INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

UMI

A Bell & Howell Information Company
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346 USA
313-761-4700     800-521-0600
Discourses of cultural identity in divided Bengal

Dhar, Subrata Shankar, Ph.D.

University of Hawaii, 1994
DISCOURSES OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN DIVIDED BENGAL

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

POLITICAL SCIENCE

DECEMBER 1994

By

Subrata S. Dhar

Dissertation Committee:

Michael J. Shapiro, Chairperson
Andrew Arno
Wimal Dissanayake
Kathy Ferguson
Sankaran Krishna
Syed A. Rahim
To my father who sacrificed his life for an identity.

Now I wonder, why!
Acknowledgments

Throughout this dissertation, one point I have endeavored to make, rather emphatically, is that the subject is embedded in the prevalent discourse with much less autonomy than perhaps what we are inclined to credit to her or him. Therefore, as the 'tangible author' of this text, I should not hesitate to make one more enunciation in order to claim validity of the text and that is, my authorship is really problematic. What I enunciate here as the author of this dissertation is the function of the intertextuality in which I am embedded. Therefore, credit should be shared with all others who contribute to the prevalent intertextuality. Aside from numerous predecessors in the field, whom I have hopefully credited duly throughout the text, there are a few more with whom I share the authorship of this text more directly.

Prof. Michael J. Shapiro was not only the Chairperson of my dissertation committee, indeed, he was always a source of intellectual inspiration to me. Attending his classes for three years before I started writing this dissertation had given me the insight which helped me look at the construction of identities in South Asia rather differently. This dissertation bears the marks of his
presence in many ways. I express my deepest gratitude to him.

When my immersion into certain ideas blurred the larger picture containing variety of perspectives, all my committee members came to my rescue. My interaction with them has always been emancipatory. Prof. Kathy E. Ferguson reminded me of the gendered voice of nationalism; Dr. Wimal Dissanayake was keen on the articulation of identity in the literary discourses and he introduced me to a number of very useful sources in this regard. In many conversations, Dr. Syed A. Rahim discussed his perceptions about the dynamics of South Asian politics and how it related to identity formations in contemporary Bengal. This provided me with an opportunity to reexamine my own perceptions more meticulously. Prof. Majid Tehranian has always taken interest in my work. His encouragement and appreciation always made me confident about the merit of my work. Prof. Andrew Arno initiated me into critical theory when I was a student of Communication at the University of Hawaii. It was a pleasure to have him on my committee.

And, I take the opportunity to express my sincerest gratitude to Prof. Sankaran Krishna. Aside from his exceedingly valuable and informed comments on my dissertation, in Prof. Krishna, I found a very caring and compassionate friend with whom I shared my moments of joy and my moments of agony. The period when I was working on
this dissertation was in many other ways a very stressful period for me. Prof. Krishna was always there to console me and provide me with the necessary moral and emotional support.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Prof. Phyllis Turnbull of the Dept. of Political Science at the University of Hawaii and Mr. Larry E. Smith of the East-West Center. Their love, affection and encouragement have significantly contributed to the completion of this work.

This study has been made possible by an award from the East-West Center and a research grant from the Ford Foundation, Dhaka, made available through the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), New York. The East-West Center award supported me through the period of initial course work and provided me with a grant for preliminary field research. The SSRC Fellowship allowed me to stay in Bangladesh and West Bengal for a longer time for an extensive field research. Social Science Research Council also organized a Bangladesh Workshop in Srilanka where a number of Bengal experts were invited. Paul Greenough, James Boyce, Abu Abdullah and Neeta Kumar sensitized me to a number of issues which otherwise wouldn’t get adequate attention.

I am also grateful to anonymous staff members at India Office Library, London, Indian National Library, Calcutta, Dhaka University Library, Dhaka, and Hamilton Library, University of Hawaii. I am especially thankful to Lynnette
Wageman and Monica Ghosh at the Asia Collection section of the Hamilton Library for locating extremely rare materials for me. They arranged to have a number of rare books and numerous reels of microfilmed newspapers from other libraries, especially, the Center for Research Library at Chicago.

And, my wife Madhumita was always there to soothe me when I seethed, to sacrifice her own time to make my time useful and productive, to take care of the family through a traumatic period and let me go abroad to finish my dissertation. My son Shayan finally accepted, with a discernible discontent that there is a thing called 'dissertation' which takes away much of his time with his father. My three-month-old daughter Kakon created the urgency for finishing my work in Hawaii and going back home immediately. It worked.
Abstract

Cultural identity has always been the central issue in Bengal politics. But the parameters for defining identity always kept changing in keeping with the dominant modes of politics. Before the colonial intervention in Bengal, perception of identity was congruent with the cultural practices prevalent in a syncretistic system of social intelligibility. In early nineteenth century, new perceptions emerged in the terrain of reformism through a dialogue between the 'rich past' of India, rediscovered by the orientalists and their local cohorts from the ancient scriptures, on the one side, and modernity and Western rationalism on the other.

In the wake of nationalism in late nineteenth century, the 'rich past' was reconstituted to negotiate its meaning with the politics of the present, and that was to confront colonial masculinity. This cultural nationalism, being a tailored response to coloniality, underestimated the possibility of intrinsic social diversities in perceptions of identities and the resistance from within. Therefore, it soon found its own configuration debilitating. The ethos of politics under the spell of the 'divide and rule' policy of the colonial rulers, around the same time, foregrounded religious identities with another round of selective
historicization of the past. All these agonistic perceptions led to the telos named ‘partition’ in 1947.

But it was then again the beginning of another endless trail. East Bengal seceded from Pakistan historicizing and asserting an identity other than religious which was found to be empowering. But contentions are still there. Alternative imaginings of identities, irreconcilable to each other, have their own historicizable past and essentializable tradition to keep the space of politics always fraught with uncertainty.

This dissertation focuses on the contentious terrains of politics and culture where agonistic identities are continually produced, essentialized and legitimated by historical narratives. The contention here is that enunciation of each identity is inextricably related to a particular imagining of power in the present. And, the locutionary environment, rather than the enunciating subject, quite often provides the clue as to what identity is empowering and what is to be historicized and essentialized.
Contents

Acknowledgments... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... iv
Abstract... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... viii

Introduction... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 1

Section One: Theoretical Considerations ... ... ... ... ... 19

Chapter 1: Identity, Difference and Nationalism in (Post)Colonial Societies: A Glimpse from the Postmodern Consciousness of History ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 20
Nation and Nationalism Revisited ... ... 22
Identity/Difference and the Other ... ... 37
Selective Construction of History ... ... 43
Postmodernism, Cartesian ‘I’ and Postcoloniality ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 56

Section Two: The Present Kaleidoscope of Identities in Divided Bengal... ... ... ... ... 66

Chapter 2: An Elegy for the Broken Self: Reliving the Past in West Bengal... ... ... ... 67
Can Two Bengalis be United Again? ... ... 67
Bangladesh, the Muslims, and the Partition: Perceptions in West Bengal... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 77
Communalist Discourses in West Bengal... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 87
The Legacy of Colonial Historiography... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 92
The Muslims in West Bengal: The Internal Others... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 99

Chapter 3: Fixating Nationhood in Bangladesh: The Debilitating Self and the Empowering Other... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 108
Discursive Environment: Identities and Their Contentious Histories... ... ... ... ... ... 115
India: The Convenient Other... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 131

x
Section Three: Eavesdropping on the Past ... ... ... 150

Chapter 4: The Itinerary of the Colonial Mind:
Construction of Hindutva and
Fragmented Nationalism... ... ... ... 151
Colonization of Indian History
and Tradition... ... ... ... ... ... 153
Cultural Nationalism and Hindutva:
Celebration of Masculinity... ... ... 171
Estranging the Muslims... ... ... ... 179
Search for a Hindu-Muslim Amity:
Constraints of the Known
Discursive Practices ... ... ... ... 191

Chapter 5: Islamic Identity in Bengal:
From Syncretism to Closure... ... ... ... 197
Syncretism: Gleanings from
the Oral Tradition... ... ... ... ... ... 201
Power, Contention and the Punthis .. 208
Waning Syncretism and the Islamic
Reformist Movements... ... ... ... ... ... 212
The Sharif Muslims: New Chaperons .. 218
The Bengali Muslims: Desiring
Subjects on the Border... ... ... ... ... 228
Of Literature, History and the
Hindus: The Contentious Terrain... ... 231
Parting of Ways... ... ... ... ... ... 237

Chapter 6: Partition: The Less Historical
Other Story... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 238
Bengal: United or Divided?... ... ... ... 245
A Move for Independent
United Bengal ... ... ... ... ... ... ... 249
The Muslim League Position... ... ... ... 256

Chapter 7: Emergence of Bangladesh: Before the
Next Stop Named Uncertainty... ... ... ... 273
Modernity Vs. Premodernist
Politics of Religion ... ... ... ... ... ... 274
Jinnah: The Progeny of the
Politics of Convenience... ... ... ... ... 275
Islamization of the State... ... ... ... ... 281
Islamization of Culture
and Literature... ... ... ... ... ... ... 287
The Bengali Identity:
A Counter-discursive Move... ... ... ... 290
The Language Movement and After... ... 300
Resurgence of Islamic Identity... ... ... 304
Return to the Bengali Identity:
The Final Catharsis? ... ... ... ... ... 310
Section Four: Conclusion... 315

Chapter 8: Peering Through the Crevice... 316
Essentialization of Identities... 319
Selective Construction of History and Tradition... 321
Identity and the Relations of Power... 324
Identity and the Discursive Environment... 330

Bibliography... 335
Cultural identity has always been the central issue in Bengal politics since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The fact that Bengal is now divided and a part of it is now independent Bangladesh with its present territorial contour is precisely the denouement of the politics of identity. Agonistic claims, inclined to constitute different and irreconcilable identities for the people of Bengal, have largely defined the parameters of politics.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, such politics meant the contention on the interpretation of indigenous culture inextricably laminated with religious beliefs of the people. Varying perceptions of culture gave rise to varying perceptions of the self to be privileged. By the end of the century, it was a contention on what perception of the self was empowering in the politics of anticolonial resistance. On the one side was modernity, the keepsake of colonial rule, and on the other side was the revived and reinvigorated indigenous culture. Contention also began to surface between religious identities of the Hindus and the Muslims showing a discernible cleavage around the time of the first partition of Bengal in 1905. Then came the moment of partition of Bengal and for that matter, of India in 1947 which cost millions of lives and wreaked
unfathomable sufferings to millions others. Amidst this catastrophe, partition was erroneously and wishfully thought to be the ultimate catharsis from intense political strife emanating from varied perceptions of identities along religious lines which almost singularly defined colonial politics in British India during the preceding four decades. History later evidenced that it was just the beginning of another endless trail.

