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THE PARTITION OF BENGAL AND THE RESPONSES OF ULEMA

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The partition of Bengal 1905 and its annulment in 1911 was a momentous event in the history of India in general and Bengal in particular. This partition issue awoke the Bengal Muslims to the consciousness of reorienting their political ideas and to rebuild their political organization to meet the changing challenges. After the revolt of 1857 Muslim moved backward in the political arena although Mohammedan Literary Society of Anwar Abdul Latif, Central Mohammedan Literary Society of Sayed Amir Ali and the Aligarh Movement of Sir Sayed Ahmed created some kind of awareness among the Muslims. However, Ulemas of Bengal remained far from all these organizations and associations. The issue of the partition of Bengal approached them towards their future political career.

In October 1905, Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India implemented the plan of partition with the excuse of administrative convenience. We find within three month of his appointment as Viceroy on December 30, 1905 he outlined number of reform programme in Bengal Presidency through Calcutta Municipality Act 1899, Punjab Land Alienation Act, Indian University Act. However none raised so much storm of protest as of Partition of Bengal.¹ Bengal at that time constituted with an area of 189000 square miles including Bihar and Orissa having population of 79 million and showing reason of largeness Lord Curzon said the eastern districts of the province were in neglect and the lieutenant governor could not visit the province for the lack of communication.² However it could not be denied that the size of the province had been drawing the attention of the government since the latter half of the nineteenth century. During the famine of Orissa in 1866, a special investigation committee in its report stated that the administrative difficulties was one of the important factors of the famine. The lieutenant Governors of the province Sir William Gray and Sir George Campbell complained in 1867 and 1872 that the administration was too burdensome for a lieutenant and accordingly to give relief to the Bengal government the three Bengali speaking districts Sylhet, Cachar and Goalpara were constituted in to a Chief Commissionership.³ Subsequently, in 1892 and 1896 suggestions were made for forming separate province consisting the districts of Bengal and Assam.⁴

Andrew Fraser, one of the pioneer of the partition plan recommended to divide the Bengal province for the administrative convenience. Andrew Fraser the Governor of Bengal designed the plan in 1903 which was the genesis of the partition of Bengal.⁵ He wrote "Dacca and Mymensingh would give a less trouble, if they were with Assam." The plan of the transfer of Chittagong division and the district of Dacca and Mymensingh to Assam published on 12th December 1903. The aristocratic Bengalis, mostly Zamindars and the educated middle class Bengali Hindus and a section of Muslims raised huge protest against this plan of partition. The Indian National

Congress discovered in it a subtle attack upon the growing Hindu Bengali nationalism. The Dacca Friend Association in a meeting on 25th January 1904 expressed their disapproval of the scheme. Lord Curzon toured Eastern Bengal to study the problem himself and Anwar Sal mullah accorded a grand hospitality to the Viceroy at Dacca and explained the problems before Lord Curzon and the Muslims of Chittagong, Dacca and Mymensingh would not draw any benefit by joining Assam. Lord Curzon addressed meetings at Chittagong, Dacca and Mymensingh on 18th February 1904 and declared,

“Partition would make Dacca the centre and possibly the capital of a new and self sufficient administration which must give to the people of these districts by reason of their numerical strength and their superior culture the preponderating voice in the province so created which would invest the Muhammedans in Eastern Bengal with a unity which they have not enjoyed since the days of the old Mussalman viceroys and kings.”⁶

From the above statement of Lord Curzon it was clear that the government was interested in showing special favour to the Muslims of East Bengal by creating a new Muslim majority province. Anwar Sal mullah argued to Lord Curzon for larger portion of the province and Lord Curzon was convinced with the argument.⁷ Final plan of partition of Bengal was published on 10th July 1905 by the Indian Secretary of the State separating Eastern Bengal and Assam from Bengal comprising with an area of 106504 square miles and a population of 31 millions of whom 18 million were Muslims and 12 million were Hindus. Final plan of partition was implemented on 16th October 1905. Sir Baffle Fuller, the first lieutenant governor of Eastern Bengal and Assam was accorded a hearty welcome by the Bengali Muslims. Anwar Sal mullah of Dacca wrote, “.....As people are now slowly and surely realizing that Bengal has been partitioned solely for the benefit of the inhabitants of the Eastern Bengal.”⁸

When the first anniversary of partition of Bengal was observed the weekly ‘Eastern Bengal and Assam Era’ highlighted number of advantages of the new province.⁹ Firstly, rise and revival of Dacca and the development of Chittagong port. Secondly, development of neglected water ways and extension of the railway lines to connect remote areas with the Dacca and Chittagong. Thirdly, new provincial council providing opportunity to represent grievances of the people to the notice of the government. Fourthly, administrative efficiency and greater security to life and property of the people. Fifthly, backward Assam would benefit by coming in contact with the educated people of Eastern Bengal. Sixthly, provisions for the development of education of the new province. Seventhly, one year experience showed them that the people were able to come in touch with the head of the government which was unimaginable to them earlier.

