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## COMMUNALISM AND THE RISE AND EVOLUTION OF MUSLIM INTELLIGENTSIA IN BENGAL: 1870s-1930s

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### Abstract

The origin of communal politics and violence in both pre and post independence India played a very significant role in the shaping of Indian history. Communalism has been viewed from various angles—as a false consciousness, an inescapable primordial reality or the outcome of politics based in vested interest. The rise of communalism in Bengal was somehow an inevitable fact because Bengal was home to two major communities – Hindus and Muslims. Although in theory, they were living in harmony since the ages, but in reality, the feeling of animosity and hostility was always there in their hearts as these two communities had contrasting development in the field of education, society and economy. The intellectual class also played a very significant role in this regard. The present article will discuss the discourse of the intellectual class and the gradual popularity of communalism in Bengal.

**Keywords:** Communalism, intelligentsia, Muslim backwardness, partition of India,

Communalism usually refers to a system that integrates communal ownership of highly localized independent communities. The usage of communalism appears to have emerged during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to distinguish commune based system from other political movements and government espousing similar ideas. In particular, earlier communities and movements advocating such practices that were often described as ‘anarchist’, ‘socialist’ and ‘communist’. Communalism in the form described above is distinct from the predominant usage in South Asian forms of English: allegiance to a particular ethnic and religious group rather than to a broader society. As such, this usage is synonymous with sectarianism and associated with communal violence. Communalism is a theory of society that is divided into several small independent communes and the state is just a confederation of these communes. It is sometimes said to put the interests of the community above the interests of the individual. This is usually done only on the principle that the community exists for the benefit of the individuals who participate in it, so the best way to serve the interests of the individual is through the interest of the community. However it has turned to take a negative meaning where people start promoting the interests of one community over another. Communalism believes that the people of different religions have different interests in political and economic matters, regardless of whether they belong to the same nation or province.

Communalism is India's one of the most persistent problems. Hundreds of studies have been published describing and attempting to explain various aspects of Indian communalism. Most of these have been written by historians, though in recent years anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists have also turned their attention to the problem. Thus far, historians have made comparatively little use of the work of their social-scientific colleagues therefore leaving ample scope for researchers to find out whether various disciplines have something to learn from one another, and suggest how an interdisciplinary approach might be worked out in this regard.

Indian communalism is more or less centered around the relationship between Hindu and Muslim community. Whatever the truth of the relations between the two communities before the establishment of the British Indian Empire, it is accepted by most that Hindu-Muslim communalism as we understand it today became a problem during the last part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It grew along with the growth of the independence movement and reached a catastrophic climax at the time of partition. Serious discussion on communalism becomes, therefore, heavily charged with political connotations, and when used in examining historical contexts and progression, raises serious historiographical issues.

## EVOLUTION OF COMMUNALISM IN INDIAN SOCIETY

The post-independence period witnessed a spate of writings on communalism and communal riots. They can generally be characterized as denoting three particular trends, which not only demonstrate their respective historiographical approaches in writing and conceptualization but also, at a subterranean level, indicate the ideological positioning of scholars on the issue.

The first variant consists of the writings of historians who find nothing new about politics based on communalism. It is seen as a phenomenon that existed since time immemorial, because it provided the only means for the pluralities or religious groups to interact as well as counteract with each other. Therefore, they conclude that the phenomenon of communalism is not modern at all-it always existed. By the denial of communalism as something modern, this group of historians implicitly denies the link between colonialism and communalism. This link, however, can be clearly seen not merely in the policies of the British to divide and rule the Indians, but also in the introduction of socio-political and economic structures and processes that brought about massive shifts in Indian society. Colonialism produced, for example, a land revenue system which changed the land relations in most parts of the country and later transformed the material conditions of large sections of people. The British created new political and administrative communities in entirely new modes. It was colonialism and its operation that constituted the changed material production and agrarian relations. Communalism was a product of the modern age, which unleashed these historical forces in the colonized countries.

The second group of writers regards communalism as a modern phenomenon, a consequence of the emergence of modern politics. Situating communalism within the overarching colonial context, these scholars refute the notion that it was a part of India's hoary past, existing for centuries. Instead, its emergence is located in the context of the British colonial impact, and the response of different social classes, strata and groups of India to this factor. They see communalism as a product of the imbalances created in the economy by the capital system. The unequal economic system was a major factor in the Muslim middle class lagging behind their Hindu counterpart. They began to feel uncomfortable about the

entire capitalist scenario, and hence, gradually shifted towards parties demanding a separate homeland for Muslims.

