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## THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN UNDIVIDED BENGAL

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### **ABSTRACT**

*When Bengal stood as one undivided and integrated entity, Islam played quite a unique role. Now, the question is – What is the need of highlighting the role of Islam in undivided Bengal? Will it help us in any way to trace the causes or the consequences of rising Islamic militancy in present day Bangladesh? Now, in reply it can be said that, yes, by analysing the role of Islam in undivided Bengal, it will become easier for us to analyse and understand the gradual process of Islamisation of Bangladesh. The Islamisation process of Bangladesh did not begin all of a sudden. It had a long history of gradual evolution which cannot be traced unless we go back to the days of undivided Bengal. Unless we come to know about the social origin of Bengali Muslims, how the rift between the local Bengali Hindus and local Bengali Muslims was created, and how the seeds of a separate nation were woven, we cannot properly understand the role of Islam in present day Bangladesh. An in depth analysis of the role of Islam in undivided Bengal will definitely help us to understand the history of gradual evolution of the process of Islamisation of present day Bangladesh.*

*When East and West Bengal stood as one integrated entity, the undoubted core value differences between Islam and Hinduism found little recognition except at the level of some sections of elite Muslims. The textual or doctrinal Islam, embodied in the Arabian, Persian and Urdu languages proved totally alien to the masses of believers who spoke nothing but local Bengali. Keeping in*

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*view these facts, the question that crops up is what encouraged the Bengali Muslims to join hands with those people agitating for a separate Muslim State? To answer this question, we have to search the answers of a few more questions, namely :*

- 1) What were the basic features and composition of the Bengali Muslim Society in undivided Bengal?*
- 2) What led to the change in the mindset of the Bengali Muslims and crave for partition?*

## **THE COMPOSITION AND THE BASIC FEATURES OF THE BENGALI MUSLIM SOCIETY**

In 1871, the Muslims in Bengal constituted 48.8% of the total population<sup>1</sup> Towards the last decade of the nineteenth century the Muslims already exceeded the Hindu in Bengal. The rapid growth of the Muslim population in the province developed among them a sense of consciousness and a desire to establish their rights and identities.

The Bengali Muslims underwent great social and political change in the early part of the British rule. During the pre-Plassey days, the Muslims remained an integral part in the administration. They enjoyed prominence in the military, dominated the field of trade and commerce. The situation was reversed with the advent of British in India. The consolidation of British rule in India deprived the Muslims of their age old privileges. The British discouraged the Muslim soldiery and disbanded the army comprising mainly the Muslims.<sup>2</sup> Being deprived of their former privileges the Muslims could hardly adjust themselves to the British rule. They remained attached to their time-honoured customs and manners. The upper section of the Bengali Muslims lived far away from their co-religionists of north India but they followed their customs and manners. The lower section of the Bengali Muslim Society followed the customs of the local Bengali Hindus but the upper section of the Bengali Muslim Society followed the customs and ways of life of the Muslims of foreign origin.

The study of the composition of the Bengali Muslim society would reveal its composite character. From the social point of view the Muslims in Bengal were divided into three categories. In the first category there were the Ashrafs or Sharif meaning noble person. It included all undoubted descendants of foreigners and converts from the higher castes of Hindus.<sup>3</sup> Like the Brahmins of Hindu society; they enjoyed a position of high esteem in the Muslim society. The urban Ashrafs were very much concerned about their racial superiority. The lesser Ashrafs' in the rural areas included the Khondkars and Syeds. They claimed equal status with the urban Ashrafs. They claimed a foreign origin, payed respect to the Islamic languages and opposed widow remarriage. The Mullahs and Moulvis belonged to this category and played a prominent role in the society by moulding the thoughts of the rival Muslims. The urban Ashrafs were Shiahhs but the rural Ashrafs were Sunnis. The rural Ashrafs or the Mofussil gentry tried to maintain link with the urban Ashrafs by marriage in order to establish connection with people of foreign origin. There were different gradations in the Ashraf class. Some of them had no racial or historical identity with the Ashraf class but were regarded as a section in this group. Some belonged to the Urdu speaking urban Ashrafs while others belonged to the Bengali speaking rural Ashrafs.

The second category comprised the Ajlaf or Atraps or lower class Muslims.<sup>4</sup> All converts from the lower castes of the Hindu belonged to this category. The word '*Ajlaf*' means mean people. They were called Kamina or Itar, or Fazil, a corrupt word of Rizal or worthless.

