



# Perspectives

*A collection of essays on*  
**Language, Ethnicity & Identity**



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**Editors :**  
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Mriganka Choudhury

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# Crisis of Identity of “Bangla” Speaking Muslims of West Bengal: An Overview

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## Introduction

*Na kisee kee aankh ka nor hoon*  
*Na kisee key dil ka quaraar hoon*  
*Jo kisee key kaam na aa sakey*  
*Main v eek musht-e-ghubaar hoon*

- Bahadur Shah Zafar (1775-1862)

Of every four persons in West Bengal one is a *Bangla* speaking Muslim. Despite their numerical density and participation in different socio-economic activities their identity is basically singular, based only on their religious affiliation. They are solely “Muslims.” All other identities (Bengali, professional, educational, economic, residential etc.) are never acknowledged and most interestingly often suppressed by the Government, popular lazy media, and concocted, unscrupulous religious and political bigots and even by the Muslims themselves, leading to their abysmal marginality, subjugation and a terrible crisis of identity. And an unperturbed eerie silence and voicelessness on all fronts—economic, educational, occupational, etc wrap their manual and menial life. The social and cultural exclusions of Bangla speaking Muslims are taken for granted, as if they are “unwanted” and let them be untouched till the declaration of another election. This cheap “vote bank” identity politics and other multiple socio-cultural issues result in their years of dehumanization and denigration in their homeland and beyond. Their crisis of identity, however, basically emerges from two questions and their consequent subsidiaries. Firstly, being *shudra*-converted, they are treated as impure or “*sherek*” Muslims by the Urdu speaking Muslims. And next, their innate Bengali identity is never acknowledged by their co-brethren elite Bengali Hindus. This dichotomy creates a traumatic crisis of identity for Bangla speaking *shudra*-converted Muslims of West Bengal. And their absence of representation, or their derogatory presence in literature, art, culture, cinema, media together with the harping on their negative stereotypes such as, barbaric, illiterate, temple destroyers, beef-eaters, women abductors, unhygienic, polygamists, crude, “*gaiya*” etc. adds further vituperation and vulgarisation to their already ghettoized and intolerably wretched identity. This paper is an attempt to explore the arenas where the plural secular identities of Bengali Muslims are suppressed with a skewed subtlety to fulfill a particular design. It also attempts to challenge Bengali Muslims’ singular “*burqa, topi, dari*” identity which is gnawing at their marrow.