

Growth of Islamic Consciousness in Bengal and the British Colonial Policy

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Abstract: *The main intention of the article is to understand the roots of communalism in Indian subcontinent particularly in the Bengal delta. The rationale of the study lies behind the explanation and analytical reasoning of the factors associated with the divisions that took place in South Asian subcontinent on the basis of religion. The study, therefore, helps to explore reasons for spiralling rise in communal violence in the region. It attempts to understand how British colonial policies had accentuated the communal tensions in the region. While looking at its rise and expansion, the study claims that the whole Bengal region is still having those communally sensitive vulnerable sides and it has been negatively influencing the politics in Bangladesh. To be precise, the scope of the study lies in providing a micro analysis to the root causes of communal based issues in Bangladesh.*

Index Terms: Bengal, Communalism, Colonial Policy, Socio Religious movements

This research article throws light on the manner in which colonial rulers were trying to exploit the communal cleavages present in the South Asian subcontinent. It discusses several theories associated with the rise and entrenchment of communalism in South Asian subcontinent. Rakesh Batabayal has brilliantly categorised the theories of communalism into three schools. The New Cambridge School represented by Anil Seal and Christopher Bayly postulates that communalism was a phenomenon prior to Colonialism [9]. It absolves colonialism of any guilt in communalising people Choudhury 2006[1]. The writings of Bidyut Chakravarty show that communalism was present in pre British India as well and none of the rulers took any serious steps to control divisive tendencies. Moreover, during the nationalist movement the politics of Indian National Congress of forging understanding with Muslim League proved counterproductive as it alienated Muslim masses away from Congress while Muslim elites were anyway supporting League itself Ghosh 1971[32]. Even worse, it delegitimized the credentials of nationalist Muslims like Asaf Ali and Maulana Azad. These fallacies of Congress in forging a strong Hindu Muslim alliance became a major hurdle for secular politics in coming years. Marxist School of thought is represented by Bipin Chandra, AR Desai, Asgar Ali Engineer and Moin Shakir[8]. They see Communalism as a product of modernity, either begotten by colonialism or a result of perversions of capitalist society. Prabha Dixit represents another viewpoint by highlighting the tradition-modernity approach to explain the insecurities

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that had made a niche in the hearts of Muslim elites. Being traditional they feared that the modern means of acquiring wealth had been monopolised by caste Hindus and they had been left behind in this race Asgar Ali 2009[2]. Dixit also argues that the modernisation championed by Sayyed Ahmad Khan was also chimerical as it was only modernisation of Muslim elites and it did not aim at socio-cultural revolution of Muslim masses. Dixit also puts the blame of communalism on muslim elites because it was they who communalised first and Hindu communalism was only a response to it. Subaltern School represented by Partha Chatterjee and Gyananendra Pandey argue that communalism was a child of enlightenment era and was imported in India via the British rule[15][25]. This article is keen on explaining how communalism rose in India. It goes into the history tracing the rise of communalism in pre independence era from 1857 to nationalist struggle for independence and how parties like Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha were formed, giving insight into the general trend of communalisation in South Asian Subcontinent [36][37][38][39][40].

The Bengal experiences show that the socio religious reform movements which had the motive of ameliorating the conditions of downtrodden in the society also inadvertently led to communal polarisation. This phenomenon is studied through the works of Chatterjee, Vanaik, Ahmad, Sarkar, Dixit and Desai. These scholars differ in their vantage points but arrive at same conclusion that socio religious reform movement did play a part in creating dissensions within the society. Most significant part of the literature review deals with the impact of communalism on the political developments that took place in post-independence Bangladesh. Linter, Karlekar, Millam, Riyaz, Ghosh and Mohsin have done seminal work in the field of communalisation of politics in modern Bangladesh. The literature review deals separately with work of these eminent scholars.