The third category was known as Arzal or degraded Muslims. They lived under social disabilities and were not allowed to use the mosque or the public burial ground. Like the Hindu Society, the Muslim Society also suffered from the evils of caste distinction. The Census Report of 1911 referred to 80 castes in the Muslim Society. The mobility in the Muslim Society was feasible because a large number of the low caste Hindus like the Chandals converted into Islam.<sup>5</sup> The democratic liberalism of Islam attracted the low caste Hindus that helped to increase the number of converts. Also the higher rate of birth among the Muslims than the Hindus in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century helped the Muslims to get a majority status in Bangladesh. The theories and observations of the British officials regarding the origin of the Muslims were challenged by Khandkar Fuzli Rubbee, Dewan of Murshidabad Nawab in his Persian work-

entitled “*Haqiqat-i-Mussalman-i-Bangla*” published in 1895. Fuzli Rubbee maintained the view that the Strength of the sword did not play a vital role in the spread of Islam in Bengal. During the Muslim rule, a large number of foreign Muslims from Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan came to settle in Bengal. The theories of Fuzli Rubbee profoundly influenced the thoughts of the Muslims and made them conscious of their separate identity. The Bengal Muslim aristocracy found pleasure in tracing their foreign origin. the Rajvanshis and Koches of East and North Bengal preferred Islam to avoid Social disabilities.<sup>6</sup> Their inclusion in the Muslim society gave it a composite character sometimes internal divisions were found very rigid in the Muslim society. These divisions stood in the way of establishing unity in the Muslim Society.<sup>7</sup> The upper caste Ashraf Muslims didn’t find themselves comfortable by regarding themselves a part of the Bengali society. They tried to maintain their non-Indian and non-Bengali identity and to preserve the theory of foreign origin.

In the late nineteenth century, the issue of foreign origin of the Muslims of Bengal created a stir in the thought process of the Muslims. The observation of some British officials that a large number of the Muslims were former members of the Hindu community created resentment in the Ashraf Society.<sup>8</sup> The anthropometrical observation revealed that the foreign element among the Muslims of East Bengal was Ashraf class consisted both Urdu speaking elite and Bengali speaking rural landlords. They fostered a separate culture from the low-caste Muslims and the peasantry. The Ashraf class patronized Arabic – Persian – Urdu culture and looked only to their well being. The Ashrafs however maintained some relation with the Ajlafs or the low caste Muslims for the sake of preserving the unity and cohesion of Islam.<sup>9</sup> The lower caste Ajlafs accepted Bengali as their vernacular language in place of Urdu which the Ashrafs condemned as the language of the Hindus. In order to maintain separate identity and unity of the Muslims, the Ashraf class developed a Bengali language coated with Arabic and Persian words.

Thus the composition and the features of the Bengali Muslim society in undivided Bengal revealed the fact that the Ashrafs were never comfortable with the practice of considering themselves as converts of the Hindus. They had been for a long time craving for a foreign and distinct identity. These Ashrafs did not attempt to bring the Ajlafs within their community because they considered the latter as just the converts of the low caste Hindus. Still a time came

when both the Ashrafs and Ajlafs landed on the same platform and demanded an alien identity. The credit for bringing them on the same platform cannot be attributed to Islam alone, but to certain other socio political factors. Now, which socio-political factors were responsible for the alienation of the Ajlafs from the larger Bengali Society and their desire for a distinct identity will be dealt in the following subsections of this chapter.

There is no denying of the fact that the perennial identity crisis of the Bengali Muslims went a long way in encouraging them to crave for partition. The Ashrafs had been demanding an alien identity since a long time but the Ajlafs had been following the local Bengali customs, language and Bengali ways of life. What made the Ajlafs also demand a distinct identity and therefore crave for partition can be understood if we can analyse the following areas –

- 1) The Orthodox And Fundamentalist trend Influencing The Political thought of the Muslim making them oppose Liberalism and Modernism.
- 2) Hindu Revivalism And Opposition To Certain Muslim Customs.