The postcolonial nation-states of India and Pakistan were soon found to be bumbling aggregates of irreconcilable identities claiming nationhood with centrifugal tendencies. Bangladesh seceded from Pakistan in 1971 in the name of the ethnico-linguistic identity only to find later that the possibilities of other agonistic identities were not exhausted. Contention continues as identities multiply. Paul Brass says, "any definition that acquires a high degree of consensus within a community at a particular point in its history is likely at some time to be subject to redefinition as a consequence of either internal conflicts of interest or ideology within the group or as a consequence of external changes that affect segments of the group differentially."¹

So was the case with the politics of identity in Bengal,

although the commensurability of the "high degree of consensus" is always questionable.

Political-cultural identity cannot enjoy any immutably settled boundary in any living culture, precisely because there is no fixed essence of identity. Identity is always a construct of a given time and the apparent consensus on the basis of which an identity is constructed is quite often hegemonic, to use the Gramscian term. Once perceived as hegemonic, it often entails a dimension of resistance at one point. A particular identity, while privileging and empowering one segment of the populace, marginalizes the "others." One primary attribute of political identity is its embeddedness in the discursive practices in conjunction and in contention with the Other which is so constituted for its own definition. This identity is to be understood in terms of its difference with the 'Other' politically perceived as significant. In the political discourses, this 'Other' is enormously important.

But there is another aspect of identity to be understood in terms of what Derrida refers to by the notion of differance - what is unheard and what is deferred. Here the Other is not immediately present on the apparent discursive ground. But its absence needs to be politically accounted for. The "high degree of consensus" thus becomes illusory. To paraphrase Dirlik's language, what is absent or what is made to be absent is as fundamental as what is
present in our effort to understand political-cultural identity. Given the extra-ordinary preponderance of contentions in advancing variously perceived identities in Bengal, the authors of Bengal politics were obviously enthused to write about it rather frequently. Since colonial politics has been predominantly informed by religious identities in the subcontinent having their visible impact in creation of the nation-states, most of these writings are understandably focused on the Hindu-Muslim relations, but almost exclusively of the pre-partition period. In regard to the general trends in such writings, Chatterjee observes quite compendiously:

There are two kinds of explanation of this phenomenon in current historiography. One may be called the 'colonialist' explanation which suggests that 'communal' identities, and hence 'communal' cleavages, are inherent in the essential character of Indian society. Politicians and power-brokers, in making demands upon the colonial government or vying with one another for its favours, inevitably turn to these 'primordial loyalties' in order to gain a stamp of representative legitimacy for their claims. The other explanation is broadly of 'nationalist' origin and asserts that the communal divide in Indian politics is wholly a creation of colonial practices. Whenever there was a nationalist consolidation of popular demands, the colonial government sought to

break it up by playing up and manipulating communal issues. A 'left' variation on this nationalist theme has further argued that the real divisions in Indian society are those of class, not of communities. The colonial government on the one hand, and communalist ideologies and leaders on the other, have tried to mask the expression of what are really class issues by emphasising the communal division.³

Added to these variants of explanation are their two logical progenies in post-partition East Bengal. From the 'colonialist' variant developed an offshoot of historical writings with its support for the two-nation theory and the belief in Pakistan. Similarly, one can draw the lineage between the 'nationalist' variant and the historical narratives advancing the ethnico-linguistic Bengali identity in the post-partition period.

Obviously, the perspective of gender does not figure on this list in spite of the fact that the whole anti-colonial and nationalist discourse was preceded by a vigorous debate on the issues related to certain gendered practices. But in the wake of the anti-colonial resistance, in the midst of a pervasive celebration of indigenous masculinity, issues related to gender were later completely subsumed or marginalized. There was an effort even to efface all

feminine traces from the perceived national identity in order to prepare the space of politics for a confrontation with colonialism in masculinist terms. Chatterjee observes about the political trend in late nineteenth century Bengal in a separate article, "Question regarding the position of women in society do not arouse the same degree of passion as they did only a few decades before. The overwhelming issues now are directly political ones - concerning the politics of nationalism." Chatterjee attributes this gradual disappearance of 'the women's question' to the incapability of the nationalist discourse to resolve it. Obviously, since then, the historiography of Indian nationalism has failed to make any claim to totality.

In all the writings now available, one can easily decipher an essentialist proclivity. Whatever identity is championed is also essentialized. Strategically, they all resort to empiricism. Given the versatile and rich repertory of antiquity of precolonial Bengal, it is not very difficult to collate the convenient strands of history and empiricize a chosen identity and validate it historically by linking it to a primordial claim. The inevitable result of this


historicizing phenomenon is a political contention, or indeed, multiple political contentions.

The dominant trends in historical writings take cognizance of these contentions, but only to historicize one or other identity or to narrativize the contentions rather superficially without any attention to the nature of epistemic support derived from subjective historicization. As of now, there are two distinct modes of historiography prevalent in Bengal. One is consecration of facticity prevalent among the mainstream historians. Collation of facts are thought to be unproblematic and the judgement about facticity, though subjective, is consecrated in the name of the truth and is objectivized. This has been useful in recovering the 'important' and 'chosen' past. The other mode of historiography is to critique such facts and advance its own only from a class point of view which is prevalent among the Marxists. Each of these modes is reductive in its respective sphere and promotes certain methodological norms that condition the emergence of a singularity of meaning.

What is really important to look into is the condition under which historical narratives are produced to legitimate one or other identity, and conversely, the condition under which identities themselves are produced in such narratives. Therefore, a better grasp of the agonistics of identities and the limits and predicaments of nationalist narratives is possible not only by looking into the history of identities
which at its best helps us realize the subjectivity of such production, but also by looking into the history of historicization of identities which helps us understand the conditions under which such subjectivity emerges. History is the "necessary condition" which work toward the creation of the nation-state. History thus needs to be approached as a discourse.

Very little serious work has been done, that too exclusively on pre-partition Bengal, to take on the very nature of the discursive practices which are surreptitiously assigned the role of valorizing a particular kind of identity and legitimizing the prevalent power-relations at a given time. Identities are "malleable and manipulable" and the collective identities, as they are perceived and imagined, "do not flow naturally and uninterruptedly from Platonic forms of nationhood." An identity, privileged at a given time, needs to be understood in terms of its contingency in the present. No matter how strenuously historicized it is, it is indeed a construct of the present, not of the past, which is inextricably tied to the claim to power at that particular time. Cultural identities in Bengal that have informed politics most importantly, are checkered

---


by such contestant claims to power - a phenomenon to be grasped by probing into the discursive practices.

The notion of discourse can be taken from Bakhtin and Foucault with a not-too-distant reference to Gramscian concepts of hegemony and counter-hegemony. Discourse always suggests a contestation which takes place within the domain of politics. While talking about discourse, Bakhtin observes that "its assertions, its tone, its rhetoric -- everything that constitutes it -- always presuppose a horizon of competing, contrary utterances against which it asserts its energies." This adversative nature of discourse immediately implies the presence of a counter-discourse, either real or perceived or potential and perhaps, suppressed. Shapiro observes, "In general, discourse can be viewed, as Foucault has noted, as an 'asset' to be assessed within an economy of linguistic practices, a circulation of silences versus volubilities and of dominant versus subjugated modes of statements and knowledge practices." The arena of language and narratives thus becomes the constituted space where struggle for domination takes place. A dominant discourse, with its certain linguistic and conceptual elements derived

---


from the "legitimated world view", is normalized and valorized in a certain kind of social formation. As Pierre Bourdieu puts it, "...any language that can command attention is an 'authorized language,' invested with the authority of a group, the things that it designates are not simply expressed, but also authorized and legitimated."\(^{10}\)

The relationship between the dominant discourse and a particular kind of social formation privileged by it is one of mutual authentication. Together they provide a system of intelligibility. The constituted discursive practices, along with the contentions embedded in them, provide the range of choice one can have in interpreting and forging perception about the prevalent social reality.

Therefore, to effect any cultural change, a big battle is fought in the arena of discourse for control of the meaning system - a battle over interpretation. As Foucault puts it, "...discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination, but it is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized."\(^{11}\) The project of counter-discourse is to seize that power.

---


A counter-discourse in the realm of culture attempts to find out the ruptures, the vulnerable points in the dominant discourse. It undertakes to denaturalize the naturalized linguistic and conceptual elements in the meta-language of the dominant discourse and "disrupt the circuit in which the dominant construction of the world asserts its self-evidence." While dominant discourse employs its energy in securing legitimation for the dominant perception, counter-discourse endeavors for subversion, and in some cases, transformation of the given power-relations. It attempts to generate a new circuit of meaning.

Evidently, immanent in the perception of discourse is an indelible reference to power. This relationship between discursive practices and power is better explicated in Foucault. Foucault contends that the "relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated, nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse... We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth." To Foucault, "...power and knowledge directly imply one another;...there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any

---

knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations."  

The scanty literature that exists on nationalism in Bengal does not adequately focus upon these discursive practices. It also keeps aside the relationship between the knowledge of identity and power and how their combination institutes the conditions in the society for the legitimation of both. Legitimation is challenged, generally, with changes or expected changes in the material conditions on which the Marxist literature in Bengal is quite eloquent. But it is also necessary to see whether such challenges are also intrinsic in the changes or expected changes in the discursive economies masterminded by the hither-to marginalized within the given range of options claiming a reconstitution of the knowledge/power matrix. Of course, the two may be consummating to each other. Therefore, in spite of relative stability of the material conditions, identities are produced in the terrain of politics being continually informed by contention on power. Thus politics of identity feature a perennial unsettledness,

---


15 Partha Chatterjee and other authors of the *Subaltern Studies* group occasionally embark upon analysis of the discursive practices. But most of their works concentrate on colonial and postcolonial India. Discursive practices constituting perception of identities in postcolonial Bengal, particularly in East Bengal, have not drawn much attention yet.
sometimes even redefining the silhouette of the protean landscape of the postcolonial nation-states as it eventuated in the inception of Bangladesh. Not to pay adequate attention to the loci of discursive practices results in a bafflement about the changing perception and historicization of identities.

Identity in Bengal has also been studied predominantly from the perspective of macro-political history of nationalism and anticolonial resistance. This political history gyrates generally around a 'great man theory.' Agency of author/ity in historicizing identities and autonomous subjectivity of the leaders in mobilizing the populace are the central reference points in such political history. This obviously obfuscates the discursive environment within which such subjectivity emerges. To Foucault, psychological motivation of the subject is not itself the source, but the outcome of strategies.  