On the otherhand, the decision of partition conveyed a threat to the interest of the wealthy and influential Hindus. The Hindu Zamindars, businessmen, lawyers and politicians opposed the scheme of partition and strong protest and agitations were organized against the decision. To the educated Bengali Hindus, Curzon’s partition plan was an attack on the ‘national solidarity’ and they believed that it was the object of the government to check the growing strength of Bengali leaders they fostered for the growth of Muslim power in Eastern Bengal.¹⁰ Maharaja Chandra Nandi presided over a meeting convened at Calcutta Town Hall on 7th August 1905 where in his Presidential address Maharaja said, “.....in the new province the Muhammad population will preponderatethe Bengali Hindus will be a minority. We shall be stranger in our own land.”¹¹ The lawyers assailed the legality of partition, the intellectuals viewed, it is a disaster on the Bengali language and literature. The politician condemned the partition as a sinister move of the British realtors to check Indian political progress and divide the Hindus and Muslims.¹²

Congress launched the Swadeshi and Boycott Movement as an effective instrument against the partition. The boycott of British goods became very much popular among the youths. English goods were seized and burned

publicly wherever found. Students' community boycotted schools, college and universities. It became a mass movement in West Bengal and the demand for annulment of partition turned in to a mass demand. Muslim League which was formed in 1906 through its resolution and letter on the other hand, requested British government that the annulment of partition would led dissatisfaction among the Muslims. The Viceroy Lord Hardinge secretly planned to annul the partition in 1911. At last with the suggestion of Sir John Jenkin, a member of Viceroy's Executive Council, annulment plan was declared shifting the capital of India from Calcutta to Delhi on December 12, 1911.

The issue of the partition of Bengal led the division of Bengali ulema in to two groups. A section of Congressi ulema did not support it. Among them Maulana Moniruzzaman Islamabadi, Maulana Akram Khan, Maulvi Liyakat Hussain, Maulvi Abdul Wahed Bukinagari, Maulana Ahmed Ali were notable.¹³ The other section who supported and played important role in favour of partition were Hakim Habibur Rahman, Maulana Pir Badshah Mian, Maulana Abdul Hayyi Akhtar, Maulvi Anwar Shamsul Huda, Maulana Nayeem Uddin, Maulana Abu Nasar Wahid and Maulana Abdul Awal Jounpuri.¹⁴

Hakim Habibur Rahman, a physician of Anwar Salimullah's family was close associate of Anwar Sal mullah. He started an Urdu monthly journal named '*Al-Mashariq*' after the formation of Muslim League and in the editorials and through articles strongly favoured partition and wrote against the Swadeshi and Boycott Movement that were undergoing with the demand to annul the partition.¹⁵ Pir Rashid-ud-Din popularly known as Pir Badshah Mian who had strong influence favoured partition. Pir Badshah Mian was a leader of Faraidi Movement and one of the successor of Haji Shariatullah. Abdul Latif Sharifabadi, the biography writer of Pir Badshah Mian writes about him that when Anwar Sal mullah convened meeting of All India Muhammad Educational Conference in December 1906 for the formation of Muslim League, Pir Badshah Mia attended the meeting as a Faraidi leader. He also financially helped Anwar Sal mullah collecting subscription for the expenses of the meeting.¹⁶ It was clear during that time one who was a supporter of Muslim League was a supporter of Bengal partition.