Thus it becomes clear that the Muslim Society in Bengal, was not devoid of internal divisions. Like the Hindu Society, the Muslim Society was also a victim of caste system while the low caste Muslims or the Ajlafs had no problem in remaining adhered to the customs and rituals of the local Bengali Hindus, the Ashrafs or the upper caste Muslims regarded themselves as the descendants of the Arabians, Afghans and the Pathans, thereby considering the Ajlafs as Kamina or worthless and mostly the converts of lower casts Hindus.

Furthermore, the theory advanced by Fuzli Rubbee that during the Moghul rule, a large number of Arabian, Turkish and Iranian Muslims came to settle in Bengal, profoundly influenced the thoughts of the Muslims. This in turn made them conscious of their distinct identity and alien origin. So the perennial identity crisis of the Ashrafs went a long way in making them desire a separate state. However, the Ajlaf Muslims also gradually joined the Ashrafs in their demand for a separate state of course, certain Socio political factors such as the orthodox and fundamentalist trend influencing the Political thought of the Muslims, Hindu Revivalism and Opposition to Certain Muslim customs – were also responsible for that.

## **THE ORTHODOX AND FUNDAMENTALIST TREND INFLUENCING THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF THE MUSLIMS.**

The anti-British attitude among the Muslims remained active during the revolt of 1857. The Muslims could not adjust themselves with English education and the ideas of liberalism and modernism emanating from it, out of the fear of losing contact with Islamic beliefs and practices.<sup>10</sup>

With the consolidation of the British rule after 1774, the Muslims ceased to be the dominating community of Bengal. Warren Hastings' policy of replacing the Muslim revenue officers by the Hindus impoverished the Muslims. The introduction of the Permanent Settlement and the Resumption proceedings and Macaulay's educational circular replacing Persian by English undermined the position of the Muslims in the Bengali Society. The Bengali Muslims noticed with concern the rising success of the Bengali Hindus, who adapted Western education and a policy of conciliation towards their British masters. Gradually the Muslim leaders of Bengal realized the futility of opposing British rule in India. The Muslims apprehended onslaught on their co-religionists in case they continued with their anti-British policy. Realizing this, the Muslim intelligentsia adapted new ways to regenerate their community. The work of regeneration was inaugurated by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817 – 1898) from Aligarh in Uttar Pradesh. He advocated Western education and rapprochement between the Muslim elite and the British administration with a motive to release the Muslims from the "Jaded dreams of the Mughal glory", and to take up advanced western education introduced by the British rulers. How much this progressive force was able to influence the Bengali Muslim is questionable. But side by side, a conservative section among the Muslims propagated orthodox ideas preserving the medieval syllabus and tradition under the guidance of Rashid Ahmed Gangohi (1828 – 1905) and Maulana Mohammed Qasun Narautvi (1832 – 1880) in 1867 at Deoband in the Saharanpur district of Uttar Pradesh.<sup>11</sup> The fact that majority of the Bengali Muslims remained far behind the Hindus in terms of education and economic well being was because this conservative Islamic force prevented them from taking advantage of the liberal and rational western education. This conservative Islamic force emphasized on Islamisation and anti Hindu feelings, which naturally strengthened the influence of the Mullahs and Moulvis on the rural Bengali Ajlafs.

A pan-Islamic trend developed with the visit of Jamat-ud-din-Afganai (1838 – 1897) to Calcutta (1881 – 1882). Now, what was this pan-Islamic trend? It was a move to empower the Mullahs and Maulvis to use symbols and slogans of Islam to establish Islamic solidarity and the separate identity of the Muslims. This pan-Islamic trend introduced by Jamat-ud-din-Afghani was continued by Sayed Ahmad Syed's disciple Haji Shariatulla (1781 – 1840) started the Faraize Movement. It was a movement to cleanse the worship of god by weeding out un-Islamic beliefs and customs prevalent in the Muslim society. After him his son Dudu Miyan (1819 – 1862) carried on the mission with militant zeal to safeguard the economic interests and to secure social justice to the Muslim peasants.<sup>12</sup> In short the pan-Islamic trend led to the growth of Muslim fundamentalism which was a major factor in the growth of separatist politics in India. A Hindu convert to Islam was made to believe that he *“belonged to a different order, not only religious but social and he had lived in that distinctly separate and antagonistic social order, religiously, socially and culturally.”*<sup>13</sup> Bengal presented the best example of this phenomenon where majority of the converted Muslims had retained their regional cultural ethos and pattern.