This article juxtaposes the British administrative, economic and educational policies with the communal consolidation in Bengal and tries to understand the relationship between them. Starting from the ancient Indian Civilisation growth in Bengal to the rise of Muslim rulers followed by British, this chapter succinctly gives us a historical panorama of growth of syncretic culture of Bengal delta. Drawing from works of Eaton, the article provides four basic arguments on the consolidation of Islamic consciousness in Bengal: Immigration Theory; 'Religion of the Sword'; 'Religion of

Patronage'; 'Religion of Social Liberation'. Eaton however argues that all these four explanations fall short of explaining the real cause of Islamisation of Bengal, for instance they do not take into consideration the role played by Sufism in consolidation of Islam in Bengal. Joya Chatterji addressed this issue when she asserts that although Islam emerged in Bengal in the 12th century, it could expand to the masses only in the 17th and 18th century with the arrival of the saints during the Mughal period[17].

The egalitarian nature of Islam and its liberalizing influence on an inequitable social system, coupled with the aura of association with the ruling class, secured large number of converts from all strata of Bengali society. The Muslim missionaries and leaders had to compete against the strong Hindu revivalist forces and movements like Vaishnavism. An adaptation to, and adoption of, local customs and practices, in other words the Bengalisation of Islam, was the only way to overcome the problem Ahmed 2004. Hence, Muslim preachers and missionaries started emphasizing on a new form of Islam, with the Bengali language and culture at its core. This linguistic emphasis and consciousness remained among Muslims of Bengal and a distinct Bengali Islamic nationalism was emphasized by them [29].

Apart from the positive influence of Sufism on Bengali society, the chapter also elucidates the negative influences like Wahhabism and other revivalist Islamic groups had on social cohesion. In short the chapter tries to convey that Islam succeeded in consolidating itself in the region due to its flexibility and ability to convey its message in popular idioms, using the local language and often utilising imageries which were familiar to the local population. The upside of this was that Islam was never seen as a foreign religion Ahmed 2004. And the spread of Islam was evolutionary and peaceful rather than revolutionary. Islamic consciousness in Bengal spread owing to various factors- traders, Sufis, new agriculture techniques, the oppressive Hindu Caste system, Muslim rulers, etc Ahmed 2004[33][34]. By the time the British established their colonial authority over Bengal, Islam had become an integral part of the society and could claim a majority status in the eastern parts of the region.

The coming of British led to deep socio economic and political churning in Bengal. The pre-eminent position that Muslims enjoyed prior to British was lost. The entire administrative system was overhauled by the British, leading to loss of administrative pre-eminence of the Muslims *amils* and *fauzdars*. The Muslims lost their judicial powers, and the number of Muslim lawyers gradually declined, reduced to just one-fourth of all referees and arbitrators appointed under the Cornwallis system Ahmed 2004. The sentiments of deltaic Muslims worsened against Hindus because they were getting lucrative positions in the administrative set up. This lack of trust was exploited by the British.

This work while understanding the ramifications of colonial policies on Bengali society lays down how the Permanent Settlement, introduced by Lord Cornwallis widened the gulf among various sections of the Bengali society. The newly emerged zamindar class was mostly Hindus, even in eastern Bengal, while the majority of the population was Muslim, thus fuelling communal division of Bengali society. In the beginning of the 19th century, vast areas of east Bengal were

affected by the farazi and wahhabi movements, which spread a kind of Islamic consolidation in Bengal Chakrabarty 2004[6]. Western English education was introduced by the British which led to the exclusion of Bengali Muslims. The new educational system was designed to produce an 'educated' local class which could help the colonial administrators in governing. The Muslims could not easily accept Western education for fear of losing contact with their religion. At the same time they also suffered from the loss of opportunities when the Persian language and administrative practices were replaced by English.

