

## A Quest for Identification of the Roots of Hindu Nationalism in Bengal



### History

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper seek to explore the roots of Hindu nationalism from nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance and the subsequent nationalist movements. The unity in diversity of the Indian culture in the midst of multiplicity of religions, languages, ethnic races and cultures has given it a unique characteristic feature in the history of human civilizations; for which the anthropologists termed it as an unique cultural mosaic. But the emergence of the aggressive Hindu nationalism of the recent two decades has weakened the very foundation of secular Indian state. Here I shall try to confirm my discussion mainly on Bengal although the rest of India more or less followed the same path.*

### Introduction

The anthropologists, sociologists and the historians are frightened that this newly risen aggressive Hindu nationalism is destroying almost everything of it. In fact ages after ages the different ethnic races that have flown like waves after waves upon the ocean like the 'great Indian nation' and formed a 'new Indian nation' by uniting into one body-politics. Now starting from the ancient age down to the medieval age if we try to identify separately the waves of ethnic races like the Aryans, non-Aryans, Greeks, Sakas, Hunas, Kushanas, Pathanas, Afghanas and the Mughals, then not only it will be unrealistic but also unhistorical. There is no doubt that realizing this characteristic feature of the Indian civilization, the founding fathers of Indian constitution have shown pragmatism by giving it a secular quasi-federal structure. Therefore for keeping intact and alive that structure it is of immediate and fundamental importance to identify exclusively the weakness of Indian nationalist movement and thereby try to make an arrangement for its solution. This paper is a humble attempt to explore that vital process and for that purpose it tried to see how the nascent Bengali Muslim intelligentsia reacted to this Hindu tinge of nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance and the subsequent nationalist movement.

### Discussion

One of the major defects of nineteenth century awakening and the subsequent national movement was its unabashed Hindu tinge. Dr. Mustafa Nurul Islam correctly analysed that the Hindu authors had since the mid-nineteenth century been awakening a spirit of Nationalism in Bengal. Unfortunately their vision was, however, largely limited to their own community. Thus to them 'national' renaissance and Hindu revival were virtually synonymous.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Leonard A. Gordon appropriately commented, "The Hindu symbolism, rites of initiation drawn from the Hindu sects and Hindu beliefs and especially the conception of Mother Goddess and the Motherland fused as an object of devotion and a cause generating action, must have prevented any kind of Muslim support."<sup>2</sup>

Of course this can be partly explained by pointing out that the idea of modern secular nationalism was still in its infancy at that time even in the countries of their origin i.e. the West. Notwithstanding this, one can agree with Dr. Mustafa Nurul Islam's analysis that their invigoration of their co-religionists antagonised almost to the point of alienation their Muslim neighbours, whom they regularly depicted as enemies and villains.<sup>3</sup>

While analyzing on the unabashed Hindu- tinge of our nineteenth century awakening and the subsequent national movement, Professor Sushobhan Chandra Sarkar rightly remarked, "The political awakening was rousing intense pride and self-confidence and in-view of the backwardness of the Muslim people it naturally tended to take on a Hindu grab more decisively than

before. Patriotic (Hindu) writers invariably glorified not merely the ancient Indian culture with its predominantly Hindu structure; they also began to dwell upon the struggles of the Rajputs, the Marathas, and the Sikhs as instances of the freedom urge. As it happened, all these people had as their adversaries the Muslims, and the Hindu trend in the national sentiment was intensified with not very happy consequence."<sup>4</sup>

Again while analysing the penetration of communal ideology into the nationalist ranks Bipan Chandra remarked, "one peculiar example of which was the wide prevalence of the communal view of Indian history particularly in its subtler forms. Many of the nationalist leaders openly spoke and wrote of India having suffered under 'foreign' rule for a thousand years and of the sharp decline of Indian society and culture under 'Muslim rule'. In fact it would be know exaggerate to suggest that a communal historical approach has been and (still) is the main ideology of communalism in India."<sup>5</sup>

Professor Irfan Habib's comment in this context was indeed noteworthy. In his book 'Interpreting Indian History', he said, "The intrusion of Islam dominates a large part of the interpretations of Medieval Indian History. A religion independence of the Indian past, containing a body of law different from the *Sastras*, accompanied by a cultural tradition and art of its own. The religion created India's largest minority; and it has been tempting to view its arrival as heralding a long prelude to the country's partition. It is this particular view of the role of Islam in India that essentially unites both the communal schools of historians, Hindu and Muslim."<sup>6</sup>