The leaders of the pan-Islamic movement suffered from a misconception that return to pure form of Islam would bring glory in its train. The process of Islamisation of the Bengali Muslim society remained incomplete but the emphasis on a revival of the spirit of Islam stirred the Bengali Muslims to claim a distinct and exclusive identity.<sup>14</sup> The new wave of resurgence also directed their hatred to the exploitative agencies, which were mainly Hindus in the form of landlord, the tax collectors and advocates. The Pan-Islamic trend in Bengal was further extended by some Muslim intellectuals in the later part of the nineteenth century like Altaj Hussein Hali, Shible Nomani and Amir Ali Islam's spectacular part was glorified to whip up the religious sentiments of the Muslims. The Bengali literature was also replete with such sentiments. The extra territorial allegiance, though more emotional than real, fostered communal loyalties.<sup>15</sup> The Bengal Census Report of 1872 showed a wide spread rage among the lower classes of Muslims (Ajlafs) to gain entry into any one of the four respectable social groups – Syeds, Sheiks, Mughals and Pathans.

The process of Islamisation was accelerated by several religious associations and Anjumans. The Muslim youth under the influence of the orthodox Islamic trend boycotted modern English

medium schools and joined the Madrasahs and Maktabas. These youths did a lot to Islamise the rural masses. They published extensive literature to propagate the gospel of Islam among the rural masses. This literature put emphasis on observing ritual duties for attaining advantages in the next world. A section of the Muslim writers attempted to publish books in “Musalmani or Islami Bengali” by using Arabic, Persian and Urdu words. Thus, this section of the Bengali Muslims, being influenced by the sectarian ideas refused to identify themselves with Bengali culture and language.<sup>16</sup>

However, in spite of providing educational facilities to the Muslim, the orthodox and traditional section of the intelligentsia remained intellectually backward. They remained separated from main stream national and cultural regeneration. The ideas of separatism in the social, economic and religious spheres were mixed with consciousness of self-development and this stood in the way of establishing composite Bengali consciousness.

At one point of time the Muslims in Bengal came to realise the futility of their opposition to the British in India. The latter had firmly established its control over the entire country and had the power to crush any form of opposition. Realising this, a certain section of Muslim intellectual tried to regenerate, the Muslim society, make them endorse western education and rational ways of thinking. But side by side, an orthodox Islamic trend also developed that discouraged the Muslim from taking up western education and made them remain confined to the traditional and age-old practices of Islam. By glorifying Islam’s spectacular part, the religious sentiments of the Bengali Muslims were whipped up. This in turn kept the Bengali Muslims far behind the Hindus who took up rational and liberal western education and took up Government jobs in different spheres of the society.

Thus the orthodox and conservative Islamic trend was largely responsible for the socio-economic backwardness of the Muslims in Bengal. As the latter lagged behind the Bengali Hindus in different spheres of the society, they developed a sense of hostility towards the Bengali Hindus, thereby refusing to identify themselves with Bengali culture and language. In a larger perspective, they remained separated from the mainstream national and cultural regeneration.

## **HINDU REVIVALISM AND OPPOSITION TO SOME MUSLIM CUSTOMS LEADING TO COMMUNAL RIOT.**

The Indian National Congress was established in 1885 at the initiative of the Hindu middle class and became the ‘accredited organ of the nation’. However the Congress in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century till the early 20<sup>th</sup> century showed certain Hindu revivalist trends in its movement organised against the British Govt. the ideas of the Hindu revivalists viz. Sri Ramakrishna Paramhansa (1836 – 1886) and Swami Vivekananda (1868 – 1902) were linked with the ideas of rationalism and the Congress.<sup>19</sup> Balgadadhar Tilak (1858 – 1925) amalgamated the congress with the Hindu revivalist trend. Bipin Chandra Paul also contributed to this amalgamation. The literature produced by quite a number of Hindu Bengali intellectuals also contributed to the growth of Hindu Revivalism.

Post 1857 social upheaval among the Hindu, flourishing of Bengali literature including the writings of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay especially Ananda Math stirred the nationalist sentiments of the Hindus but antagonised the Muslims. In Ananda Math, certain comments were made regarding the Muslims which the latter considered derogatory.