It is also relevant to understand the War of Independence that Bangladesh fought to free itself from clutches of Pakistan. Indian subcontinent has been ravaged by two partitions leading to immense death and destruction. While formation of Pakistan was based on religious nationalism, Bangladesh positioned its identity on language. The formation of Bangladesh also debunked the two nation theory on which Pakistan was formed. In this light the role of Britisher's in flaring up communal passions cannot be ignored. They deliberately tried to divide Indian people by recognizing Muslim League as chief representative of Indian Muslims. Muslim league had support in Central provinces and it ignored the Bengali identity which was more coherent than pan-Indian Muslim identity Suranjan 1988[11]. After partition East Pakistan was dominated by the West Pakistan's economic and political elite[3]. They even tried to impose Urdu on a majority Bengali speaking population[20]. This led to the formation of Bengali identity which culminated in War for independence in Bangladesh. The genocidal rampage went on till the Mukti Bahini, with assistance from the Indian Army succeeded in defeating Pakistani army to declare the formation of Bangladesh Chatterji 1994. The formation of Bangladesh decisively showed the futility of the theory that nations are religions and that religion can be the basis of nationalism. One can even argue that the Two Nation theory which stated that Hindus and Muslims are two separate nations met its end in the formation of Bangladesh[40].

Later, Bengal witnessed the gradual Islamisation of Bangladesh's polity during the rule of successive military dictators. The people of Bangladesh during the phase of 1947 to 1971 were feeling stifled under the religious nationalism imposed by western Pakistan on them, because they felt that it was a threat to their linguistic identity. However, the undercurrent of religious consciousness still remained palpable in the Bangladeshi society. This is because despite having cultural affinity with the Hindu dominated West Bengal, there were hardly any demand for joining the two Bengals together Chatterji 1994. The Awami League in Bangladesh gained strength during the Bengali nationalism phase and therefore aimed to keep Bangladesh a secular country. Nevertheless Islamic consciousness was always present in Bangladesh and importance of Islam grew as Awami league fell out of power and military rule took over[30].

Military dictators started using religion as a counter weight to League's largely secular and socialist policies. They even started maligning Awami League that they were a party that did not believe in tenets of Islam. Further Awami league itself feel out of favour owing to its failure in delivering good governance and social justice. All this worked in favour of military rulers. Yet, the military rulers used religion as a tool to gain legitimacy because they were not democratically elected. Since they were not socialist religious nationalism provided a platform to shape the country the way they wanted. Some scholars also argue that secularism was not properly understood in Bangladesh, before secularism to be adopted as a state policy secularization of society is also essential. Since secularization of society did not happen, secularism was not successful in BangladeshChakrabarty 2004. When Zia came to power in Bangladesh he did away with the term secularism from the constitution and established Bangladesh Nationalist Party as an Islam oriented party that recited verses from Quran as a regular practice in their meetings. It quickly became the second largest party in the country after the Awami League. Zia took several other steps in various fields to bring Islam back to the national mainstream.

The longevity of the changes he brought out to the national character of Bangladesh became clear after his assassination in 1981. His removal from power did not weaken the Islamic forces in the country and in many ways the opposite happened. Ershad put Islam even more in the centre of Bangladeshi polity and eventually ended up making Islam the state religion of Bangladesh in 1988. He even brought back the Jamaar-I-Islami, an organisation which had supported Pakistan against the Bengali nationalists during the liberation war. Most of its leaders had fled to West Pakistan after 1971 but they were rehabilitated under Ershad and Islam became a political factor that cannot be discounted Talbott 2007[16]. After the fall of Ershad regime the polity of Bangladesh had become completely communalized as all the parties in elections were competing with each other to show that they were pro Islam. The Communist Party was said to have held religious gatherings in its office. Such was the impact of the Islamisation of Bangladeshi society from 1975 to 1990 that its effect has become widespread and deeply ingrained in the Bangladeshi polity.