The third group of writers advocates an altered periodization of Indian history in the pre-modern and modern phases. They attempt to restore 'agency' to the voices which, they argue, have remained suppressed due to modernist and liberal historiographical practices. In their conceptualization communalism is, among other things, a category constructed on the premise of European enlightenment and its paradigm of rationality, which became a universalizing force. In this way, communalism as a category of defining certain kind of politics is also implicit in the modernist frame of knowledge. The authors of this variant argued that 'communalism is a conception of bourgeois-liberal ideology'. In the pre-independence stage, it was intrinsically linked with nationalism, while in the postcolonial society it is a notion which derives from the self-definition of the Indian state and is, hence, inseparably tied to its counterpart, i.e., 'secularism'.

## COMMUNALISM IN BENGAL

Bengal was the region where the colonial rule first entrenched itself, and where it has a deeper impact than in any other region of the sub-continent. Colonialism, and the various institutions it introduced, helped in producing conditions for the evolution and development of multi-layered and multi-dimensional conflicts in the Bengali society. Politics in the province developed into a kind of screen on which these conflicts were not only reflected but also played out. Therefore, communalism in Bengal had a trajectory different from its counterparts in other provinces due to different socio-political reasons.

In the 1950s and 1960s, communalism was quite often associated with only Muslim separatism and, consequently, inevitability of Muslim separatism has informed a number of studies on Bengal. At the same time, it is also assumed that the socio-economic and politically advantageous position of the Hindus necessarily meant that the only recourse for Muslims was to articulate their political aspirations in the form of communalism and separatism. Sufia Ahmad accepts the idea that separatism was a deliberate choice of the Muslim community, because they were conscious of their inferiority in education and economic strength. This situation arose because the community was reluctant to accept the western ideas and institutions of the conquerors, therefore, they gradually lagged behind the other community, i.e., the Hindus, who were gradually trying to make up for their past failure in the industrial and commercial sphere and their educational backwardness.

By the end of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, therefore, the Muslim community became very conscious of the disparity and their lag. This became reflected in their literature, which, devoid of Western sources of inspiration, gradually developed a reactive mind against the new subjects and modes that the Bengali Hindus produced. Nearly all the histories are studies of Islamic history. The aim of the authors was 'to make their coreligionists aware of their religious, not national history'. Thus, the two political developments that marked this period were the ideological foundation of a religious rather than a national identity, and the growth of loyalist and then, separatist politics.

Some writers emphasized that Muslim separatism was a product, among other things, of the lag amongst the Muslims in economic, social and educational fields. They argued that it was self-interest that motivated the Bengali Hindus to resist the development of the Muslim community as such and its leaders in particular. This pushed the latter towards communalism, while the former became increasingly bitter against the colonial authority for favouring the Muslim community.

## RISE OF MUSLIM INTELLIGENTSIA IN BENGAL

Hundreds of books and papers are being produced year after year analyzing the causes leading to the bitter division between the Hindus and the Muslims that ultimately resulted into the partition of the Indian sub-continent. However, most of the works in this direction are 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 endeavor 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 our culture and society.

In India, the Muslims were bound to feel the influence of the Hindus who were undergoing change under the impact of the West. 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 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 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 descriptic 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 (*Ashrafs*), who included the upper class Urdu speaking elite, the urban intelligentsia and the prosperous landholders, had a role in the process of Islamisation 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 and the rural masses was so wide that no positive contact was even expected. Even in the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 favor 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 Muslim intellectuals, 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*', '*Banga Nur*', '*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. *Malulana 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 analyzing 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 endeavor 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 do not belong to the literary field alone. People from other fields also contributed for the modernization of Bengali Muslim. Here mention may be made of **Jainul Abedin**, the most famous Bengali Muslim artist of the pre-partition days and also his pupil **Kamrul Hasan**. Through his paintings he brought the class consciousness in the communally polarized political arena of the forties. He has brought the peasant society into limelight, but he never expressed whether they were Hindus or the Muslims. Famous Bengali Muslim classical Indian instrumental musician **Ostad Alauddin Khan**, famous Bengali essayist Abu **Sayyed Ayyub**, etc. were other prominent Muslim intellectuals of the time.

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 endeavor 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 remold 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.

Historians have little doubt that the evolution of the Indian intelligentsia started after the coming of the British in India. Intelligentsia as a class or belonging to a particular ideology was more or less absent till then. 19<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 himself 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. And this research is intended to look after some of the points which approve or disapprove this theory.

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 Zaka Ullah** (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. What was the reason that kept them away from their revival?

Muslim intelligentsia is more often associated with separatism. 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. The Muslim intellectual class, when they began to appear in Bengal were considered as the secular and moderate thinkers. This group did not show the communal tinge and tried to develop Muslim people on the base of rational thinking. But gradually the approach shifted and it focused more on communal elements. The foundation of the Muslim League in 1906 also gave importance to Muslim nationalism and later the Two-Nation Theory gain popularity. The Lahore Resolution of 1940 gave the Muslim people a true hope for a separate homeland, free from the control of majority Hindu community and after seven years, their dream of Pakistan fulfilled.

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