Most of the landmark works including Rabindranath Tagore’s “Katha O Kahini” were interpreted by the Bengali Muslims as direct attack against the community. Between 1870 and 1900 Muslim elite brought out papers like Mohammadi Ambar, Mussalmani Bandhu, Islam Pracharak, Kohinoor and Nural Imam. This parallel development represented tangential growth of Hindu and Muslim nationalism, which often took the shape of ugly communal outburst. The trend of parallel evolution of Bengali Hindu and Muslim nationalism culminated in the partition of Bengal on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1905.<sup>18</sup> Present Bangladesh also presents two distinct faces of Bengali nationalism, linguistic and cultural nationalism which has absolutely nothing to do with religion as represented by the progressive liberal and secular forces of the country on the one hand and Islamic identity of the Bengali speaking Muslims as represented by the Islamic militants like Jamat, the branded Wahabis and other force patronised by Pakistan and the Arab nations on the other hand.

The role of the militant Hindu revivalist movement, especially the Arya Samaj was responsible to a large extent for the growth of Muslim Separatism in the Indian political life. During 1880s and 1890s Arya Samaj attacked the Muslims with increasing intensity.<sup>19</sup> The leader of the crusade, Pandit Lekh Ram condemned all forms of Islam particularly the naturalist Mohammadis i.e. Saiyad Ahmad Khan's Aligarh Movement, and demanded that the Muslims should either be expelled from India or converted to Aryanism.<sup>20</sup>

The mentality of the nations go a long way in determining their character. The Bengal renaissance which awakened the Hindus from centuries of sloth and slumber had also a negative side. Various socio-religious movements aiming at purification of the society, brought along with it the idea of revivalism. There is nothing wrong in eulogising the past but a person who goes to the past automatically and inadvertently becomes an enemy of the present. The Arya Samaj no doubt gave a new vision to the Hindus through the concepts of self-help and self reliance, but its Shuddhi Sangathan, cow protection measures alienated the muslims.<sup>21</sup>

This trend prevented the two communities from organizing a common national platform to express grievances against the British Govt. The Hindu Symbols and myths adapted by the Indian National Congress under the pressure of its revivalist leadership created suspicion and fear in the minds of the Muslims. The extremists' bid to equate nationalism with religion would have been laudable in case of a singular society. But in case of a plural society like India, it sowed the seeds of separatism between the Bengali Hindus and the Bengali Muslims. The Hindu bias in literature, history, the projection of India as mother Goddess made the Muslims allergic to Indian nationalism. Gandhiji in his own way introduce religious terminology in politics that inadvertently imparted to the Congress a religious tone and tenor in introducing terms like Ramrajya, Satyagraha which were quite naturally taken by the Muslims as oriented towards Hinduism.<sup>22</sup> Again the yogis, Gods and temples were commandeered into the field of politics synchronizing nationalism with Hinduism. If the Hindu cannot forget his past, neither can the Muslim. During a crisis of identity, symbols came to bear greater meaning and significance than they otherwise did. Insistence by Hindus that Muslims should have a symbiotic relationship with them might be altruistic, but might not necessarily appeal to the latter. The tolerance of Hinduism became a cliché. Its powerful assimilative tendency like a banyan tree did not allow

any of its rebel offshoots to grow and prosper. The authoritative undertones of Hinduism presented a real challenge to all forms of social transformation on the lines of democratic secularism.

The Muslims were quite allergic to the national anthems like *Banga Amar* and *Bande Mataram*.<sup>23</sup> The Bengali Muslims asserted that *Banga Amar* glorified only the Hindu heroes excluding the Muslim ones, while *Bande Mataram* was idolatrous in nature.

Actually the message of the Bengal renaissance was misunderstood by the Bengali Muslims. The message was to work for the enlightenment and welfare of mankind. Though the militant nationalist struggle in Bengal took a Hindu religious colour which alienated the Muslims, its basic objective was to send a message to everyone that – the greatest need of the hour was to win freedom. The militant nationalist struggle, no matter however Hindu oriented it was – never denied the fact that all religions were true and that they were but different paths to reach only one goal and that was freedom.<sup>24</sup>

