Census Hand Book, 2001 South 24 Parganas; Primary Census Abstract, computed by the author

Gender Variations of Religions, 2001:

This quantitative study demonstrate that all religions in both rural and urban areas show more male percentage, only the Christians occupy more female share (51.52%) than male (48.48%) particularly in urban areas (Table 4). The interesting feature is that the percentage of male and female for both the Hindus and the Muslims are more or less similar in rural and urban area. The gender gap of the Hindus is little higher (3.35%) than the Muslims (2.35%). The Christians have a very lower gender difference (1.64%) in the rural sector. Among the other minor religions, gender gap is the highest among the Jains followed by the Sikhs and the Buddhists. In urban areas, the Muslims gender gap is little higher than the Hindus and the Christians have 3.04% points higher females share than the males (Table 4). The gender gap in all communities is higher in urban areas than the rural areas because of the concentration of more migrated male.

The Spatial Patterns of Hindus in block level, 2001

Hinduism is the oldest religion since time immemorial and there is a saying that ‘a Hindu can assert that all religious human beings are in fact Hindus whether or not they know or desire it’ (Sopher, 1967). Numbering 45, 48,459, Hindus constituted 65.86 per cent (Table 1) of the total district’s population, occupying the highest concentration among all the religious groups. The most rapidly grown block Sonarpur experiences the maximum concentration of the Hindus with 43,9,466 covering 9.7% (Table 5) of all Hindus population in the district which is followed by the Thakurpukur Maheshtala with a population of 3,20,006 (7.0%), Baruipur occupies 2,64,203 (5.8%), Patharpratima constitutes 2,60,784 (5.7%) and Kakdwip has 2,01,752 (4.4%) etc. A large proportion of the Hindus have been found along the middle portion of the district extending from north to south whereas a relatively lower concentration can be found towards the western and the eastern blocks.

Table no 4: Religious Composition by Residence and Gender in percentage, 2001

Religions	Rural			Urban		
	Male	Female	Gender Gap	Male	Female	Gender Gap
Hindus	51.67	48.33	3.35	52.19	47.81	4.39
Muslims	51.17	48.83	2.35	52.47	47.53	4.93
Christians	50.82	49.18	1.64	48.48	51.52	-3.04
Sikhs	59.94	40.06	19.89	57.82	42.18	15.65
Buddhists	54.49	45.51	8.99	52.27	47.73	4.54
Jains	65.52	34.48	31.03	57.94	42.06	15.87
Others	50.76	49.24	1.52	55.97	44.03	11.93
Religion not stated	51.88	48.12	3.76	53.83	46.17	7.66
All communities	51.50	48.50	2.99	52.27	47.73	4.53

Source: District Census Hand Book, 2001 South 24 Parganas; Primary Census Abstract, computed by the author.

The socioeconomic status of the Hindus is comparatively better than the Muslim community in all blocks. Most of the Hindus are distributed on the basis of the agricultural opportunities in early days but due to reduction of the agricultural potentialities, the inter-block migration has made the present pattern of

redistribution. The Hindus have mostly migrated from the rural to urban areas and more concentrated in Sonarpur and Thakurpukur-Maheshtala block especially due to employment and educational opportunities, though most of the blocks are early homeland of the Hindus for long.

Table no 5: Percentage distribution of the Hindu and Muslim Population in South 24 Parganas, 2001

Sl. No	Blocks	Hindu	Muslim	Sl. No	Blocks	Hindu	Muslim
1	Thakurpukur Maheshtala	7.04	8.35	16	Gosaba	4.41	0.82
2	Bishnupur-I	2.99	2.62	17	Mograhath-I	2.16	5.50
3	Bishnupur-II	2.69	2.94	18	Mograhath-II	2.96	5.42
4	Budge Budge-I	2.87	3.39	19	Mandirbazar	2.65	2.70
5	Budge Budge-II	2.68	2.23	20	Kulpi	3.37	3.84
6	Sonarpur	9.66	2.58	21	Falta	3.32	3.07
7	Jaynagar-I	3.14	4.32	22	Diamond Harbour-I	2.24	2.99
8	Jaynagar-II	2.37	4.36	23	Diamond Harbour-II	2.28	2.67
9	Kultali	3.03	2.18	24	Mathurapur-I	2.28	2.64
10	Baruipur	5.81	5.57	25	Mathurapur-II	3.64	1.20
11	Bhangar-I	1.56	5.81	26	Kakdwip	4.44	1.63
12	Bhangar-II	1.44	6.17	27	Namkhana	3.08	0.89
13	Canning-I	3.51	3.66	28	Sagar	3.63	0.88
14	Canning-II	1.57	5.39	29	Patharpratima	5.73	1.17
15	Basanti	3.44	5.00		South 24-Parganas	100.00	100.00

Source: District Census Hand Book, South 24 Parganas, 2001, Primary Census Abstract, computed by the author

Commercialization of Thakurpukur-Maheshtala block has attracted all religious groups to settle since the historical periods. The maximum concentration of the Hindus particularly in the deltaic southern blocks has been due to in-migration from the Midnapore district for agricultural and fishing opportunities. In addition to this, a large number of Hindus have concentrated in the southeastern part of the district due to the cross border migration of Hindus from Bangladesh at the time of communal riots after the independence.