The role of political parties in today's Bangladesh is also decisive. The first three distinct phases of party politics in Bangladesh, starting with the evolution of Awami League and its preponderance over politics in Bangladesh. The First phase which was similar to Indian "one party dominance of Congress", can be seen as dominance of Awami League in Bangladesh. From 1972 to 1975, Awami League enjoyed predominant role in politics of Bangladesh. Many reasons can be attributed to its success but the reason that it was the party that led to independence of Bangladesh remained prime most Chatterji 1994. The opposition was weak, friable and worse seen as conspirators and traitors to cause of Independence. This was initial phase, slowly and gradually, sentiments started emerging that Awami League was a party antithetical to Islamic cause. Coupled with that, the poor governance and economic mismanagement further tainted Awami League's credentials. To deal with the opposition in 1975, the Awami League high command brought fourth

amendment, which further put many radical changes and made de facto one party system into a de jure one party system.

The second phase which lasted from 1975 to 1990 saw two military rules and a veritable butchery of democratic institutions. Major General ZiaurRehman and Mohammad Ershad ruled from 1975 to 1981 and 1982 to 1990 respectivelyChakrabarty 2004. Their regimes were dominated by the presence of military personnel, both retired and serving in government posts. While, elections were held to secure political legitimacy of the military rulers; but they were mostly farcical in nature.

The Third Phase from 1991 to present is marked by bitter rivalry between Awami League and BNP. This section deals with this rivalry and gives a detailed account of the same. The chapter then moves forward to appraise about the role of religion in Democratic Era in Bangladesh. Democracy is a game of numbers and for sake of pragmatism parties adopt measures that may not be beneficial in the long run. To secure power Awami league formed alliances with Jamaat and conceded to its ideology even if partially. Soon, liberals like NGO's university professors, and minorities came under attack of organizations like Ahle-Hadith. This trend of Islamisation was checked to a small degree by coming of power of Awami League in 1996. The passing of the fifteenth Amendment marks a historic step in Bangladeshi politicsKing 2007. It is the first time since 1977, the constitution became more secularized instead of vice versa.

The four main political parties in Bangladesh during the democratic era have been the Awami League, the BNP, the Jatiya and the Jamaat. The Awami League led the struggle for independence from West Pakistan and describes itself as a 'pro-liberation force' in Bangladesh politics. It claims itself to be based on founding principles of nationalism, democracy, secularism and socialism. Awami League has shown a strong commitment to these principles while maintaining a pragmatic approach. Alliance with jamaat in 1996 and passing of fifteenth amendment, as argued earlier are case in point Sengupta 2012[19]. The Awami League also maintained a close relationship with India despite the fact that India is seen by some conservative sections of Bangladeshi society as a Hindu country.

Bangladesh Nationalist Party identifies Bangladeshi Nationalism, democracy, free market economy and teaching of Islam as the core principles of the party. The party pitted Bangladeshi Nationalism which was a territorial claim with more Islamic complexion than Bengali complexion. Ironically, even though BNP was formed by a military ruler who filled his government with army officer during his rule, since the mid-1980s the party has been active proponent of democracy and was the first political party to come to power in 1991 through free and fair elections. The party has been opposing secularism consistently and it was indeed its founder President Zia who removed secularism from the constitution of Bangladesh in 1977. It was he who also

allowed the rehabilitation of religion centric political parties in Bangladesh Ahmed 2004. This tacit alliance with Islamic forces in the country became formal with the coming to existence of the Four Party Alliance in 2001 in which BNP was in alliance with the Jamaat.

As noted earlier, this enabled extremist forces in the country to operate with impunity and a series of terror attacks across the country jolted the consciousness of the country. While the BNP led government eventually did take some actions to curb extremists, it was perceived to be too little, too late. The Jatiya party was created by Ershad after he secured power through savvy political maneuvering after the assassination of Zia in a military coup in 1981 and its key ideological principles include Bangladeshi nationalism, Islamic ideology and economic emancipation. In many ways, the Jatiya Party is not dissimilar to BNP in its ideology Ahmed 2004. In fact, it was the Jatiya party led government which made Islam as the state religion by passing the eighth amendment to the constitution in 1988 and its leader, Ershad was publicly very enthusiastic about making Bangladesh an Islamic state.