Again it would not be out of place to mention here Professor Barun Dey's opinion, where in he remarked, "In the chauvinists theory put forward by Dr. R.C. Majumdar, the alien occupation of India is pulled back to the Sultanates of North India which expanded or fractured, since the 11 th 12 th centuries. Thus all Hindu uprisings against Muslim Rulers are supposed to have originated from the Indian freedom struggle."<sup>7</sup> Such theories were also common in Pakistan in an inverted form. This saw all rebellions against Indian Medieval rulers, as internal contradictions if they were initiated by Muslim segments of the ruling class, but as inherent treachery, if they were conducted by Hindus.<sup>8</sup>

Now let us see in this context how the nascent Bengali Muslim intelligentsia reacted to this Hindu tinge of nineteenth century Bengal renaissance and the subsequent nationalist movement of the early period.

*Islam Pracharak* in 1903 reported that at a session of the Muslim Education Society in 1898 Syed Nawab Ali Choudhury has got a resolution passed condemning "the animosity...found in Bengali

literature.” “This resolution had later been published in English under the title ‘Vernacular Education in Bengal’. Though submitted for review to many Hindu editors it had received serious attention from none: Indeed *Bharati* (1877) had merely mocked and ridiculed it.”<sup>9</sup>

The kind of anti Muslim sentiment to be found in Bengali literature was outlined in the same article of *Islam Pracharak* : “ Everyone, beginning from the poet Iswar Gupta, Rangalal Bandhopadhyay, novelist Bankimchandra, the poet Hem Chandra Bandyopahyay, and Nabin Chanra (Sen) right down to the disciples of their disciples which means any Hindu Tom, Dick and Harry, does not hesitate diabolically to abuse the Muslim race and to vilify their glorious ancestors. They take immense pleasure in exhuming from their peaceful marble tombs the Muslim emperors of Delhi and depicting them in the pages of their novel and poems as wicked, tyrannical dissolute devils and hateful lecherous dogs and these distributions are, when staged in Calcutta and various places in the provinces, earning the praise of countless Hindus.”<sup>10</sup> ...It seems as if Hindu authors, orators, poets and novelists have been born only to stay the *Yavanas* (i.e. that is the Muslims). The first word a Hindu author has to write, when toying up his pen, is *Yavana*, otherwise his pen simply, does not move. Consequently, no matter how much you Muslims may object, the Hindus will be unable to abandon the word *Yavana*.<sup>11</sup> “... open your eyes and you will see that each Hindu author in either a second Bankim or a second Nabinchandra, both of them were enemies of the Muslims. Each one of them are enemies of the *Yavanas*. We had thought that this evil nature of theirs would right itself...But alas, all our hopes have been in vain.”<sup>12</sup>

Then commenting on the performance of (*Banger*) Pratapaditya (1903) at the Grand Theatre, *Naba Nur*, 1905 stated, “We are unfortunately unable to watch... with complete sympathy. The aspects of Muslims (it depicts) are not founded upon any very high ideals.” *Naba Nur* contemptuously supposed these scenes and the maligning of Muslim with “ such sweet sounding epithets as *Yavana* and *Mleccha*” were necessary to warm the ice cold blood of the Hindus... The purpose behind the portrayal of the low character of Muslims... is to denigrate the Muslims... The aim of these authors is to exalt Hindu ideal at the expense of Muslims.”<sup>13</sup>

In 1917 *Al-Eslam* lamented the fact that Muslims had no place in the national song ‘Banga amar’ composed by D.L. Roy (1863-1913). “ It mentions Asoka, Nemai, Rasmani, Pratapaditya but contain no trace of Muslim heroes like Giasuddin, Isa Khan and so forth. The population of Bengal is seven crores... more than half of these are Muslims. Why then were Muslims excluded from a national song composed for this vast Bengali nation constituted of both Hindus and Muslims?”<sup>14</sup>