Strategies emerge from the site of conjunction between knowledge and power. And subjectivity is the creation of the knowledge/power grid. Therefore, instead of the subject, the knowledge/power relationship attains centrality. Therefore, it is more pertinent to interrogate the power implications of knowledge that constitute modern subject rather than recovering the subjectivity of the subject expressed in the

---

meaning system. The decentered subject, however, needs to be examined "not to restore the theme of an originating subject," but to attend to how it functions within the given grid of knowledge and power. Foucault says:

We should suspend the typical questions: how does a free subject penetrate the density of things and endow them with meaning; how does it accomplish its design by animating the rules of discourse from within? Rather, we should ask: under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what position does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse? In short, the subject (and its substitutes) must be stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse.

Whether we really want to strip the subject of its creative role is perhaps debatable, but definitely, that role is meaningful only in terms of the constraint and possibility bestowed upon it by the prevalent discursive environment.

There are other curious propensities too in the texts about political-cultural identities in divided Bengal. In West Bengal, most of the significant writings are about the

---

colonial period. There is a general discursive closure about postcolonial Bengali identity in West Bengal except in the writings of the communalist authors who are primarily concerned about the persecution of the Hindus in East Bengal since 1947 which in a circuitous way privileges religious identity in West Bengal too. This closure in discursivity in itself is an interesting area to be studied.

In Bangladesh, despite the centrality of the contention on identity in politics, informed almost exclusively by varied perceptions of culture, the amount of serious work on it is strikingly meager. There are numerous articles in the newspapers agonistically representing and essentializing one or other identity rather superficially and in fragments. But there is hardly any serious work that traces the itinerary of these perceptions, how they are essentialized at different times corroborated by the rationale of power and how power itself incarnates and is legitimated in such perceptions.

Most importantly, and surprisingly, there is not a single research work or an effort in historical writing either in West Bengal or in East Bengal that concentrates on a comparison of the trajectories of cultural perceptions on both sides of Bengal since partition. As though the terminus of history is 1947 and it has elapsed into an irrecoverable oblivion since then. As though two Bengals are just two remote acquaintances in the global cartography. There is, of
course, a general recognition of the phenomenal importance of this partition. On the one hand, it is understood in terms of the agonies, destitution, displacement and deterritorialization of millions of people, opportunities advanced by this partition to some of the people, and diverse developments of political-cultural entities in two parts of Bengal since partition. On the other, the irresistible cultural perviousness of this partition is recognized. But research has curiously remained completely unresponsive to these developments. In a way, this also reveals the partition syndrome, the tangle between identities constituted and perpetuated by partition. There is a perceived contention stemming from cultural superiority-inferiority complex. Apathy from one side is met with counter-apathy from the other. All this results in a forced and obfuscated intellectual closure.

In view of all this, this dissertation is an attempted genealogy of the popular discourses of political-cultural identities and the counter-discourses which at times interrogated the dominant perceptions to reconfigure the power-relations in the space of politics. Mainly, the discursive practices are the data of analysis in this research. As Foucault says, "The field of statements... is accepted in its empirical modesty, as the locus of particular events, regularities, relationships, modifications and systematic transformations; in short... it
is treated not as the result of something else, but as the practical domain that is autonomous (although dependent) and which can described at its own level."19 The concern here is more "with the constitutive role of the statements than with their referential function."20 The field of statements, understandably, alludes to an environment of intertextuality.

The attempt here is to grasp the present perceptions of identity on both sides of the post-colonial societies of divided Bengal and then trace the itinerary of the varying perceptions treading back to the 'histories' to comprehend how the present contention is recounted in the agonistic constructions of the past. The objective here is to look into the discursive environment within which a particular perception ascends to dominance and which at the same time facilitates the birth of counter-discourses too and also to look into the metamorphosis in the discursive environment which provides for interchangeability of positions between dominant and counter-discourses. The subjects of history, as they are perceived, around whom so far the history of the subcontinent has been ordered is decentered in this dissertation. What comes to prominence is an interpretation


of the discursive environment which governs both discourses and the subjects who turn into subjects in history. At the heart of this discursive environment are various kinds of contentions: contention in imagining nations, contention in selective construction of history, and contention between modernity and contentiously recovered primordial identities. And overarching all these contentions is the contention on power. This dissertation looks into these contentions in order to trace the trajectories of changing perceptions of national-cultural identities in Bengal.

The pursuit of this dissertation is not to narrativize a 'descriptive total history.' The attempt here is to identify certain critical ruptures of history which are presumably fraught with multiple propensities of construction of identities, look into their contentions and see how certain perceptions emerge from the crevice as historicized and others are dumped into it either for ever or to resurface later.

The organization of this dissertation is thematic, rather than temporal. Among many conceivable constitutions of identities, for the sake of manageability of this study, only those identities are selected for investigation which have direct relevance to the macro-politics of Bengal appertaining to its partition either through support or through opposition and the ones that have provenance in the partition itself.
Section One
Theoretical Considerations
CHAPTER ONE

Identity, Difference and Nationalism
In (Post)Colonial Societies:
A Glimpse from the Postmodern Consciousness of History

When the societies were colonized, one of the most empowering gifts of colonialism to these societies was their politics of identity. And now that the societies are decolonized, it appears - if seen from the perspective of the once-desperately-desired nation-state - the most disempowering and devastating denouement of colonialism is its continuity in post-coloniality in the form of politics of identities. Agonistics, which were deferred in the name of a grand identity to inspire nationalism in colonial politics, have now been invoked. Agonistics, which were not even known to the people before, have also been spawned with claims to legitimacy and deployed in the ever-expanding field of contention. All these newly-emerging identities have claims which are quite often irreconcilable to the nation-state or its imagined fragments. Each is tinged with a vaunted and historicized perception of nationalism. The nation-state, once seized from the colonial rulers, is now besieged in many post-colonial countries by its own fragmented people - the same people who were once rock-solid in the name of a national and anti-colonial grand identity and were ready to immolate themselves in millions for it. Now they are about to swear off this identity. In their renunciation of the hard-earned nation-state, they are again
wagering their lives in millions. This curious post-colonial phenomenon has inspired enough intellectual cerebration about the susceptibility of the nation-state. Understandably, there can be many different lines of thinking. Is it a disenchantment about the grand identity for which the other perceptions of self were forsworn and have now resurfaced after the confrontation is over with the physical disappearance of the outside - the coloniality? Is it the internalization of confrontation or opposition as an ineluctable mode of politics even in post-coloniality which is now destined to spin off varied perceptions of identities - the ones that were postponed before and the ones which were never thought of before? Is it a denouement of the flaws in the grand narrative of nationalism, perceived only after colonialism was over? Is it a tension between pre-coloniality and post-coloniality? Or, does it mean that the nation-state was more a perceptual strategy against colonialism than a real desire which never enjoyed any real concordance? What exactly is the moment of disappearance of the nation-state from the psychological territory of the nation as it was known so far? Baudrillard said in Les Strategies Fatales: whatever is immanent is at the point of its disappearance.¹ The nation-

state, as is seen in South Asia, is sometimes born with the possibility of its future disintegration.

This grid of circuitous queries is inextricably entwined with some other questions too: how is nationalism perceived? How is a nation constructed? Indeed, an inquest into these queries is an imperative before we attempt to answer the previous ones.

**Nation and Nationalism Revisited**

Given the preponderance of nationalist politics during the colonial period, its successful continuity in certain countries, insurmountable problems in others and also its European antecedents, there are volumes of writings on nation and nationalism. But many authors have acknowledged the difficulty of forming any singular perception of the categories. Seton-Watson, one of the best authors on nationalism within the liberal tradition, resigns in his effort to define nation: 'Thus I am driven to the conclusion that no "scientific definition" of the nation can be devised; yet the phenomenon has existed and exists.'\(^2\) Since the 1920s, Marxism has been a widely used alternative repository of knowledge. But, on the question of nationalism, the dearth of Marxist theory is also

---

conspicuous. In Marx’s own time, it was indifference and perceived marginality of the issue. But later, it was the incapacity of Marxism to arbitrate between theoretically endorsed internationalism and practically observed upsurge of nationalist trend even in the socialist countries. After the collapse of the socialist bloc, the violent insurgence of ethnic, religious or racial identities in their fragments perhaps embarrasses the Marxists more. The other surviving socialist countries are also equally nationalist. Obviously, difference has not ensured amnesia. History has now come back with its previously silenced contentions in many of these countries. As Tom Nairn observes: ‘The theory of nationalism represents Marxism’s great historical failure.’

However, despite their limitations, efforts have been made from diverse traditions to confront the question.

To Hans Kohn, nationalism is ‘a state of mind,’ ‘an act of consciousness,’ which is shared by ‘the large majority of a people.’ Its ambiguity aside, leaving nationalism to the mind and to the consciousness, Kohn perceptively alludes to the slipperiness of the concept. Snyder, having the advantage of being a late-comer in the field, is a little better in helping us visualize otherwise-intangible

---


nationalism. He describes it in terms of a "condition of mind, feeling or sentiment of a group of people living in a well-defined geographical area, speaking a common language, possessing a literature in which the aspirations of the nation have been expressed, attached to common traditions and common customs, venerating its own heroes, and in some cases, having a common religion." To Snyder, obviously, the nation precedes nationalism. Snyder thus overlooks how the nation is sometimes concurrently produced in the narratives of nationalism. Besides, the commonalities he presumes unproblematic are quite often the sources of agonistic interpretations sundering any presupposed unified perception of nationness. But Snyder at least short-lists an inventory of things, he thinks, needed for making a nation which perhaps encourages Shafer to make a larger inventory.

Instead of a brusque definition, Shafer advances ten basic attributes, both real and mythical, which he thinks, contribute to the making of nationalism. These are: 1) a certain defined, even if vaguely, territory or land inhabited by a people or desired by them; 2) a people, called the nation, who share or hope to share, in different and shifting ways, a common culture; 3) some dominant social and economic institutions; 4) a common independent sovereign state or the desire for one; 5) a shared belief in a common

---

history and often in a common ethnic origin, sometimes thought to be religious or racial; 6) preference and esteem for and emotional ties with fellow nationals; 7) a shared pride in past and present achievements 8) a shared indifference or hostility to other (not all) peoples similarly organized in nations; 9) a devotion to the entity called the nation that embodies or symbolizes the territory, the people, the culture, the institutions, the interests and the common heritage and 10) a shared hope that the nation will have a secure and happy future.6

The edifice of the nation, as presented by Shafer, is founded upon perceived commonness in a number of things. Taken commonness for granted, and sifting the cases of unrealized desires apart, one can assume from Shafer's picturization that the nation is happily and peacefully embedded in the tranquil stasis of nationalism with its meaning relatively fixed. Like Snyder, Shafer also assumes that the commonly perceived nation is already given only to be buttressed by a pervasive feeling of nationalism. Such a construal obnubilates the preceding process of internal contestation in producing the nation within the tension of variously perceived nationalisms.