Towards the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the question of cow-slaughter and cow protection became political issues and subjects of controversy both among the Hindus and Muslims of India. Some papers published by the Muslims expressed views in favour of cow-slaughter.<sup>25</sup> The ritual cow-slaughter on the occasion of Bakr-id created resentment in the Bengali society. Pamphlets were issued by the Gaurakshini Sabha (set up by Swami Dayananda Saraswati in 1882) urging the Muslims to stop cow slaughter. The Muslim paper, the *Sudhakar* held the Hindu Zamindars responsible for opposing the practice of cow-slaughter performed by the Muslim peasant.<sup>26</sup> The riots at Rishra and Murshidabad created further tension on the issue. Mir Mosharraf Hossein wrote on the contemporary political issue of cow-slaughters in his book *Gojiban*. *Gojiban* was criticized by the orthodox Muslims because he urged them to stop cow-slaughter in order to maintain cordial relationship between the two communities. But the orthodox Muslims paid hardly any heed whatsoever to Mir Mosharraf Hossein or his liberal thought. The anti-cow killing riots had established themselves as a chronic disease in all parts of India. Almost every year during the Muslim festival of Bakr-id the riots recurred and there was much bloodshed between the two communities. These riots were mostly incited by the Gaurakshini Sabhas, which

gradually became closely linked with the Indian National Congress. At the congress session held in Nagpur members of the Gourakshini Sabha held a meeting in the same pavilion as the Congress. It was even addressed by some of the Congress delegates.

The 1905 partition of Bengal was embarked upon by the British Raj at a time when the Hindu Bhadraklok was seen increasingly hostile to European domination. There was no such demand from the Muslim population at that time.

The partition was carried out along communal lines. It created a Muslim majority province comprising the eastern district and a Hindu-majority province comprising the western districts. The Muslim community came to see its benefits in terms of better opportunity for education, employment and the recovery of some lost glory. In fact the 1905 partition exposed some deep divisions between the Hindus and Muslims on communal lines. Thus in Dhaka, the non participation of the Muslims in the Janmashtami festival, their refusal to lend carts or drag them in the festival – was a manifestation of the Hindu-Muslim divide on religious lines.<sup>27</sup> Riots in the name of religion became a recurrent feature in Bengal. The manipulation of religious symbols in these riots was common. Slogans of Allah-u Akbar and Bande Mataram became religious war crimes underlining the natural exclusiveness of Hindus and Muslims.<sup>28</sup> A large number of riots followed the period 1918 – 1926. In 1926 a major violence broke out in Calcutta, Pabna and Dhaka. The issue was – playing of music during Hindu processions past mosque. A telling feature of the riot was the deliberate disregard of traditions that one side or the other claimed were authoritative for relations between the two communities. A major communal riot took place in Bengal on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1926, when the Arya Samaj held its annual procession in North Calcutta, when the procession passed by the Dinu Chamrawalla Mosque at the time of evening prayers, a police escort asked the group to stop playing music. So a group of Muslims came out and a conflict broke out. Later that day a Saivite temple was attacked and shops were looted.<sup>29</sup>

However the Hindu Muslim riots were not really one-sided. At times, the Muslims launched aggression against the Hindus. One such incident broke out in Tallah in Calcutta in 1897. The Muslims refused to give up possession of a plot of land to its Hindu owner under an order of the court as the land contained a mosque. The land actually belonged to Maharaja Jatindramohan

Tagore. But since the Muslims disobeyed the court order vehemently, and started agitating, the police had to fire on the crowd, and as a result several Muslims were killed.<sup>30</sup>

The Hindu revivalist trends shown by the Congress in the movement against the British Govt. also alienated the Bengali Muslims to a large extent. The revival of the past glory and heritage of the Hindu religion helped to develop consciousness and a feeling of oneness among the Hindus, but prevented the Hindu and Muslim communities from organising a common national platform to fight against the British rule. The attempt of the extremist fraction of the congress to equate nationalism with Hindu religion proved to be a poison for the pluralist society of India. It actually sowed the seeds of separatism between the Bengali Hindus and the Bengali Muslims.

Actually the message of the Bengal renaissance was to work for the enlightenment and welfare of mankind. Though the militant nationalist struggle in Bengal took a Hindu religious colour, its basic objective was to remind everyone that the need of the hour was to win freedom. Although it had a Hindu orientation, the militant nationalist struggle never denied that all religions were equally true and were only different paths for the attainment of only one goal – freedom. Unfortunately the Bengali Muslims failed to understand this basic underline of the Bengal renaissance and got alienated from the mainstream national liberation movement.

