

The Twentieth Century Bengali Muslim Thought and Society: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract: *The Muslims in India were the rulers of the country for more than seven hundred years. This status of 'rulers' was snatched away by the establishment of British rule in India. Bengal was one of the most significant centres of Muslim population in India. They lived side by side with the Hindus, sharing cultural assimilation and social bonding. The establishment of British rule was a rude shock to the Muslims of Bengal, posing serious questions before them with regard to their identity and culture. This paper highlights the changes in the Bengali Muslim thought and how they tried to cope with the challenges thrown open to them.*

Keywords: Muslim culture, challenges, intellectuals and institutions

A large number of books and papers are being produced year after year analysing the causes leading to the bitter animosity between the Hindus and the Muslims which was one of the principal factors for the partition of the Indian sub-continent. However, most of the works in this direction is being done from the political point of view. Barring certain exceptions, very few attempts have been made so far especially in Bengal to study the Bengali Muslim society in a historical perspective from the sociological and anthropological points of view. Besides, the process of modernization of the Bengali Muslims, an important aspect of the sociological study still remains almost a hitherto unexplored exercise even amongst the socially conscious academics and intellectuals.

There are so many questions regarding the Bengali Muslims of the period, which need to be explore, such as, what was the response of the Bengal Muslims towards the concomitant issues in relation to modernity like secularism, rationalism and humanism in its positive aspect which are the very essence of the modernity and traditionalism, conservatism and communalism which are the very anti-thesis to the concept of modernity. It further need to be explore and investigate whether there was any endeavour on the part of the Bengali Muslims to sustain communal harmony or whether the very word communal harmony was a myth created by the nationalists to further their cherished goal. Another point should be added here that there is ignorance and apathy even among the enlightened section of the intelligentsia about the contribution of the Bengali Muslim community towards the enrichment of the culture and society.

In India, the Muslims were bound to feel the influence of the Hindus who were undergoing changes under the impact of the Western education and culture. The old Muslim polity and the system of values began to disintegrate, but the reconstruction of the Indian Muslim society did not immediately follow. Despite their proximity to the progressive Hindu culture and an ancient civilization, Indian Muslims withdrew into cultural isolation, seeking security in traditional forces. The earliest attempts at reform, in the last quarter of 19th and 20th centuries were not towards a change into something new but towards re-establishing and reaffirming the supremacy of the traditions of the past.

The syncretistic tradition emanating from the literature, is a descriptive and analytical label for the religious tradition that the Muslim 'cultural mediators' (Ulemas) in Bengal reconstructed rather

consciously, urged by a deep sense of obligation towards the masses of the believers, with their specific needs and demands in the social and cultural milieu of Bengal. The Ulemas were all along alive to the realities of the situation and made efforts at different time to rectify it, though not with any great measure of success.

The Muslim elite, who included the upper class Urdu speaking elite, the urban intelligentsia and the prosperous landholders, had a significant role to play in the process of Islamization in Bengal. They were not homogenous classes and they did not see eye to eye on many issues, but inter-communal rivalry and competition between Hindus and Muslims had created conditions for co-operation between these different segments of Muslim society. Moreover, the efforts of intelligentsia were directed towards reviewing an interest in the study of Islam by interpreting it in the light of Western knowledge. The new generation of emergent Bengali-speaking Muslim intelligentsia, who were not yet a dominant force in the society were by and large affected by above objective.

The cultural distance between the dominant Muslim upper classes (*Ashrafs*) and the rural masses (*Altafs*) was so wide that no positive contact was even expected. Even in the 19th century, cultural gap remained as wide as before and found reflection in their respective dress, manners and social habits. For the ordinary Muslims, the Urdu-based culture remained as foreign as the language itself. The two groups thus never got to know each other and they flourished side by side.

The particular of the local aspect of the cultural questions regarding the Bengali Muslims refers to the attitude of the Ulema or the Muslim jurist theologians towards the history and culture of the countries in which Islam had established itself. The Ulema often supported the power that championed the idea of the completeness and self-sufficiency of Islam as a way of life and opposed the acceptance of any strand of local culture which was looked upon as inferior and likely to dilute the true faith. Though the operation of the social dynamics made the mutual interaction between and incoming civilization and the local one inevitable the Ulemas were adamant in their refusal to accept this social reality.