The Jamaat-i-Islami was founded in 1941 with an express objective to establish an Islamic state and Islamic society. It explicitly rejects secularism, socialism and nationalism as it sees all of them as contradictory to its objective of establishing an Islamic state. Since these three principles were fundamental elements of the 1972 constitution, the Jamaat was directly opposed to the core aspects of the first constitution of the independent state and thus it was no wonder that it got banned by the Mujibur Rahman government Ahmed 2004. As noted earlier, it got eventually rehabilitated under the military rule and their commitments to Islamic principles remain intact [31].

Bangladesh was formed in trying circumstances. Contingencies of the moment dictated Bangladesh to have amicable relations with the Muslim world. However, since Bangladesh was formed on the basis of linguistic nationalism as opposed to religious nationalism, many West Asian countries did not recognize Bangladesh after its formation. Even during the liberation war many West Asian countries either remained neutral or sided with Pakistan. Moreover, since Bangladesh was formed with the support of a secular India and the initial constitution of Bangladesh was secular in nature, many West Asian Muslim countries saw Bangladesh with suspicion. Nevertheless, Bangladesh was in dire need to maintain good relations with these countries for many reasons, Firstly, favourable perspective of these countries would have meant the free flow of petro dollars to Bangladesh which was in critical need of capital for its nascent economy. Further, the massive hike in oil prices during first gulf war meant that the nation had to be dependent on these countries for cheaper oil import Bose and Jalal 1998. To make situation worse, aid from western countries was also slackening due to global recession.

Thus, it was extremely important for Bangladesh to forge strong ties with the nations of West Asia. Secondly, Bangladesh also felt that good relations with Islamic countries would help it to solve many irritants between Bangladesh and Pakistan as these Islamic countries held a good influence on Pakistani politics. Thirdly good relations with these nations would mean that Bangladesh would get better acknowledgement in world affairs, and it would no

more remain a pariah in Islamic world. It would also ensure that the Bangladesh would get membership in Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. Fourthly, these countries could also become an employment arena for Bangladesh population and help Bangladesh earn remittances. Lastly, domestic pressure from the conservatives in Bangladesh's society cannot be ruled out in influencing Bangladesh's proclivity to West Asian countries. So, one could divide the gradual Islamisation of Bangladeshi society in two broad phases. The first phase was not so intense but the second phase coincided with the rise of Islamic consciousness worldwide and therefore it was more impactful Suranjan 1988. After coming to power of military regime in Bangladesh the constitution was changed and given Islamic colour. Zia Ur Rehman specifically wanted to institutionalize political Islam in Bangladesh.

After his assumption of power in early November 1975, Zia made sincere efforts to establish and maintain deeper relations with Muslim countries. This was especially true with respect to Saudi Arabia. Zia, having gained the ruling position through a coup, thought that recognition by Muslim countries would give him legitimacy which was necessary and essential for the military regime, for reasons of both domestic and external legitimacy. Zia wanted to establish Bangladesh as a prestigious member of the Islamic community who was accepted by other Muslim countries. Thus, one of the reasons, Zia chose to Islamise his government was to improve political relations with Muslim countries Chatterji 1994. As a result, under the regime of Zia-ur-Rahman, necessary legal and administrative changes were brought in the constitution.

Thus, it is not wrong to say that it was expected that globalisation will result in a rapid loss of cultural diversity and will lead to a consolidation of a dominant identity. This is a huge concern for many who see it as a kind of cultural imperialism which threatens local cultures and identities. Scholars have argued that because of globalisation and rapid technological changes in the last two decades, there has been a 'deterritorialization' of culture which is fuelling the formation of transnational identities that are not tied to or by any geographical location. What this means is that, globalisation has enabled parochial cultural identities to persist and even thrive across the world Asgar Ali 2009. This is because, since culture has become deterritorialized, people who perceive themselves as belonging to the same culture even if living in different geographical places are able to maintain their cultural identities and thus preserve their identities.