The Spatial Patterns of Muslims in block level, 2001:

Muslims are generally considered to be as the minority group, though they accounts for about half of the Hindus and ranks second after them in terms of size. Muslims contributes relatively higher fertility as well as lower child mortality among the other religious groups in India (Shariff, 1995). They present a large spatial variation in terms of their concentration. The highest concentration (Table 5) has been found in Thakurpukur-Maheshtala (191743, 8.4%) located to the extreme north western boundary whereas the lowest concentration has been identified in the deltaic Gosaba block (18906, 0.8%) to the extreme southeastern boundary of the district. The agricultural and fishing potentialities in Bhangar I & II have led to a large number of Muslims to be concentrated. Bhangar-II is the second largest Muslim populated block within the district which is followed by Bhangar-I (133317, 5.8%), Baruipur (127947, 5.6%), Mograhath-I (126174), Mograhath-II (124402, 5.4%) and Canning-II (123786, 5.4%) (Table 5). Only the Thakurpukur-Maheshtala has been found to be the most multi religious block where the greater concentration of nearly all religions has been observed. Bhangar-II occupies the highest proportion of Muslims and the lowest proportion of Hindus and Gosaba contributes the lowest concentration of the Muslims (0.82%) among all the blocks.

Table no 6: Religious Composition of Population in South 24 Parganas in Percentage, 2001

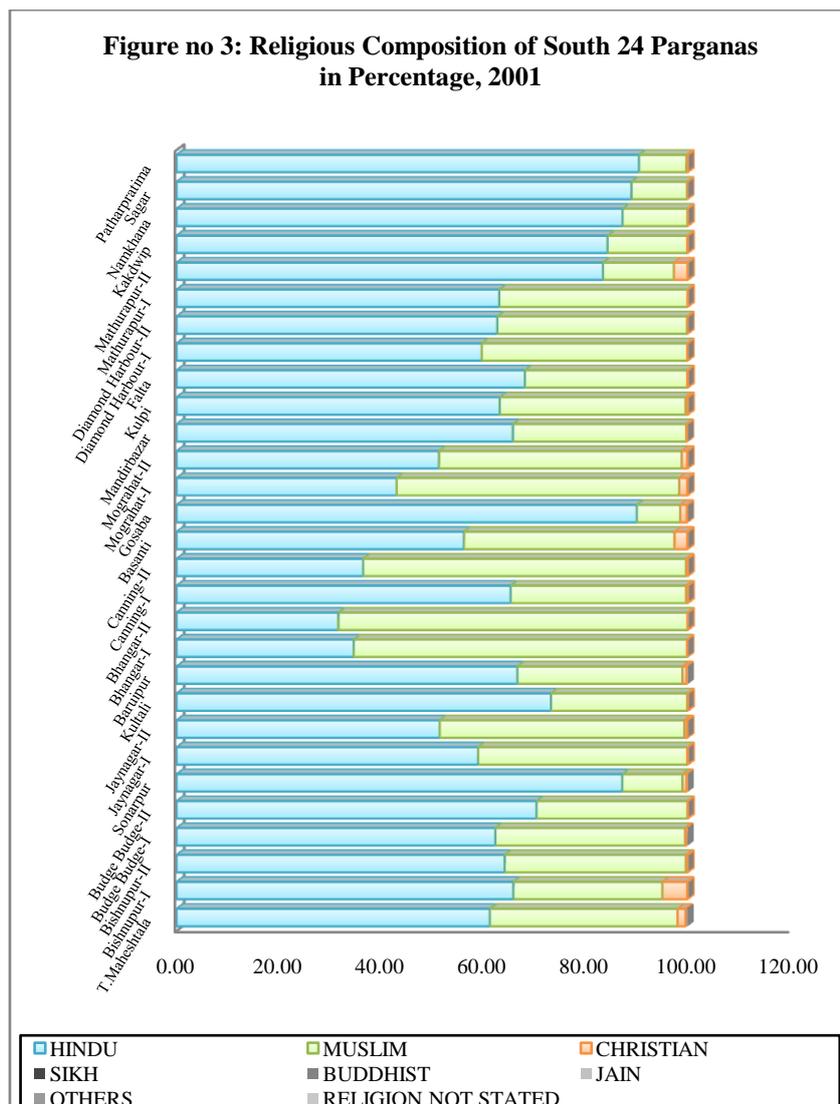
Sl. No	Blocks	Hindus	Muslims	Christians	Sikhs	Buddhists	Jains	Others	Religion not stated
1	Thakurpukur Maheshtala	61.28	36.72	1.55	0.11	0.26	0.01	0.02	0.04
2	Bishnupur-I	65.87	29.14	4.87	0.01	0.03	0.00	0.01	0.06
3	Bishnupur-II	64.17	35.43	0.31	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.05
4	Budge Budge-I	62.35	37.14	0.19	0.23	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.04
5	Budge Budge-II	70.38	29.57	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.03
6	Sonarpur	87.18	11.77	0.80	0.05	0.03	0.01	0.07	0.10