Along with this, the Hindu disliking of certain rituals of the Muslims gave rise to communal riots. These riots went to long way in the process of partitioning India in general and Bengal in particular. In undivided Bengal, Islam practically failed to unite the Hindus and Muslims and collectively endwavour to attain freedom.

## **A BIRDS EYE VIEW OF THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN EAST PAKISTAN SINCE 1947 TILL 1971.**

Bangalees were treated as second class citizens in the then East Pakistan. The Urdu speaking Muslims in Pakistan never believed the Banglees and they always tried to suppress them in every

sector of the state. Not only that, the urdu speaking Muslims never treated the Bengali Speaking Muslims as true Muslims.<sup>31</sup>

The urdu speaking Muslims of Pakistan hated Bengali culture and pointed it “anti-Islamic”. They imposed ban on Rabindranath Tagore’s songs in national broadcasting centres of Pakistan.<sup>32</sup>

In 1947 a key resolution at a national education summit in Karachi had been adapted that ‘Urdu’ would be the sole state language of Pakistan and the Government would ensure its exclusive use in the media and in schools.<sup>33</sup> On 21<sup>st</sup> March 1948, the founder of Pakistan Mohammad Ali Jinnah declared in a civic reception in Dhaka that ‘Urdu and only Urdu will remain the state language of Pakistan.’<sup>34</sup> The students of Dhaka University instantly protested this declaration in front of Jinnah. Pakistan Government forcibly tried to stop the demand of the Bengali people to establish ‘Bangla’ as one of the state languages of Pakistan.

After the formation of Pakistan in 1947, both Jinnah and the poet Philosopher Muhammad Iqbal perceived Islam not in terms of the details of Shariah but in three broad and interrelated levels –

- 1) Islam as a faith, cardinal beliefs mark its adherents as Muslims.
- 2) Islam as a culture, a way of life that would integrate Muslims into a nation state.
- 3) Islam as a political ideological system whose set of values could socialize Muslims into a viable, separate and distinct political community.<sup>35</sup>

With the emergence of Pakistan in 1947, East Pakistan gradually came under the socio-economic hegemony of political Islamists who pursued the steady growth of radical Islam in East Pakistan.<sup>36</sup> The Bengali Muslims preferred to call themselves Mussalmans than Bangalees, they gradually lost their centuries-old emotional bond either with the Hindus or with the concept of Bengali nationalism. For them, the word Bengalee denoted Hindu Bengalee. The locality containing Hindu Bengalees was called Bengalipada whereas the locality containing Muslim population was called Mussalmanpada with the irrelevance of Bengali nationalism, the Bengali identity of the Muslims became subservient to the Muslim identity, which was based on the socio-cultural

foundation of Arabisation. This transformation of identity from Bengali Muslims to Muslims Bengalees was the outcome of the lust for Ashrafised status within the Muslim society. This phenomenon was based on the attachment of exaggerated importance to the Arabian origin of Medieval rules. The communal self-conscious attitude of the Muslim elite of Bengal as well as their socio-political and cultural character were responsible for infusing this sentiment among the Muslim masses.

Nonetheless, the Bengali Hindus felt insecure and found it difficult to adjust to the new political reality of East Pakistan. Firstly through various socio-economic measures, the Government of East Pakistan sought to change the hinterland status of the province and to end the economic domination of the Hindus. The most important step in this direction was the passage of the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act in 1950.<sup>38</sup> It abolished the land holding system instructed by the Permanent Settlement Regulation of 1793 and deprived the absentee Hindu landlords of their economic base in East Pakistan. The East Bengal Transfer of Agricultural Land Act, passed at the same time restricted the sale of lands, which stopped the transfer of capital to West Bengal.<sup>39</sup>

The East Bengal (Emergency) Requisition of Property Act empowered the Government to confiscate houses and buildings belonging to the Hindus for official purposes. All these and other social measures necessarily affected the affluent Hindu classes by depriving them of their capital assets.