Maulana Abdul Hayyi Akhtar Siddiqi, a famous Hanafi Alim, who wrote 54 books in Islamic theology, was a strong supporter of the partition of Bengal. After the partition of Bengal when Lord Curzon resigned from his post, the Muslims of Bengal were shocked with the sudden unexpected resignation and to protest against the resignation a public meeting was organized in front of Hussaini Dalan (Dacca) on the 4th November 1905. The meeting was presided over by Zamindar Wazed Ali Khan and Maulana Abdul Hayyi Akhtar Siddiqi delivered speech in protest of Curzon's resignation.¹⁷ He was the president of the reception committee of second Mohammedan Educational Conference which was held in Mymensingh on 18th & 19th April 1908. In this conference, he delivered a long speech in Urdu supporting the political ideology of Anwar Sal mullah.¹⁸

Maulana Shah Sufi Abu Baker, the Pir sahib of Furfura was in favour of partition of Bengal. He criticized the political activities of the Bengali Hindu leaders. It was reported that during the time of Swadeshi Movement the inhabitants of Jessore refused to pay the land tax to the government, then Pir Saheb requested them to pay the tax and accordingly they paid tax.¹⁹ He also delivered speech at Wealington Square, Calcutta against the Swadeshi Movement in presence of Sal mullah, the Anwar of Dacca.²⁰ Maulvi Nayeemuddin was another strong supporter of Anwar Sal mullah and the partition of Bengal. Maulana Abu Nasir Wahid of Sylhet, inspite of being even a government employee was a strong supporter of partition of Bengal. Though he was not a traditional madrasa educationist yet he was given title of Maulana, because he was an MA in Arabic from Calcutta Presidency College and was also the first man among the Bengal Muslims who obtained the MA degree.²¹ Among the ulemas of Bengal who supported partition of Bengal Anwar Sayed Muazzam Hussain a prominent *alim* of Sayestabad (Barisal) was noteworthy. He was strong supporter of Bengal partition and was associate of Anwar Sal mullah. When the

partition of Bengal was in force on 16th October 1905, a meeting was arranged in the Northbroode Road of Dacca and Muhammadan Provincial Union a political association was formed and Anwar Muazzam Hussain was elected as its president.²²

Although large section of ulemas of Bengal were in favour of partition of Bengal, however number of ulemas who opposed partition of Bengal were also not minimal. They were called as Congressi Ulema among them Maulana Maniruzzaman Islamabadi of Chittagong was notable. He was educated an expert Alim of that time and was politician. He was educated in Hoogli and Calcutta Madrassa and he was the pioneer of undivided India and also was Congressi up to the last days of his life. He published weekly 'Soltan' in which his political ideology was reflected, however it was closed in 1910. He was very active in anti partition movement and various articles and remarks about partition were published in his weekly.²³

Another well known Alim of Bengal Maulana Akram Khan of 24 Pargana was against the Partition of Bengal. His political life actually started at the time of this measure. Maulana worked with top-ranking leaders of India during this movement and became known as a spirited political worker. After all, Maulana Akram Khan, Maulvi Abu Passim (Boardman) Maulvi Muzibur Raman Khan editor of the Musclem and Bashter Abdur Rasul were against this movement.²⁴ Even Maulana inspired the Bengal Muslims to participate in Swadeshi Movement led by Surendranath Banerjee and he delivered his speech everywhere in anti partition agitation. Maulvi Liyakat Hussain was against this movement though he was a man of Bihar. But he migrated from Bihar to Calcutta & started his political movement from Calcutta. A vital role was played by him in Swadeshi Movement and annulment of Bengal partition, He was an associate of Surrendranath Benarjee and was called in the society as Maulvi.²⁵ Principal Ibrahim Khan addressed in his 'Batayan' about Maulvi Liyakat Hussain that he heard the speeches of Maulvi Liyakat Hussain, whenever we read in St. Poll College, he used to deliver his speech as Congressi *alim*. There were a very few persons prevailing during that time who could deliver speech like Liyakat Hussain.²⁶ Other ulemas of Bengal who were against the partition mention may be made of Maulana Ahmed Ali of Khulna, Maulvi Abdul Wahed of Bukainagari of Mymensingh, Maulvi Mohammad Hussain of Barisal, Maulvi Ghafur Siddiqi of Bashirhat etc.

However, considering the situation the British government assured the Muslims of Bengal that though the partition of Bengal was a 'Settled fact'²⁷, but for the heavy pressure of the Hindus the British Government declared the annulment of Bengal partition on December 12, 1911. The Ulema and other Muslim leaders of Bengal like AK Fazlul Hoque, Anwar Sal mullah, Abdullah Suhrawardy became frustrated at this unexpected declaration. The Muslim began to proceed gradually to be self reliant.

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