In post-colonial societies such as South Asia, perception of commonness is produced and contested in the

---

discursive terrain of nationalism. Instead of a stasis, nationalism thus implies movement propelled by contention. In its inertia of movement, at each moment, nationalism makes a claim of a nation with constancy, but then it keeps moving either to cancel other dominating or subdued-but-contending perceptions or to accommodate them, if possible and agreeable. In the process, it continuously readjusts its limits of perception.

While movement or continual displacement of perception is almost inevitable in postcolonial societies, contention is considered undesirable from the nation-state’s point of view. Failing to grapple with the contentions, the modern nation-state sometimes privileges, as Oakeshott would put it, in a different context, a crafted ambivalence in its ‘vocabulary of discourse.’ Tom Nairn, identifying the ambivalence, described the nation as ‘the modern Janus.’

The diversities in the conditions of existence of different post-colonial nation-states around the world cancel out any possibility of generalization in this regard. But it can be pointed out that, at least in a heterogeneous cultural setting like South Asia, the nations, since the very moment of their birth from the womb of coloniality, have strategized ambivalence in order to survive in their own

---


self-negation. The Janus-faced nation is thus at the same time nationalist, marked by its desired decolonization, desired landscape and its 'containing thresholds of meaning,'\(^9\) and anti-nationalist in its stance in silencing, deferring and denying adequate discursive space to the internal agonistic desires which it cannot reconcile within the framework of the given nation-state. In post-coloniality, the demarcating line between nationalism and anti-nationalism thus gets blurred to the bafflement of the people(s). To recall Baudrillard once again, whatever is immanent is at the point of its disappearance.

To Ernest Renan, who takes the intellectual responsibility to discredit race, language, material interest, religion, geography, military necessity etc. as any true constituents of the nation, and undertakes a moral charge to advance a prescriptive notion of the nation, - "A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, \(^9\) Bhabha, Homi K. 'Introduction: Narrating the Nation,' in Bhabha, Homi K. ed. *Nation and Narration*. London & New York: Routledge. 1990. p.4.
the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form."^10

It is interesting for a South Asianist to note that Renan puts forward arguments to screen off elements like race, language, religious affinities and geography, the inconsequentiality of which would apparently empty the nationalist history of South Asia and even its present. Renan’s argument, as noted earlier, is more prescriptive than historic. And the historical examples he cites to bolster his prescription are Eurocentric. One can dismiss these elements, on the ground of their ultimate undecidability, through an ontology of recovery from the remote past, as Renan does. Nevertheless, these elements have informed people’s perception of the nation quite persuasively at different junctures of history and motivated people to engage in political action to realize the perceived nation, no matter how erroneous or fabricated or ‘invented’ (as Gellner put it,^11) the perception is. Renan cannot condone “a rich legacy of memories” in the constitution of the nation. What if the legacy of memories is inextricably tied to the people’s perception of race, linguistic affinities, religion or territory? What if the


"present-day consent" of the people or their "desire to live together" is exclusively informed by their linguistic affinities, religious persuasion or geographic contiguity? This is definitely the case in many post-colonial societies. And they certainly have existed as nations. What is important here is the perception of the people about their identity, either already immanent as a result of the politics of the past or politically constituted at present. The image of the nation resides in the imagi(nation) of the people.

This brings us to Anderson and his much-celebrated and oft-quoted book *Imagined Communities*. To Anderson, the nation is:

an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign... It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion... The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic, boundaries, beyond which lie other nations... It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm... Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in
each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.\textsuperscript{12}

Anderson brings to our notice that the nation is created and resident in the imagination of the people. It exists as long as a congruent imagination exists. Implicit in this construal are different criteria that make imagination possible. But what is more important is the imagination itself. This is incontrovertibly a valuable contribution to the understanding of the nation. Such an understanding becomes more admissible if we take the \textit{stasis} implied in this imagining of nation only as a transient outcome of contentious discourses named nationalism, soon to be unsettled or at least contested by fresh counter-dictions and therefore, counter-imaginings.

It is a fact that nation-states, particularly in the post-colonial societies like South Asia, can never exhaust the moral space so that counter-imaginings at one point could be put to an end. While the official nationalism of the nation-states imagines the whole landscape left behind by the colonial rule, the contentiously resurfacing antiquity deploys its precolonial fragments. Antiquity is fraught with endless possibilities of such redemptions. If imagination is the most important criterion, and it is, then the settled boundary of a nation in a post-colonial society

is subverted at the very moment its creation. What was a nation on August 14 or on August 15, 1947 in the Indian subcontinent, was not a nation the day after. Because, the imagination immediately began to crumble. Imagination is created and destroyed in the contentious terrain of newly emerging nationalisms, each lugging its own construction of antiquity which not only subverts the nation, but also the relative modernness of the notion of nation. Here again, we are confronted with a deficiency in our understanding of the post-colonial nations. Anderson doesn’t help much in this regard. His search for a definition, a settled boundary of the notion of the nation keeps him away from the other aspect of nationness - its perennial unsettledness.

Different from this deficiency, Chatterjee raises another central objection to Anderson’s reading of the nation for its incompatibility with the reality of the postcolonial nations. Chatterjee takes us to the mode of imagining and to the autonomy of imagination of nation in a postcolonial setting. Chatterjee notes:

If nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain "modular" forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but
also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized.\(^{13}\)

Chatterjee observes a difference between anticolonial nationalism and the modular forms of national imaginings of the West. He asserts:

...anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains - the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the "outside," of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an "inner" domain bearing the "essential" marks of cultural identity.\(^{14}\)


\(^{14}\) Chatterjee, in a different article, draws an interesting parallel between the 'inner' and external domains on the one side, and the Bengali concepts of *Ghar* (the home) and *Bahir* (the world) on the other. Chatterjee notes, "The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents our inner spiritual self, our true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world - and woman is its representation." Evidently, Chatterjee here again perceives the 'inner domain' as singular and he essentializes it. Still, his observation is important in the sense that it sensitizes us to the
The greater one's success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one's spiritual culture. This formula is, I think, a fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalisms in Asia and Africa...

The colonial state, in other words, is kept out of the "inner" domain of national culture; but it is not as though this so-called spiritual domain is left unchanged. In fact, here nationalism launches its most powerful, creative, and historically significant project: to fashion a "modern" national culture that is nevertheless not Western. If the nation is an imagined community, then this is where it is brought into being. In this, its true and essential domain, the nation is already sovereign, even when the state is in the hands of the colonial power.

Although Chatterjee claims that he doesn't raise this objection for any sentimental reason, his yearning for an alternative history outside the module of Western historiography is only too obvious. And there is nothing wrong about it. The Nation and its Fragments in conjunction with a number of articles by various authors in Subaltern Studies and the writings of many other postcolonial Indian

---


33
historians are a laudable outcome which only reaffirms the legitimacy of such a project. The problem is in his compulsive urge to label certain locutionary practices of the colonial period, especially of the nineteenth century as emancipated. In spite of occasional claim to globalness of his thesis, Chatterjee, evidently, draws most of his theoretical impulses from his observation about Bengal. Therefore, it is there we need to see how justifiable such an assertion is.

A separation between the material domain and the spiritual domain in nineteenth century Bengal is easily discernible. It is also possible to draw a line between the emergence of an intense perception of identity, the antecedent of later-day nationalism, in the cultural space, and the political nationalism more explicitly geared toward anticolonial resistance. But in such a separation, we need to bear in mind that the cultural space or what Chatterjee calls the constitution of the "spiritual domain" was not apolitical or without its own intrinsic contentions. In a cultural heterogeneity that goes by a common name "Hinduism," there were obviously many different possibilities in the discursive production of the spiritual domain. The spiritual domain that emerged was inevitably crisscrossed by the politics of the time, a significant component of which can quite legitimately be named as "colonial modernity."
It is true that Anderson's modular forms of nationalism
drawn from the West doesn't fully match with the initial
perceptions of identity which were emerging in the cultural
space of Bengal. While in the West, as Anderson points out,
secular nationalism was emerging in abnegation of religious
identity in the realm of the nation-state, in Bengal, or in
India so to speak, the propensity was quite the opposite
after the initial harmony with colonially rationalized and
fragmented perception of modernity in the name of reformism.
A quest for an empowering spiritual domain in order to
redeem a gloried self-identity from the past in the face of
the onslaught of the lately-perceived malevolent colonialism
was on. But clearly, there are a few oversights in
Chatterjee's reading of this moment. These are: the
condition of emergence of the spiritual domain; the rupture
between the reformist movement and the reversion to the
spiritual domain which Chatterjee is inclined to consider as
continuous; the synchronicity of the moment of reversion with
the moment of emergence of political nationalism and their
subsequent inextricability; and increasing politicization of
the cultural identity which initially emanated from the
spiritual domain, but gradually yielded to the demand of
modernity. On all these counts, sovereign imagining of the
nation in colonial period is remarkably attenuated.

15 Discussed at some length in the chapter titled "The
Itinerary of the Colonial Mind."
This is not to deny the importance of the spiritual domain in imagining the nation. Indeed, Chatterjee’s contribution is a corrigendum to Anderson’s observation of gradual waning of the religious-spiritual penchant in imagination since the middle ages. The recent resurgence of religious nationalism in Anderson is not particularly accounted for. We know, the nations and nation-states in South Asia cannot be talked about without proper attention to religious nationalism.\textsuperscript{16}

Now that the significant work of Mark Juergensmeyer on the surge of religious nationalism is available, we don’t need delve much into it.\textsuperscript{17} It would suffice to note that national imaginings do take place along the religious line. Such imaginations are in contention sometimes internally with other religious imaginings or secular propensities as in South Asia, and sometimes externally with the general propensity of modernity as in Iran, Egypt or Algeria. Internal contention leads to a movement which sometimes culminates in the cartographic changes of the nation-states. This may again be the beginning of another level of movement. Imagination continues to move from one stasis to another.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{16} Imagined Communities. pp. 12-19.
\end{flushleft}
Imagination, contention and movement are all very important aspects in understanding post-colonial nations. What is equally important in perceiving the national identity in a postcolonial setting like South Asia, is an intense feeling of difference - the ceaseless construction of the Other(s) across or along the margin of its own imagined self-identity.