7	Jaynagar-I	58.99	40.89	0.07	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.03
8	Jaynagar-II	51.47	47.84	0.53	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.13
9	Kultali	73.23	26.66	0.07	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02
10	Baruipur	66.66	32.28	0.81	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.21
11	Bhangar-I	34.63	65.23	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.10
12	Bhangar-II	31.65	68.29	0.03	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.03
13	Canning-I	65.32	34.34	0.32	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02
14	Canning-II	36.51	63.17	0.26	0.00	0.01	0.02	0.00	0.03
15	Basanti	56.23	41.18	2.50	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.06
16	Gosaba	90.03	8.48	1.30	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.15	0.04
17	Mograhat-I	43.06	55.26	1.60	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.08
18	Mograhat-II	51.36	47.47	1.08	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.09
19	Mandirbazar	65.79	33.91	0.12	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.18
20	Kulpi	63.22	36.35	0.39	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.04
21	Falta	68.12	31.80	0.03	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.04
22	Diamond Harbour-I	59.71	40.19	0.02	0.04	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.03
23	Diamond Harbour-II	62.74	37.13	0.04	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.02	0.06
24	Mathurapur-I	63.12	36.84	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.03
25	Mathurapur-II	83.39	13.91	2.64	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.05
26	Kakdwip	84.30	15.60	0.04	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.05
27	Namkhana	87.23	12.71	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.05
28	Sagar	88.96	10.91	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.11
29	Patharpratima	90.43	9.31	0.20	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.04

Source: District Census Hand Book, South 24 Parganas, 2001, Primary Census Abstract, computed by the author

The Spatial Patterns of Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains in block level, 2001

The Christians are the 3rd largest religious group with 52,835 covering 0.8% of population share of the district (Table 1). The largest share is occupied by Bishnupur-I with 10,054 covering 19.0% of Christians of the total Christians of the district (Census, 2001) followed by Thakurpukur Maheshtala (8111, 15.4%), Basanti (6975, 13.2%), Mathurapur-II (5225, 9.9%), Sonarpur (4045, 7.7%), Mograhat-I (3650, 6.9%), Baruipur (3209, 6.1%), Gosaba (2892, 5.5%) etc. The Christians have no traceable demographic influence in the district due to less numerical strength. Christians cover only 4.87% (Table 6) out of the total population of Bishnupur-I block, though it occupies the highest proportion of the district and this is followed by 2.64% for Mathurapur-II, 2.50% for Basanti, 1.60% for Mograhat-I and 1.55% for Thakurpukur Maheshtala. The concentration and growth of Christians have been influenced due to education, health and housing opportunities provided by the Christian organizations in some cases. Disputes about conversion and religious truth have led to mutual incomprehension between different groups in Indian society for at least two centuries (Claerhout, 2019). Expectedly, some of the Hindus have been found to be proselytized to a particular faith due to the weakness of the hold of Hinduism and pulling factor of economic advantages.



Source: District Census Hand Book, South 24 Parganas, 2001, Primary Census Abstract, computed by the author

Among these three minor groups of religions, the Buddhists cover 1799, the Sikhs are 1680 and the Jains constitute only 213 people out of the total population of the district. The mostly urbanized and multi religious Thakurpukur Maheshtala block occupies the highest position in concentration of these three communities. Thakurpukur Maheshtala contain 1341, 588 and only 78 people for the Buddhists, the Sikhs and the Jains respectively. Sonarpur occupies the second largest position in covering the Buddhists people with 156 in absolute number and the contiguous block, Thakurpukur Maheshtala has 485 Sikhs, people followed by Sonarpur (269), Diamond Harbour-I (69), Baruipur (35) etc. Budge Budge-I constitutes only 32 Jains followed by Sonarpur (30), Canning-II (30), Jaynagar-II (13) etc. It is quite clear that these three religions have no significant influence in religio-cultural characteristics of the district.

V. FINDINGS

- The proportion of Hindus has consistently been declining whereas Muslims shows the reverse trend.
- All religious groups have experienced diminishing status in respect of average annual growth rate.
- Hindus and Muslims provided dominant role for the total population growth of the district and others have very negligible contribution.
- All religious groups have been predominantly concentrated especially in rural area where male are relatively larger and Hindus shows higher gender gap than Muslims.
- Multi-religious gathering have been experienced by northern part of the district due to multi-dimensional opportunities.

VI. CONCLUSION

The present study area is the home of more than 4.5 millions Hindus, 2.2 million Muslims and rest of 0.2 million includes Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists and Jains only. In spite of having traditionally Hindus, they are being experienced their steady decline for contemporary decades. Consisting of one third of the district's total population, the proportion of Muslims is rapidly increasing and their average annual growth rate is more or less double than Hindus that may shed a light towards the social transformation to some extent. A strong association has been observed in block level where the higher proportion of Muslims reduces the proportion of Hindus and vice versa. Finally, Religious conversion and spatial variation of differential opportunities shape the present religious landscape of the district.

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