Economic and cultural factors played an important part in the minds of Bengali Muslims regarding accepting the Western education. One point should be made clear here, the unfriendly attitude of the majority of the Muslims towards modern education did not mean that there was no Muslim representation at all in the new educational activities. There were some Bengali Muslims who were in favour of the modern education, and Muslim students were admitted to English schools, which were imparting modern education, though the number was extremely small. In any case, there was the rise of intellectuals, though small in numbers, in the various parts of Bengal.

There were several periodicals published by the Bengali Muslims, whose primary objective was to address the identity questions of the Muslims in Bengal. They were advocating for Bengali language to be the medium of modern education for Muslims, as they were more familiar to the culture and traditions of Bengal, after coming into contact with Islam more than seven centuries ago. '*Islam Pracharak*', '*Al Eslam*', '*BangaNur*', '*Naba Bur*', '*Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika*', '*Kohinur*' etc. became the medium for Muslim intellectuals to express their advocacy for modern education and addressing their identity issue. There was division among intellectuals for which language to be regarded as the mother tongue of the Bengali Muslims- Bengali or Urdu? Later on when tinged with communalism; the Hindu-Urdu controversy finally became a political issue, Hindu identifying themselves with Hindi and Muslims with Urdu. Thus the advocacy of Urdu began to partially to symbolize Muslim nationalism.

To understand clearly whether there was any quest for modernity among the Bengali Muslims or not it is necessary to discuss something about the contribution of some of the leading Bengali intellectuals and the organizations towards the process of modernization. **Maulana Mujibur Rahman**, the famous editor of the English language weekly '*Mussalman*' was the champion in the Swadeshi advocacy and later nationalist causes. With his death on 20th April 1940, a glorious chapter in the history of Muslim journalism ended. All through his life Mujibur Rahaman fought like a valiant fighter against the worst evils of communalism after single handed in the face of tough opposition from all quarters. Another outstanding Bengali Muslim personality of the period was **Begum Rokeya or Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain**. In an age when among the Muslim man-folk there was rampant superstition, blind orthodoxy, backwardness, we find in Begum Rokeya remarkable clarity of thought, which was full of rationalism. Her lifelong dedication and service to the uplift of the Bengali Muslim women-folk was indeed unparalleled even among the comparatively progressive Bengali Hindu women. Rokeya's outlook was non-communal or secular minded in all respects. She was far away from orthodoxy. There is absence of any sign of weakness or sympathy in Rokeya's writings for separatist policies of the Muslim League.

Most of the journals and newspapers that were being published at that time mainly kept their visions confined towards the religious and social aspects. Proper literary activities were not the aims of many of them. Culture for the emancipation of the intellect, and the spread of free thinking were almost practically impossible in the society. For this reason, those who have cultivated for emancipation of the intellect even to some extent and looked towards the free expression of thoughts and opinions, were condemned in the society.

However, it was not before the advent of **Kazi Nazrul Islam** the literary firmament that there was any revolutionary transformation of the Bengali Muslim mind. He brought new lease to the moribund ideals of the Bengal Renaissance on the one hand and Muslim socio-political renewal on the other. **Muzaffar Ahmed** was another Bengali Muslim intellectual who greatly advocated for the cause of peasants. He showed a remarkable clarity of thought and intellectual acumen while analysing the contemporary problems. He possessed quite an advanced socio-political and socio-economic outlook which was indeed rare in those days.

Besides, the period also saw the emergence of **Humayun Kabir**, who was educated in Calcutta and England. He wrote many articles in many contemporary newspapers and journals supporting secularism, nationalism and rationalism. Before joining the congress, he was associated with the **Nikhil Banga Praja Samiti**- a non-communal political organization formed by the Bengali Muslims in 1929. It is necessary to discuss a little bit about the Nikhil Banga Praja Samiti, particularly in its endeavour for the secularization of politics among the Bengal Muslims.