*Banga Nur* in 1920 argued that cow-sacrifice was not the sole cause of friction between the Hindus and the Muslims. Other sources of friction were the Hindu phobia about contact with Muslims polluting them: their use of abusive terms like *Yavana*, *Mleccha*, *Pati Nere* and so forth; their bad treatment of Muslim over jobs and their general inclination to do Muslims down wherever “their own interests are involved... All these things render Hindu-Muslim unity more distant.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1917 *Al Eslam* questioned Bankim Chandra’s patriotism. ‘Love for the Bengalis’, *Al Eslam* argued, “must mean love for all the inhabitant whether they be Hindu, Muslim or members of other communities... If he had been a real patriot he would have depicted the glorious character of Mir Kasim (in Chandra Sekhar, a novel)... (But instead) like a traitor he depicted it in a most heartless distorted way... It has not crossed his mind even once that Muslims one also Bengalis, Muslims also dwell in this country and Muslims are also brothers and neighbours to the Hindus.

If he had glanced at the census report then his biased love of the Bengalis would have cured.”<sup>16</sup>

Despite attacking Bankim Chandra for his anti-Muslim bias, Muslims were, nevertheless, aware of the excellence of Bankim’s literary style, which was, according to *Bangiya Muslim Sahitya Patrika* in 1918, simple straight forward and lucid, “It should be our ideal, for no one needs to take pains to understand it.”<sup>17</sup>

However, Muslim periodicals did not fail to appreciate right-thinking Hindu literatures. As early as 1904 *Kohinoor* was playing tribute to Dinesh Chandra Sen (1866-1939) for the sympathy he had shown towards Muslims not only in his book ‘Banga Bhasha O Sahitya’ (1896) but also in his account of *Timur ...* “The respect and devotion of Muslims towards Dinesh Chandra Sen would therefore be further enhanced.”<sup>18</sup>

The ‘national’ literatures of the Hindus and Muslims had, *Al Eslam* argued in 1916, been “Moving in completely different directions.” There had been no contact between them and, indeed they had each been attempting to move further away from the other. This was deplorable “but fortunately a group of Hindu writers have realised it. They are, as far as possible, using Muslim thought and words in Bengali literature and for this they deserved the thanks of all Muslims... Rabindranath’s lyrics now echo the immortal love songs of the Persian poets... many Hindu writers frequently quote Persian verse. Dear Muslim authors ... do not harbour a grudge against the whole of Hindu Society because because some Hindu authors have maligned you.”<sup>19</sup>

The following year *Al Eslam* paid tribute to Akshay Kumar Maitreya for eradicating the “disrepute into which Siraj (Sirajudaulah) and Kassim (Mir Kassim) had fallen. Is not this the best way to establish sincere affection between the two communities?”<sup>20</sup>

Moreover after laminating the bias exhibited in ‘Pratapaditya’ (a drama) *NabaNur* in 1905 pleaded for the exercise of resistant and caution by both Muslim and Hindu writers when depicting low characters from each community. “Is it not our duty”, *Naba Nur* argued, “to study the best parts of our past history so the social ideas of both communities may receive appropriate ... respect?”<sup>21</sup>

Commenting on other plays by D.L. Roy, *Al Eslam* in 1916 put in a similar plea for mutual tolerance and compassion between the two communities. “ Both are brothers and must, therefore, be depicted side by side on an equal footing. Otherwise, neither of our communities will fare well.”<sup>22</sup>

Mutual tolerance was again the theme of a public address published in *Bangio Musalman Sahitya Partika* in 1919 where it was claimed that novelist should be ‘idealistic’ not ‘destructive’, that is they should not “ through ignorance or childish quarrelsomeness”, expend all their energies attacking others. “If we fling all the stones that we possess upon our enemies”, the author asked “then what are we to repair our own dilapidated house with?”<sup>23</sup>

*Saugat*, a thoroughly secular minded journal in 1919 lamented the deleterious effect of drama upon Muslim young man and commented: “The past glorious of all of us, irrespective of our nation or religion, ought to be held before us so that our nation would be directed towards good ideas. If this happened then the birth of the play and theatre would be worthwhile.”<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

After having a thorough perusal at these Bengali Muslim periodicals one can see that slowly the modernist and secularist trends were on the rise among the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia, despite the strong cross – currents of tradition, orthodox and

conservatism, British Policy and Hindu Nationalism.

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