Identity/Difference and the Other

The moment of enunciation of an identity is also the moment when the difference in relation to Other(s) is intensely felt and/or the difference is discursively produced. This is not to say that at the moment of enunciation an identity is always created anew. An identity that is privileged at a given time is indeed quite often existent somewhere in the nebulous perception of the masses waiting for redemption at an auspicious(!) moment. The mercurial nature of the perceived importance can be capitalized on if an opportune moment at all comes. One such moment is of course the moment of perceived difference. The politics of identity, therefore, by its very definition, is not endowed with a full autonomy of its own, and is constantly informed by the politics of difference as its reference point. The self consciousness that invokes an identity, therefore, should be scrutinized on the ground of

37
what difference is considered important. If there are many possibilities of identifiable differences, there are many possibilities of identities too, quite often each claiming a space in the contentious terrain of politics. In order to deploy a privileged identity, the perceived difference is sometimes made to undergo substantive changes or other differences are redeemed to prominence to match the perception of constituted exteriority. But an eternal deferment of other perceptions of differences which privilege the recovery of other identities and constitution of other Others cannot be fully secured. Therefore, the enunciation of an identity and a difference has to be understood in terms of the context of the enunciation. First, we need to look into the subjective nature of the self consciousness as it emerges in its tangle with the juxtaposed difference. This can be done through an interrogation of the discursive and affective conditions of the claim to selfhood. Second, we need to see what it consciously or unconsciously leaves aside or suppresses. But understandably, what is suppressed runs the risk of being lost forever, making history incorrigibly flawed.

When the discursive and affective conditions refer to a colonial setting, configuration of identity becomes even more intricate. Here, not only identity, even the perception of difference, under a historical sway, becomes non-autonomous. While at the political level difference is still
celebrated, or at least, rhetorically kept alive, at the psychological level, there is a tormenting mimesis of the "Other." This mimesis is the working of the anguished presence of a perceived-to-be-superior self of the (colonizing) "Other" in the subjugated self. This "Other" itself is a subjective construction of the colonizers based on pragmatic choice and attributed rationale of colonialism, therefore, a product of a specific history prioritized over other possible alternatives. Endowed with an already legitimated linear notion of history and an ineluctable teleology, the indigenous urge for a self-identity is strenuously tailored to match the image of this colonizing Other. Politically, what it does is an invocation of this "Other" in the self, and in the process, it reconstructs its tradition entirely. For example, if masculinity marginalizes femininity and androgyny in the colonizing society in order to legitimate colonialism, this is also resurrected in the indigenous self to do politics in the designated terrain, leaving aside, perhaps a whole rich tradition of femininity and androgyny, as it happened in India.\(^8\)

This selectivity, as a code of politics, appears to be empowering in creating a grand identity as long as the "Other" is tangibly present. Once the "Other" is removed, the self thus constituted plunges into self-doubt. But since

---

selectivity persists as a legitimate code, it opens up possibilities for numerous constructions of agonistic identities. In such an imbroglio, the ethic of politics grounds itself on the single question unconstrained by the moral space created by the nation-state: what choice of counter-diction is presumably empowering to its enunciator in the given discursive context? Choices are numerous, all redeemable subjectively from the repository of precolonial history and all legitimate in spite of their subjective imagining as long as the selectively produced grand identity of the new nation-state is legitimate. These choices are supported and desired by one or other fragment of the new nation amidst an unending contention, as it appears, creating an insuperable quandary for the postcolonial nation-states. While the postcolonial nation-state claims to speak for the whole 'nation,' the fragments of the 'nation' appear polyvocal in asserting multiple imaginings of identity. The once-desired nation-state is now in postcolonial stage imagined as hegemonic or coercive.

Disenchantment is there, based on real or imagined reasons. Indeed, optimism reached its pinnacle at the moment of decolonization. But this was also the moment of beginning of disenchantment. The inheritance of limited resources in the postcolonial states poses particularly an insurmountable predicament in meeting the insatiable demands of different regions and communities of the new nation-state. Such
demands are initially articulated in the name of an identity—linguistic, regional, religious, or broadly cultural—behind which people of a community or a region can be rallied. But then the whole political discourse is gradually taken over more importantly by identity itself than the claim to resources. The fledgling politicians baffled by the emergence of this new phenomenon and the method of crisis management of the overdeveloped state inherited from the colonial period exacerbate the situation. Disenchantment grows and continues, so does imagination of new identities which were deliberately deferred or sacrificed in the search for a common identity perceived as empowering in the anticolonial resistance.

Like the state, the mode of postcolonial politics was also an inheritance. The invincibility of the colonial state for decades allowed politics of opposition to reach its maturity. All these years, politics meant identifying the Other in the central colonial state and investing all its energy against the state in order to redeem its own imagined identity. This mode of politics was gradually internalized and had its inescapable manifestation in the postcolonial state too. In Indian subcontinent, the contention in imagining the postcolonial state indeed began in the colonial period resulting in the emergence of two nation-states based on the two-nation theory conceiving the permanent irreconcilability of the Muslims and the Hindus.
This indeed, even before the birth of the postcolonial state, legitimated agonistic imaginings which both India and Pakistan would be facing in later years. If two nations could be imagined based on selective redemption of history, many nations can also be imagined with equal legitimacy inasmuch as the repertoire of antiquity is opulent with the possibility of many selective redemptions. The politics of grand anticolonial identity which once found power in the deferment or attempted erasure of other possibilities, in the postcolonial state, was found incorrigibly debilitating as its own logic could be used against it.

There was also a tension between precoloniality and postcoloniality brought into play by the colonial interface. For example, in South Asia, a united India, which later came to inform nationalism based on perceived Indianness, was indeed the outcome of the colonial rule. Before this, many of the fragmented territories which constituted different kingdoms and at their best larger empires, were in conflict with each other. These old kingdoms represented different regions. With a stretch of imagination and selective redemption of history, some communities marked with cultural contiguity in terms of language, ethnicity or religion can also be envisioned in these regions. These communities, now in the postcolonial state, are redeeming the contiguous regions as nation-states. The rallying point for each of these contentious identities, as evident from the foregoing
discussion, is a history of its own - real, invented or imagined.

Selective Construction of History

The perception of history now in circulation in the societies which were once colonized is relatively new and inextricably entwined with coloniality. The precolonial accounts of history written by the court historians, as in South Asia, were mostly the encomiastic accounts of virility and victories in war of the kings and emperors who employed these historians.\textsuperscript{19} There was another genre of historical writing, the twin sibling of the literary writings of the middle ages in India, which was inclined to relate the divine will with the mundane affairs of the rise and fall of the empires and kingdoms in keeping with the social philosophy of the time.\textsuperscript{20} In such writings, history and mythology stood close to each other, sometimes inseparably. What is known as modern historiography was definitely brought in by colonialism. Pitted against the evident flaws and irrationality of precolonial and early colonial histories, as they came to be known after the colonial encounter and inevitable acceptance of the superiority of

\textsuperscript{19} One such oft-mentioned account is \textit{Ain-i-Akbari}, written by Abul Fazal, emperor Akbar's court historian.

\textsuperscript{20} For example, Mrityunjay Vidyalankar's \textit{Rajabali}. 43
Western epistemology which had its own history of conquest apart from the military one, this new historiography appeared to be readily acceptable by the newly enlightened people of colonial India. Assimilation at the cognitive level took place through an arbitrarily drawn homology between childhood and primitivism21 and a self-asserted necessity of colonization as a civilizing mission. But as we know from numerous recent writings in the West, predominantly from the postmodern perspective, this historiography, inextricably imbricated with the strenuously figured modernity and rationality, had its own flaws, own elements of rationalized irrationality, evidenced in its support for dazzling growth of colonialism. Among other possible penchants of analysis, these flaws can be traced back also to the very construction of the concept of modernity originating in the West.

As Niebuhr says, "History, clearly and explicitly comprehended, has at least this one use: that one knows how even the greatest and highest spirits of humanity do not know how accidentally their vision adopted the form through which they see and through which they vehemently insist that everyone else see."22 If we stretch our thoughts in equating


Niebuhr's "highest spirit of humanity" with post-Enlightenment phenomenon of "modernity", and if we consider "the vehement insistence" as an inevitable coefficient of "power," the notion being extracted straight out of the Foucauldian concept of knowledge-power relations, we definitely approach a better comprehension of the logocentricism in the history of coloniality and postcoloniality. The given logocentric history of the non-West, seen from the perspective of Enlightenment of the West which provided the rationale for colonialism, is at its minimum, inescapably debilitating for the (post)colonial societies, evident in the continuity of the identity of coloniality with a paradoxical prefix of "post." But before focusing upon the specifics of coloniality/postcoloniality and their generous largesse(?) to the victim societies, it is important to draw attention to the relationship in general between modernity and history - modernity that legitimated colonialism and history that still makes (post)coloniality ineluctable.

First it begins with the erasure of memory of a civilizational magnitude. This amnesia was effectuated by prioritization of modern Western philosophy, the progeny of European renaissance, over archeology. Eventually, it amounted to a preemptive closure. No form of knowledge, incongruent with this philosophy, could inform it. So was 1980. p.12.
the fate with the archeology of knowledge received from Eastern civilizations in the colonial encounters which could be made usable and meaningful only by making it strenuously coherent with Western epistemology. Western philosophy, which began to see its success in the rapid social transformation in the West and also in the so-called "civilizational mission of the West" carried through colonization, gave rise to an egocentricism, as identified by Martin Heidegger, vividly evident in the Cartesian "I." 23 The rest of the world and the history of civilization got effaced instantly only to be reconstituted and retold by this "I." This "I," apart from being egocentric, narcissist and male, called itself "modern," asking Others outside it compulsively into a mimesis. Western experience thus had become the exclusive site of knowledge of the world to be experienced from then on.