The article also highlights the rise of consciousness of "othering" in case of India and Bangladesh. Thus, the emergence of a threatening 'other' can have a radicalising effect on collective identities leading to 'grouping'. Thus, India began to be seen as an 'enemy' or at the least the 'other' which meant Bangladesh had to define its identity based on Islam as opposed to a larger Hindu India. While

Bangladesh during her pre-independence days saw Pakistan as the 'other' and thereby defined her identity as 'Bengali' as opposed to Islamic, post-independence with the threat of Pakistan subsiding and the perceived threat of a Hindu India rising, began to see India as the 'other', thereby defining herself as an Islamic country under successive military dictatorships. This has alienated her domestic Hindu population who were also seen as 'other' as their nationalism was based on religion.

The decade of 1970's witnessed a period of Islamic resurgence across the world. With the failure of Arab nationalism after the humiliating defeat of Arab nations in the 1967 War with Israel, scholars have argued that Islam began to rise in importance in the Middle East as well as across the world. Thus, by many accounts, modern Islamic revival began in the 1970s, coinciding with the decline of Arab nationalism. This was inevitable because Arabs constitute a significant and influential percentage of global Muslims and their refocus on Islam during this period rather than their ethnicity after the failure of Arab nationalism, inevitably spread to Muslims of other parts of the world as well. This revival affected Muslims across the world in different ways and thus naturally affected Bangladeshi Muslims as well and can be argued that it strengthened their Muslim identities Suranjan 1988. Many other instances like the Islamic revolution in Iran, First Gulf War, Cold War politics and end of ideological war, beginning of war on terror and "Islamophobia" all worked together in concretisation of religious consciousness in Bangladesh.

CONCLUSION

Thus when we look at the evolution of communal politics in Bangladesh we can discern two major currents; first is the syncretic and inclusive current and second is the communal and exclusivist current. The split of Indian subcontinent in 1947 culminated from the spiralling of exclusivist communal trends in politics, however the second split in 1971 was a manifestation of deep desire among the masses for restoring pride in their ethno cultural linguistic identity and it was purely secular and heterogenous Suranjan 1988. It was a desire long unfulfilled of a large section Bangladeshi people to cherish their collective cultural consciousness which had a long historical trajectory and yet was being stifled by West Pakistan. Thus, it led to the inevitable struggle for liberation in Bangladesh and after a long protracted war which resulted in millions of death and unfathomable destruction finally the putatively weak community came out of draconian socio cultural and economic subjugation of West Pakistan.

The year 1971 marks a threshold in world history when a combined might of people stood up against dictatorial regime to prove that religion alone cannot be a pivot around which a nation has to be formed, respect for diversity is essential for a nation's survival. Unfortunately, the recalcitrant monster of communalism reared its ugly head again after the military takeover. It is notable that although Awami league represents secular and syncretic culture of Bangladesh which is rooted in the pride of Bengali culture; Bangladesh Nationalist Party and other such parties based on exclusivist politics, for their electoral benefits are determined to tear apart the secular fabric of Bangladesh and give encouragement to radical elements in the society. The roots of radicalism in Bangladesh are not

new but can be traced from colonial period which reached its zenith during 1905 to 1947 Rothermund 2007. Onus also lies on divisive politics unleashed by British colonialists and other socio political and economic circumstances in Bengal that gave rise to communalism in the delta.

Unfortunately, communal forces are still working in Bangladesh and unless Bangladesh government and society does not work symbiotically to fight it the future might be bleak. The recent killings of bloggers, riots against minorities and radicalisation of educated and well to do youth are pointing towards a gloomy future. This is a war of mindset and ideas and it can be countered only with support of another set of ideas. In this light, history becomes an important tool to understand present politics as much of the present communalisation is related to the events that transpired in pre independence colonial Bengal. Understanding of history is very crucial because it is said by the wise that 'those who forget their history are condemned to repeat it'. In the end, it can hope that Rabindranth Tagore's beautiful lines "Amar Sonar Bangla" should win over the divisive politics that is threatening Bangladesh's peace and prosperity and for that the government and society have to take pledge to root out communalism from Bangladesh.

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