Another Bengali Muslim progressive personality was **S. Wajed Ali**. He was a socially committed intellectual who was a secular minded rationalist and humanist writer. Unfortunately, however, even such a liberal minded intellectual temporarily receded into conservatism which finds reflections in some of his articles. His Bengali Journal '*Gulistan*' was a vanguard of Hindu-Muslim harmony and centering round this paper a powerful progressive cultural circle grew up. Even after the communal division of the country, S. Wajed Ali stood firm to his commitment towards secularism.

The Bengali Muslim intellectuals discussed above has been termed as 'moderate Muslims', eager to play down communal differences in the interests of Bengal and India. As a whole the activities of

this group was characterized by a rational and almost secular approach. They greatly helped in the modernization of Bengali Muslim and the development of rational thinking.

Apart from the individual intellectuals, there were several Muslim institutions in Bengal which were working for the modernization of Muslims in Bengal. With the establishment of the '**Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti**' in 1911, cultural awakening of the Bengali Muslims began to gather momentum. Centering round this institution, Bengali Muslim writers began their first concerted endeavour through their literary pursuits to awaken the Bengali Muslim society. It occupied a unique place in the history of the Bengali society and culture. Though this institution was set up exclusively for the Muslims of Bengal, it was not a communal institution. One of the main aims of this literary society was to encourage and to organize the backward Bengali Muslim litterateurs. Besides that, the Samiti also aimed at getting reflected through literature different facets of the Muslim society. The Samiti always welcomed Hindu authors for their contribution to the institution. The establishment of '**Muslim Sahitya Samaj of Dacca**' in 1926 was another step towards the modernization of Muslim in Bengal. The purpose of the Samiti was to baptize the Muslims mind with rational ideas. Besides, the Samaj was not confined to the geographical limits of Dacca or to any particular community. Since its inception, the Samaj draw the attraction of all sections of Bengali intellectuals and became the forum of those who believed in the idea of 'emancipation of intellect'. There were other institutions whose name need a mention here, **Al-Helal Sahitya Samiti of Mymensingh (1934)**, **Biswa Bharati Sammilini (1924)**, **Parda Birodhi Sanga (1927)**, **Al-Mamun Club (1927)** and **Banga Sahitya Sangsad of Calcutta (1930)** etc. although these institutions were no doubt short lived, yet their role cannot be doubted in shaping the mental makeup and intellect of the Muslim writers in Bengal.

The emergence of Muslim League as a potent factor in Indian politics in 1930s silenced the voices of those who wanted to remould Muslim mind with democratic rationalist ideals in the context of India's unity and integrity. The Muslim rationalists could not cope with the growing strength of communal and separatist forces. Their journals- *Avijan*, *Sikha and Jagaran* which were short lived, were no match for the communal minded journals and newspapers like the *Masik Muhammadi* and the *Dainik Azad*. Several Muslim authors began to apply two-nation theory in literary and cultural fields of the country, and they defined the cultures of the two communities as 'Hindu Culture and 'Muslim Culture. Thus a new cultural and literary base was created for the demand of a separate homeland for the Muslims. In this connection, one should mention the role of '**Purba Pakistan Sahitya Samsad**' (**Dacca 1942**) and '**Purba Pakistan Renaissance Society**' (**Calcutta 1942**), which emphasized on developing Bengali Muslims own exclusive literature which is separate from the literature of the Hindu authors, whose spirit and language being non-Islamic. Tragically, in spite of the honest and sincere attempts of so many Bengali Muslim intellectuals towards the modernization, the forces of reaction and communalism were stronger and ultimately won the day.

The Bengali Muslims' quest for identity and the modernization of their society gradually took shape of political agenda. They saw in the two-nation theory, the solution to their long pending question of identity and the separate homeland. There is no doubt; Ali Jinnah made them believe that the separation from India was the only way out for the Bengali Muslims. The Lahore Resolution of 1940 played a great role in this regard. But the history has it, that the decision made by the Bengali Muslims to partition from India and becoming part of the new state of Pakistan was not solution which they wanted. The question of their identity and language became more complex in the new state of Pakistan. Since the creation of Pakistan, the Bengali Muslims, who now became part of East

Pakistan, became subject of discrimination and deprivation- politically and culturally. The result was the Language Movement by the students and ultimately, the creation of the new state of Bangladesh.