Although many historians of the colonized societies were inclined to describe the colonial conquest as accidental, the conquest of Western epistemology was never accidental. While to the marginal societies, this epistemology was condescending and cloaked with authority, it was not immune from its own internal strife in the West. If modernity, the proud progeny of Western epistemology, was

cast into the matrix of post-Enlightenment rationality, and if that rationality itself emerged with a sharp contour from the haze of European renaissance, then it all must have taken place under certain discursive and affective conditions to cope with its own internal crisis. But there was a second crisis to modernity too, rather unanticipated and more serious, brought back home by the colonizing splurge of the West. Ashis Nandy observes:

Colonizers, as we have known them in the last two centuries, came from complex societies with heterogenous cultural and ethical traditions... (I)t is by underplaying some aspects of their culture and overplaying others that they built the legitimacy of colonialism. For instance, it is impossible to build a hard, this-worldly sense of mission on the tradition to which St. Francis of Assisi belonged: one has to go back to St. Augustine and Ignatius Loyola to do so. It is not possible to find legitimacy for the colonial theory of progress in the tradition of Johannes Eckhart, John Ruskin and Leo Tolstoy, based as it is on the rejection on the ideas of an omnipotent high technology, of hyper-competitive, achievement-oriented, over-organized private enterprise, and of aggressively proselytizing religious creeds operating on the basis of what Erik Erikson calls pseudo-species. One must find that legitimacy in utilitarians such as Jeremy Bentham and James Mill, in the socialist thinkers conceptualizing colonialism as a necessary step to progress and as a remedy for feudalism, and in those
generally trying to fit the colonial experience within the mould of a doctrine of progress.\textsuperscript{24}

What is in a sense accidental is the leverage of the colonies in reshaping modernity. Revealed of the emptiness of its thus-far vaunted humanist content at the moment of colonization, modernity perennially cloaked itself under the garb of humanism which has been subjected to recurrent alterations according to the needs of its own rationalizing projects. Given this, it is important to draw a line between humanism and modernity in spite of their concurrent emergence in European renaissance, not to allow humanism to be universally passed on as a blank check for modernity. The task is evidently difficult and to some extent paradoxical to begin with, therefore questionable, since humanism never in the past had an untainted face. To Foucault, "The humanistic thematic is in itself too supple, too diverse, too inconsistent to serve as an axis for reflection. And it is a fact that, at least since the seventeenth century, what is called humanism has always been obliged to lean on certain conceptions of man borrowed from religion, science, and politics. Humanism serves to color and to justify the conceptions of man to which it is, after all, obliged to

take recourse. But this subservience of humanism to history is more like an end-product of a tempestuous process marked by discernible tension. In spite of the apparent docility of the notion of humanism, a tension between humanism and modernity was always immanent which sometimes constituted certain vicissitudes and certain crevices through which we can now occasionally peep into history rather skeptically. While the more ostensible effect of such tension was redefinition of humanism from time to time, the subtler effect was changes in the perception of the modernist project itself. Intelligibly, the modernist project, as we come to know, thus is a selective configuration.

The immediate advantage of this separation between humanism and modernity, the recognition of the tension between them and comprehension of selective configuration of modernity is that it makes us enormously skeptical about the historicity of the history of civilization since

26 Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin are inclined to see even the latest developments in the Western frontiers of knowledge as informed by colonization. They write, "it is arguable that dominant European movements, such as postmodernism... may themselves, in fact, be more indebted to the cultural effects of the material practice of colonization and its aftermath than is usually acknowledged." See Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literature. London, New York: Routledge. 1989. p. 156.
Enlightenment. The tension itself is telling of the contingencies of multiple perceptions, and hence multiple interpretations. Therefore, the notion of modernity and the concomitant notion of humanism, palmed off to the humanity, which in combination are thought to be the exclusive site of the production of knowledge and human history, are indeed a specific discourse emanating from the Cartesian "I," 'the subject of knowledge, action, and moral responsibility.'

It was no accident that this Cartesian 'I', now out to conquer, colonize and penetrate into the unknown world was perceived as a 'man.' Since only the 'real men' could penetrate into other countries, and since colonization was about to happen, the Cartesian 'I' had to be constituted in terms of the masculinist traits before the act of colonization. Colonization and celebration of Western masculinity went hand in hand.

Characteristic of patriarchy, this Western man, the subject of knowledge, action, and moral responsibility, on arriving at the new-found land called the colony had to self-assign the moral responsibility of dissemination of knowledge, the subjective epistemic locution, of which he was the source. Evidently, there were two objectives in it. First, to provide a rationale to the act of colonization.

---

which was needed to be seen as a civilizational mission meaning well-being of the subjugated 'primitive' people for its own legitimation. Second, to secure his own identity as valid in the face of a crisis intrinsically felt in the first encounter with other possibilities of very different identities valued and legitimated by knowledge already prevalent in the colony.

A good example is the colonial encounter in India. Given the rich past of India and a civilization which antedated Europe, India couldn’t be ignored altogether. One can easily trace certain traits of identity which the Indian people have traditionally valued such as androgyny, femininity, asceticism, tolerance, pacifism, and passivity. All these values stand in sharp contrast with the selectively constituted set of Western values that had actualized and rationalized colonialism at the time of what Said calls 'the extraordinary ascendance of Europe.' Therefore, in the given discursive ambience in India at the moment of colonization, the identity of the 'Western man' who colonized was indeed surreptitiously under scrutiny. Since colonialism was an irreversible given to this 'Western man,' in order to recover the gloried self in the colonial setting, an epistemic inversion in the psychological domain of the colonized was the only alternative apart from his coercive presence. The colonial authority was at his disposal to make it happen. There were two mutually
complementary discursive strategies to effectuate this inversion. One, with the enunciatory authority bestowed upon Western man by colonial power and perceived superiority of Western epistemology, the colonized in India could be exoticized and reproduced as the Other in terms of the traits of their identity which were not rationally explicable. This Other, like a voyeur, would see from the margin the extravaganza of the celebration of an identity very different from his/her own and eventually indulge in a desire for emulation. Two, India needed to be reconstituted from its own past as a rational society modelled after West. This would eventually devalue the traits of its own identity which were a source of perturbation to colonialism. A rewritten history of India, cloaked in a rational garb, was therefore necessary.

Both of these discursive propensities gave rise to what was named orientalism which can be briefly defined as rediscovery of the orient at the epistemic domain actualized through an unmistakable occidental orientation.28 In India,

28 Edward Said defines orientalism as "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient...(W)ithout examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage - and even produce - the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. Orientalism. New York: Vintage
it began with William Jones at the cusp of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Selective constitution of the occident and the arbitrarily attributed rationale of colonialism had their indelible marks of enunciation in this orientalism. As a consequence, orientalism too couldn't be anything but a selective construction of logos meant, among other things, for affirmation of the superiority of the Western tradition of knowledge. At the ideational level, Gramsci would perhaps call it a hegemony of global magnitude. Said writes, "as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other...In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on... flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand."29

While Said concentrates predominantly on Orientalism parented by Westerners both in colonial and postcolonial global vision, It is of utmost importance to appraise its long-term impact on the indigenous locutionary practices, emergence of indigenous subjectivity in constituting experience and perceptions in the given colonial and

Books. 1979. p. 3.

postcolonial discursive environment and production of indigenous history.

It all begins with the legitimated selective construction of the Western epistemology itself which allows orientalism also to be a selective construction. The Macaulayean intelligentsia in India, after its emergence under the spell of psychological colonialism,\textsuperscript{30} was considerably swayed by this orientalist worldview. Whether in the desired emancipatory locutionary endeavor and anti-colonial resistance or in its subservience, the orientalist worldview was the inevitable point of reference to this intelligentsia. Their response was substantially informed, if not totally predetermined, by this worldview. History was rewritten and culture, tradition and identities were reconceived by the local intelligentsia to match this worldview or to set a dialogue with it perceivably from a subdued position.

For instance, the orientalist preference for reading ancient scriptures in an authorial mode unmistakably informed the indigenous discursive practices from which contending perceptions of Indian tradition and national-cultural identity emerged. Invariably, these constructions were selective administering internal marginalization within the colonial discursive economy of power. Since they bore

\textsuperscript{30} For a detailed discussion of this colonial phenomenon in a different context, see Fanon, Frantz. \textit{Black Skin White Masks}. New York: Grove Press. 1967.
the signature of power, they were also subjectively thought to be legitimate. With this authentication of selectivity as a legitimated mode of inquiry, endless claims and counter-claims of legitimacy of different histories and identities were inevitable in a heterogeneous society of South Asia.

Initially, certain perceptions and histories attained centrality constituting their own margins of experience. But within the mode of selectivity, monocentrism of perceptions instantly came to be interrogated creating a situation where all colonial experiences were uncentered. This decentering and pluralism of experiences could be made possible only in creative articulation of discourses since the state power was not at disposal of any perception claiming centrality. All such discourses were in a sense counter-discourses contending with each other and also with colonial power, in the later case, of course, with discernible constraints.

The result was proliferation of identities and histories. The received notion of historiography which canonized and molded this colonial history was carried over to postcoloniality with a significant impact on cognitive constitution and an insuperable predicament for the postcolonial nation-states. Politics of identities in postcolonial societies was thus sired by orientalism which in turn owes its origin to the Cartesian "I."
Postmodernism, Cartesian 'I' and Postcoloniality

Many in the West have taken on this Cartesian "I" and the selective construction of history. Hayden White enlists European thinkers like Valery, Heidegger, Sartre, Levi-Strauss, and Foucault for their remarkable skepticism about the objectivity of historical consciousness. Most notable among them is perhaps Michel Foucault. Foucault, while recounting the knowledge of 'madness,' 'sexuality,' 'delinquency' and 'punishment' has shown how this "I," from the vantage position of power in Western epistemology, has continually regenerated itself each time with added authenticity, amidst the production of numerous marginalizable Others. What "I" enunciates becomes 'knowledge,' what "I" does becomes the 'history of mankind.' On the margin of this "I"-initiated story of mankind is the anguished presence of the Other primarily to fulfil the self-definition of the "I." Such a history deserves scrutiny. As Harootunian observes, attributing Foucault and


Bakhtin, "Any consideration of the status of the Other...invariably calls into question the construction of narrative itself as the privileged story line of subjectivity and the unfolding of consciousness in time."\textsuperscript{33} History thus seen critically is plunged into what Jameson called "the crisis of historicity itself."\textsuperscript{34} What is passed in the name of history is a philosophy of history drawn straight from the Enlightenment tradition.