More significantly the emphasis on the Islamic character of the new state provide the Hindu a feeling of alienation from mainstream politics. A prominent Hindu member of the East Pakistan Provincial Assembly felt, *“I have become impotent due to the pernicious theory of party politics based on religion.”*

Finally the Hindu middle class, as the dominant socio-economic group for a century and a half, had developed contempt towards the Muslims of East Pakistan and found it difficult to adjust psychologically to their rule.<sup>40</sup>

The gradual transformation of identity from Bengali Muslims to Muslim Bengalis began in East Pakistan itself. It was a direct outcome of the lust for Ashrafised status within the Muslim community. As a result, the Bengali Muslims gradually lost their centuries-old emotional bond either with the Hindus or with the concept of Bengali cultural nationalism. In this way, a wide rift was created between the Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims of East Pakistan in the cultural sphere. In the socio-economic sphere also by passing certain anti Hindu laws, the Muslims of East Pakistan alienated the Hindus. By depriving the Hindus of their capital assets, the Muslim rulers of East Pakistan not only became successful in ending the economic domination of the Hindus but infusing a sense of insecurity in the minds of the latter as well. Finally in the political sphere also, party politics based on religion made the Hindus impotent and dissuaded them from psychologically adjusting to Muslim rule.

## CONCLUSION

This, if we sum up, it seems that Islam in undivided Bengal could not act as a force unifying the two communities – the Hindus and the Muslims. It could not even keep the Muslims united. Rather it kept the entire Bengali Muslim Society stratified encouraging a section of the Muslim community to crave for an identity, distinct from that of the local Bengali Hindus. As it has been stated earlier the Ashrafs or the elite Muslims claimed a foreign origin and a distinct status while the low caste Muslims or the Ajlaf remained adhered to the local Bengali customs and ways of life. However with the passage of time the Ajlafs also began to distinguish themselves from the local Bengali Hindus and claimed a distinct identity. It was nothing unnatural because the torture to which they were subject and the violation of their fundamental rights by the upper caste Hindus (Zamindars, Jotdars) were enough to push them into this logical fold of Islam and finally culminated in the process of their joining hands with the Ashrafs.

Certain other factors especially the orthodox trend influencing the political thought of the Muslim community on the one hand and the growth of Hindu revivalism on the other hand were also responsible for alienating the Bengali Muslims. The traditional and conservative force of Islam influenced the Bengali Muslims mindset to a large extent. It discouraged the Bengali Muslims to take up western education and acquire the rational and liberal ideas of the west.

While the Hindus took western education and went far ahead of the Muslims in terms of social and economic prestige and status, the Muslims lagged far behind. Thus the socio-economic deprivation of the Muslims was largely a result of their reluctance to adapt western education, emanating from their hatred towards the British rulers.

On the other hand, the Hindu revivalism engineered by men like Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Rajnarayan Bose and others cast a negative impact upon the Bengali Muslims. The Hindu orientation which characterized the militant nationalist movement organized by a certain section of the congress leadership alienated the Muslims. The Hindu symbols and myths adapted by the Indian National Congress under the pressure of its revivalist leadership created suspicion and fear in the minds of the Muslims. The synchronization of Hinduism with nationalism by the use of symbols like cow, saffron flag, sadhus, yogis and temples pushed the Muslims far away from the Hindus, so much so that the Congress appeared to them as a Hindu organization, catering to the interest of the latter.

To all this was added the non-approval of certain customs and rituals of the Muslims by the Hindus leading to communal riots. The Hindus disliked and therefore tried to prevent the Muslim practice of cow-slaughter, while the Muslims failed to accept the playing of music by the Hindus in front of any mosque, especially at the time of prayer. All these factors combinedly contributed to the partition of Bengal. Very unfortunately instead of playing a progressive role, Islam deviated the Muslims from the larger cause of winning freedom for the subjugated nation, and made them crave for a distinct identity and a foreign origin.

Islam failed to enable the Muslims realise that a nation is not a religious community irrespective of a territory. It is a land comprising all its inhabitants regardless of its religious diversities.

Finally it can be said that the lust for Ashrafised status within the Muslim community retained the division between Bengali Hindus and Bengali Muslims in East Pakistan as well. As the Bengali Muslims lost their centuries old emotional bond with their Bengali Hindu neighbours on the one hand and with the concept of Bengali cultural nationalism on the other hand, a wide rift was created between the two communities in the cultural sphere. Similarly in the socio-economic

sphere also, by introducing several anti-Hindu policies, the ruling Muslim community alienated the Hindus. In this way, even after Bengal got divided and East Pakistan was created, in the latter province, Islam kept the two communities divided along social, economic, cultural and political lines despite the presence of a common linguistic and cultural factor.

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