Historians have little doubt that the evolution of the modern Indian intelligentsia started after the coming of the British in India. Intelligentsia as a class or belonging to a particular ideology was scant till then. The 19th century India that was witness to the rise of several Western educated Indian social thinkers was also the period when intelligentsia made its beginning. It was astonishing to see that the Hindu educated people were the first to grab the opportunity and used it to their advantage. While on the other hand, their Muslim counterparts were still hesitant to accept the new avenues that were opened by the spread of Western education. Slowly, the Hindu intelligentsia gained upper hand. Why Muslim community was reluctant to accept the new changes and adapt to the changing environment of the society is one of the focal point of this research.

The intellectual and emotional environment of the Muslim elite in the 19th and 20th centuries was dominated by Islamic revival and reformation, a situation similar to that of the Hindu elite whose intellectual environment was dominated by Hindu revival and reformation. In this context the rise of Muslim intelligentsia was in true sense started with Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his Aligarh Movement in India. The Muslim educated elite class needed an inspiration to break the shackles of orthodoxy, which was provided to them by Syed Ahmad Khan. There is no doubt that Syed Ahmad was deeply influenced by the ideas and writings of Shah Waliullah. The movement for Islamic revival and reformation in India in the colonial period owed a good deal to the pioneering efforts of Shah Waliullah who flourished in the 18th century. Syed Ahmad Khan, though western educated, he still believed in the orthodox principles of Islam. Although, he showed some friendly attitude towards Hindu ideas in his initial stage, but gradually he not only kept him away from the Hindu society but vocally denounced any association with them as well. The point whether Syed Ahmad Khan believed in a Muslim nation or in an all-inclusive Indian nation has been debated for a long time.

Apart from Shah Waliullah and Syed Ahmad Khan, there were several Muslim intellectuals who worked very hard for the revival of Indian Muslims. **Shah Abdul Aziz** (1746-1824), **Munshi ZakaUllah** (1832-1911), **Maulvi Nazir Ahmad**(1836-1912), **Altaf Husain Hali**(1837-1914), **Syed Ameer Ali**(1849-1928), **Shibli Numani** (1857-1914) etc. are some of the Muslim intellectuals whose ideas and writings greatly helped the revival of the Muslim society all over India. Here one striking thing comes into mind that Bengal was the place where the Colonial masters first started strengthening their root. And during that period majority of Muslims lived in the area, still they fall far behind the Hindus in every aspects of life. The most significant reason that kept them away from their social and cultural revival was their orthodoxy and the non-acceptance of the western education.

Muslim intelligentsia is more often associated with separatist ideology by some group of people. There is no doubt that the intellectual elite of the Muslim society tried to revive their community through the principles of religion. But the same thing can be said about the Hindu intelligentsia as well, because we have numerous examples of them using religious principles and ideas to inspire their community. This research is intended to find the truth behind this.

Though the politics of Bengali Muslims' myriad relationships with Islam has been analysed in various ways, their specific relationship to changing conceptions of regional identity, folklore, and enrichment of language alongside Hindus in the late colonial period has not been fully examined. How did Bengali Muslim intellectuals conceptualize the Bengali language before the creation of Bangladesh? If many Bengali Muslim intellectuals spoke out against the Pakistani states polices in the 1960s through the 1971 war, then how did Bengali Muslim intellectuals perceive Pakistan in 1947 in

the first place? Furthermore, what does the particular Bengali Muslim history demonstrate about the history of nationalism based on language, culture and Islam in modern south Asia? But for a historian of regional consciousness, his perceptions of Pakistan hold great importance for an understanding of Bengali Muslim intellectual and cultural history during the late colonial era and decolonization. Regardless of the outcome of the 1947 transfer of power, Pakistan held intellectual and literary value and meaning for many Bengali Muslims.

The Bengali Muslims making choices about language and politics seldom did so without being in direct or indirect conversations with Hindus and the local political and linguistic environment in which they worked. Bengali Muslim history, therefore, is necessarily not only a history of a Muslim community contrasted with other communities, but a history that is reflexive of conversations and contestations between Hindus and Muslims that have occurred within Bengal. Therefore, the history of Bengal is enlarged not only by showcasing the Muslim component of it, but by demonstrating how its history cannot be understood without Muslim interactions with Hindus at multiple levels.

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