Foucault tries to steer history out of its present crisis of the logos by his efforts to recover the marginal from the crevices of history. He first named this mode of enquiry archeology and then changed to genealogy although the titles of some of his books retained the word 'history.' One step ahead of Foucault in positing the impossibility of history and indeed in critiquing Foucault for his intellectual enterprise in recovering history, Derrida observes:

A history, that is an archeology against reason doubtless cannot be written, for, despite all appearances to the contrary, the concept of history has always been a rational one. It is the meaning of 'history' or archia that should have been questioned


first, perhaps. A writing that exceeds, by questioning them, the values 'origin', 'reason', and 'history' could not be contained within the metaphysical closure of an archeology.35

In spite of differences regarding the possibility of history, the unquestionable common ground for Derrida and Foucault is the recognition of the ahistoricity of the given history. Derrida's position, more than Foucault's, elicits a caustic reaction even from other critical perspectives. Terry Eagleton calls it with contempt "a liquidation of history."36 Ernest Gellner deriding Derrida's privileging of silence, comments:

Strictly speaking, the rest should (logically) be silence. But postmodernists do publish, sometimes quite a lot, and have evidently not brought themselves to embrace fully this logical corollary of their depth. But perhaps there are some really good postmodernists who in fact do not publish at all? Ex Hypothesi, a really good one would be silent. Perhaps some real genius of postmodernism will one day persuade us to admire his uniquely deep silence, rather like the


avant-garde painter who secures admiration for a canvas which he simply covers with uniform black paint.\textsuperscript{37}

People may have reasonable doubt about how revealing these acrimonious and sarcastic writings are of the lacunae of postmodernism. Besides, they do not, in any way, exonerate the known epistemology, and for that matter, the teleology of human history, from Western subjectivity, the basic anxiety posited by postmodernism. When Agnes Heller tries to make a case for history, she does so not exactly by confronting the postmodernist challenge, rather by urging accommodation. Because, she thinks what has been handed over to us from the past is ineluctable.\textsuperscript{38}

These intellectual discoveries are, however, fairly recent to offset considerably the notion of history inherited from colonialism which is still prevalent and dominant in the postcolonial societies. But if Western episteme is under serious interrogation in the West, there is every reason to interrogate also the histories of the colonial and postcolonial societies, the primary constitutive element of which is this Western episteme. Intellectual propensities are already visible, quite significantly in India, in raising these questions. The


issue in the present context is whether postmodernism, the theoretical perspective most critical of this episteme, is useful in comprehending the phenomenon of pre-ordained telos of postcoloniality.

Said's seminal work *Orientalism* would be a very good example in this connection. In spite of Said's discernible anxiety for authorial authenticity among his occidental audience and his anchoredness in occidental knowledge predominantly of the Enlightenment tradition, *Orientalism* becomes an extraordinarily significant work primarily because of the perceptual tools he uses in his analysis, apart from the strenuous empirical work he does. These are: orientalism as a discourse generated from the epistemic perspective of the West, signature of power inscribed on this discourse, and the mutually authenticating relationship between discourse and power. Notably, Said, in spite of his difference with Foucault on the question of agency, has borrowed the notions of power and discourse from Foucault.39

Foucault's exploration in the margins of selfhood in Western epistemology has opened up the possibility for inquiring into the mode of the construction of alterity in various settings. The relative conspicuity of such construction in the colonial and postcolonial societies makes it even more germane to probe into the usefulness of

this mode of inquiry. Though not fully overlapping, some
significant studies on South Asia are already in place which
adapt to the critique of Western historicism of the post-
Enlightenment era. One good example is the *Subaltern*
*Studies*. David Arnold's 'Touching the Body: Perspectives on
the Indian Plague, 1896-1900' is explicitly a Foucauldian
reading of Indian plague.40 Partha Chatterjee, in 'More on
Modes of Power and the Peasantry,' is not fully convinced of
the direct and total replicability of the Foucauldian notion
of the capillary form of existence of power, as it exists in
Western capitalism, in the setting of India where the older
modes of the operation of power are still prevalent. But he
does enter a dialogue with this notion which is unmistakably
suggestive of what provokes in him the urge for
investigation into the mode of power.41 *Subaltern Studies*
also interrogate the authorial subjectivity in colonial
historical writings and are skeptical about the role of
historical subjects (such as leaders) as the sole agents of
change, which has long been favored by mainstream historical
narratives.42

40 Guha, Ranajit and Gayatri C. Spivak eds. *Selected

41 Ibid. pp. 389-90.

42 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, though somewhat critical
about certain failures of the subaltern studies and their
essentialist trends at occasions, maps the strands of
deconstructive elements in these studies in ‘Subaltern
Studies: Deconstructing Historiography.’ See Guha,
Similarly, authors of postcolonial South Asian societies like Peter van der Veer, Jayant Lele, Sheldon Pollock, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Vinay Dharwadker, David Lelyveld, Rosane Rocher, David Ludden, Nicholas B. Dirks and Arjun Appadurai who have opened up a new vista in the comprehension of South Asia are quite responsive to postmodernist notions of discourse, power, and knowledge.\textsuperscript{43} Clearly, it is the interpretation of the postcolonial context with enunciatory provenance in these notions that make their studies remarkably different - and significant too. That Western knowledge is still the indelible point of reference is itself a postcolonial predicament, as it may appear when sighted from the extreme position of intellectual xenophobia.

But Postmodern critique as a reference point in this particular case has an emancipatory dimension too, attested by the recurrent return of these authors to this new mode of inquiry. No matter how adversarial some of these authors are, they, by no means, negate the interpretative potential of these notions completely. Rather they push the limits to make them more accommodative of the possibility of interpretation of the colonial and postcolonial societies.

Endeavor is there to make Foucault more useful in the context of post-colonial societies. This is being explored from the perspectives of gender, race, class and culture in order to call our attention to the nature of domination, constitution of alterity, possibility of resistance, and to open up spaces for the emergence of polyvocality. So can be done, perhaps more relevantly and urgently, from the perspective of postcoloniality for its unmistakable converging point with postmodernism in the critique of the West as the birth place of knowledge and power.

Understandably, the postcolonial discursive trajectory will not be singularly determined by the Foucauldian notions. It has to be substantively and primarily informed by its own context. And Postmodernism is definitely useful in understanding the dominant mode of power constituted in the locutionary practices. It is also useful in understanding mode of knowing presently in circulation in the postcolonial societies.

Another major anxiety in regard to the use of the postmodernist notion of history, particularly in the case of postcolonial nation-states, is its stance of endless critique and its privileging of polyvocality which accord legitimacy to multiple identities. Kumkum Sangari writes:

...the postmodern problematic becomes the frame through which the cultural products of the rest of the world are seen... The writing that emerges from this position, however critical it may be of colonial
discourses, gloomily disempowers the 'nation' as an enabling idea and relocates the impulses for change as everywhere and nowhere. 44

The question is: is there any moment in history at which a nation can be essentialized? What was British India was divided into Pakistan and India which later gave rise to three nation-states: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. If the process continues, the cartography of the subcontinent will have to accommodate a few more new states like Kashmir, Khalistan, Assam, Gurkhaland, Sind, Pakhtunistan, Chittagong Hill Tracts and eventually numerous others. There is no universal moral space from which an assertion of an imagined identity can be argued for and the other can be dismissed. But perception of multiple identities is not in itself the problem. The problem is its assertion in disclaiming the 'nation.' To the displeasure of many who intend to essentialize the given nation-state, the renunciation of the given silhouette of the nation in the postcolonial societies is an inescapable phenomenon as long as the agonistic imaginings are possible. And given the predicament of present historiography, such imaginings are almost inevitable. This abjuration of the nation is, as we have discussed before, the denouement of subjective imagining of

---

the nation bolstered by selective construction of history, a legacy of the nature of anticolonial resistance which is exacerbated later by domination, coercion and dismissal of the difference already perceived by the fragments of the populace of the given nation state. The problem is already there. Postmodern critique of history only helps us understand it and does it in a very useful way. The stance here is neither for nor against the nation-state. It is rather a depiction of the predicament of the logic of the nation-state which works against itself. The nation-state can exist only by accommodating the diversity of perceptions of identities. But for this to happen, each contentious identity, making a claim to a separate state, needs to be stripped of its essentialist content including the present nation-state itself. Postmodern consciousness of history, thus in fact, might be empowering for the nation-state too. It de-essentializes all imaginations of identity. The rest of the dissertation, from an anti-essentialist perspective, takes on these subjective imaginings and the consequent predicament of the nation states in the case of divided Bengal.
Section Two
The Present Kaleidoscope of Identities in Divided Bengal
CHAPTER TWO

An Elegy for the Broken Self:
Reliving the Past in West Bengal

"Can two Bengals be united again?" was the question raised by a prestigious Calcutta weekly journal.¹ Four eminent scholars of West Bengal were to respond. Curiously, the responses were not only the intellectual renditions of the issue. Eventually, they were also found to resonate the popular opinion in this regard. In view of this, it is important that we draw a map of the prevalent discursive environment in West Bengal which makes the presence of these opinions comfortable. In this chapter, we’ll probe into the popular and intellectual sentiments regarding Bangladesh, the Muslims both in Bangladesh and West Bengal, the partition, the role played by selective construction of history in forging these perception and their overall relation to the state politics. We can begin with the responses to the question posed earlier.

Can Two Bengals Be United Again?

At least one of the four respondents once earned eminence for his expressed agonies over the partition of

Bengal in 1947. Annada Shankar Roy indeed became famous for these legendary lines of his poetic expression:

You’re mad at the little girl
For breaking the flagon of oil.
When you the old boys rend the country,
Then what?

Immanent in this exasperated expression was an agony that could easily touch the souls of the people who for intelligible reasons looked upon themselves as the victims of partition. The complaint against the politicians who conceded to the amputation of India constituted the dominant mood of politics. And the poem resonated that rancor.

After four decades of Partition, when Roy was again asked whether he would like to see a united Bengal, he came up rather with a carefully worded response bereft of any enthusiasm for united Bengal. He said:

Instead of imagining with whom West Bengal will unite if it secedes from India, let’s hope that it will never secede. The perception of Indian nationalism which liberated India was very strong in West Bengal, indeed, stronger than in other provinces... West Bengal will never want to secede. But if there is an imbroglio all around the country, and if Delhi fails to manage it, then there is a possibility that India might disintegrate. In such a case, West Bengal may secede from India and slam the corridor to other seven states including Assam which will also secede. Then a federation of states can be formed under the leadership
of West Bengal. But not with Bangladesh (emphasis mine).²

This total dismissal of any possibility of reunion with Bangladesh from a front line Bengali intellectual in West Bengal, especially from Annada Shankar, comes, in the first instance, as a surprise. Annada Shankar, in numerous articles and letters written in the 1950s and 1960s, expressed that he was waiting for an auspicious moment when the Hindus and the Muslims on both sides of partitioned Bengal would relinquish the animosity and rewrite the history of Bengal.³ And now he vocalizes his disapproval of a unity with Bangladesh not from an allegiance to the nation-state, inasmuch as he doesn't rule out the possibility of West Bengal's secession from India, but indeed from the perception of Bangladesh which is indelibly inscribed as the other. This perception of alterity is so strong that it overshadows the claim of common Bangalitva (Bengaliness) of the Hindus and the Muslims as a nation. He acknowledges the fact that there is a common culture in two Bengals. But then he also makes a case for the differences in identities constituted both politically and in terms of religion over the years which, he thinks, are insuperable

² Ibid. p. 150.
impediments to unification. The Bengali Muslims in Bangladesh, according to him, will never desire to be a part of the Delhi administration, and the Bengali Hindus in West Bengal will never agree to cast off their identity as Indians, unlike the peoples in some parts of India, at least in the foreseeable future. Discernibly, the change in Annada Shankar’s perceptual trajectory over the decades is influenced by the perceived change in the discursive environment. Reunion of two Bengals is no longer a choice to him. Obviously, there could be two tenors of imaginings, each equally historicizable - one on the basis of common Bangalitva, the other on the basis of the religious difference between the Hindus and the Muslims. In the given discursive environment largely informed by the historicization of the religious difference continually reminded by the partition, even Annada Shankar can’t but think of political-cultural identity except in terms of religion.

Pabitra Kumar Ghosh, another respondent to the same set of questions and an eminent Bengali intellectual in West Bengal, begins with an agony over the marginality of the Bengalis in the Indian state, but then recognizes the impossibility of merger of two Bengals. Tracing briefly the historical background of the partition, he contended:

If a proposition for independent, united and sovereign Bengal is resuscitated, there will be no response from either Bengal. The educationists and intellectuals of
Bangladesh are enjoying the privileges of an independent state. They have substantial employment opportunities at seven universities, numerous schools and colleges, public administration, private trades and business, overseas embassies, United Nations, World Bank etc. In literature, they don’t have to compete with the writers of West Bengal. Even the secular Muslim intelligentsia of Bangladesh would now recognize that the practical reasons advanced by the Muslim League for creation of a separate Muslim state were not negligible.

On the other hand, the Bengali Hindus of West Bengal would by no means want to break off with India. From time immemorial, we are a part of Indian civilization... Any call for secession from India doesn’t stir our minds.4

What is implicit in Annada Shankar’s response is perhaps more discernible in Pabitra Kumar Ghosh’s exposition. The perceptions of identity are largely informed by the estimation of what discourses advance the self-interest of the people and what enables them to approach power, of course within the historically constituted range of choices. But Ghosh’s observation is only partial in identifying the concern for such self-interest and power among the enlightened Muslims of Bangladesh. Conversely, he attributes the repugnance of the Bengali Hindus to secession from India and unification with Bangladesh to their inextricable attachment to the heritage of Indian

civilization. Again here, a subjective historicity is invoked as to who is a "part of Indian civilization" and who is not. Obviously, to Ghosh, the Bengali Muslims of Bangladesh are not a claimant to this civilization.

Contrary to the psychological attachment of the Bengali Hindus to India, Dr. Atul Sur, another respondent, advanced some practical reasons, as he perceived them, for this repulsion. Sur's response almost resonates with the Hindu hard line position:

The situation in other Bengal (Bangladesh) on the basis of which some people expected that two Bengals should be united has changed since 1947. There was an exodus of the Hindus from that Bengal to this Bengal. Those who stayed back felt utterly defenseless and vulnerable. If the state in other Bengal were secular instead of being "Islamic," people of all communities would have a sense of security. Presently, the Hindus of other Bengal, perhaps, would welcome a reunion with this Bengal. But the Muslims of that Bengal won't want a unification with a secular state. Therefore, other Bengal, being an avowed Muslim state will never have the desire for reunion.

For understandable reasons, we also don't want a reunion of two Bengals now. Because, this is not the year 1947, this is 1987. There have been a lot of changes in the intervening period. Today, the socio-economic conditions and the differential rates of population growth in two Bengals are counter-suggestive of unification... At the time of partition, West Bengal was industrialized and East Bengal was agrarian. Because of this difference, immediately after partition, we had a scarcity of raw materials and food
crops. Therefore, the economic considerations prodded the thought of unification. But this situation has changed with the differential rates of population growth. East Bengal, once called the granary of Bengal, has lost its opulence for tremendous increase in population... Therefore, the economic reasons for which we wanted unification at the time of partition are completely absent now.

Let's look at the social situation now. Presently, Bangladesh is an Islamic state. According to Islamic shariah, there is no restriction to taking more than one wife. Besides, remarriage of widows is also a common practice among the Muslims. Because of these practices, birth rate per thousand population in Bangladesh is much higher than in West Bengal. According to the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, polygyny is restricted in West Bengal. Remarriage of widows is also not a common practice here. Besides, success of the sterilization methods under the family welfare programs in West Bengal has contained the population growth. Therefore, if two Bengals are united, Muslim population in India will once become equal to that of the Hindus or even exceed it.\(^5\)

Sur observes that India is already envisaged with an insuperable problem due to the "ever-increasing Muslim population." He is against fomenting it by adding the Muslim population of Bangladesh. These three responses in combination also focus partially, though not with an adequate answer, on an intriguing question - why in West

\(^5\) Ibid. pp. 155-56.
Bengal, unlike in some other states of India, is a separate imagining of the nation opposed to the Indian identity absent?

In seeking an answer to this intricate question one perhaps needs to look into the history of the gloried self-image of the Bengalis as Indians. The Bengalis were the first "enlightened" people in British India and the largest consumers of "trickle-down authority" under colonial rule. On the other hand, it was also the site from where a strong anticolonial resistance was launched at the discursive level. Indeed, Calcutta was the seedbed of Indian nationalism. Since then Indianness has remained inextricably tied to the self-identity of the Bengalis. To part with Indianness is to part with the self sired by themselves and to part with the glory and reverence the Bengalis enjoy all over India for their achievements. Gokhale's ultimate acclaim that what Bengal thinks today, the rest of India thinks tomorrow is still the oft-quoted phrase by the Bengalis in asserting their gloried intellectual self-image and their edge over other Indians. Calcutta, which was once the capital of British India, is still considered by the Bengalis the cultural capital of India. The larger the country, the larger is the glory of this self-image.6

6 From the economic point of view, there are, however, strong resentments too in West Bengal regarding the negligence of the central government. But this resentment has never gone to the extent of mobilizing people's alternative perception of identity for
This allegiance to Indian identity is to some extent also attributable to the partition syndrome. Bengal had a devastating experience of partition comparable with no other state of India except the Punjab. This partition has prevailed since 1947 as an invincible reality in West Bengal not only at the territorial level, but also at the psychological level. The logical tenor for a secessionist movement in the name of a linguistic-cultural Bengali identity would be, as one can easily assume, a desire for reunion with the other part of Bengal. But such reunion would also mean the political dominance of the Muslim majority in Bengal, as was the case during the pre-partition period. Given the history of the subcontinent constituted around essentialized religious identities and the carnage that followed from such a perception, this is not considered to be a choice to the Bengali Hindus of West Bengal. It is curious to see that although the question asked of these prominent intellectuals was whether two Bengals could be united again, the responses unmistakably concentrated on whether the two religious communities could be united. Obvious in this perception are the constructions of West Bengal as Hindu Bengal and Bangladesh as Muslim Bengal.

Indeed, there was move for independent united Bengal in the last days of the British rule. See Chapter 6.

75
History is only selectively constructed to authenticate this perception which suggests that West Bengal is much better off in India.

Evidently, there is a stereotyped notion about the Muslims in Bangladesh, who are by no means homogeneous in their perceptions of identity or their fortitude to withstand unification in the name of separate religious identities. It is obvious in these responses that the constructed parameter of religious identities that once defined the territories of the states in 1947 is accepted, legitimated and bulwarked in the minds of these West Bengal intellectuals. This attitude is buttressed by some added rationale which, we will see soon, are produced and/or reaffirmed rather selectively within the political discourses. While Sur recognizes that this was 1987, not 1947, perhaps, he doesn't take cognizance of the itinerary of changing perception of identity in East Bengal during the same time. It is true that many in East Bengal probably won't be quite enthused about unification with India due to various reasons. But it is also true that Bangladesh seceded from Pakistan on the basis of the renunciation of religious identity. The secular identity born in the liberation struggle of the country still continues to assert itself in the political arena quite strongly. The political discourses in West Bengal inclined to essentialize the difference in terms of religion obviously assess this secular trend of
politics in Bangladesh as relatively unimportant. Instead, among other things, the alterity of the Muslims of India constituted in the domain of communalist politics also comes to inform the image of the Muslims of Bangladesh as unmistakably evident from Sur’s response.

Bangladesh, the Muslims, and the Partition: 
Perceptions in West Bengal

To perceive the construction of the image of Bangladesh and assignation of the inviolable religious identity to its people, one also has to look at other historical facts that get preeminence in such construction and their representation in the socio-political discourse in West Bengal. The perception of Bangladesh and its people in West Bengal is most prominently, if not singularly, informed by the fact of on-going mass exodus of the Hindus from Bangladesh to India even in the 1990s, and most recently by the recurrence of communal riots and destruction of temples in Bangladesh. Extensive literary and media representation of the social and political problems created by the influx of Hindus from Bangladesh, reports of communal riots, looting, arson, abduction of Hindu women tend to shroud other aspects of Bangladesh history in the minds of the West Bengal people. The language movement of 1952, the secular nationalist upsurge of the 1960s, the successful liberation
struggle of 1971 that spurned religious identity, the wholehearted support of the people of West Bengal during that liberation struggle and the euphoria about Bangladesh for about two years after 1971 expressed in innumerable media representations - all get effaced or jostled to the inconsequential margin of history and of popular discourses. All that is constructed is an image of malevolent exteriority. 8

One example of this representation is a widely-talked about article written by Sabyasachi Ghoshdastidar and published in a prestigious Calcutta weekly magazine with a

---

8 The eclipsed history and a positive image of the Muslims of Bangladesh are, however, sometimes retrieved in another context with a different political intent. On January 5, 1993, one Sudipta Roy wrote in the letters-to-the-editor column of the Ananda Bazar Patrika:

The Bengalis of Bangladesh launched the language movement in 1952 and liberation struggle in 1971. As a Bengali, I'm also proud of these. But the question arises: if they could go so far, why have the Muslims in this Bengal not been able to trace their own true history. 'India or West Bengal is for the Hindus, nothing here is ours(?)' - this inferiority complex is perhaps the reason... Bangladeshis embraced Bangla long ago. Fundamentalism is no less active there. They could have accepted Urdu in 1952... Actually, Bangladeshis love their mother-tongue. Love for mother-tongue of the Muslims in this Bengal is negligible.
wide circulation in Bangladesh too at that time.\(^9\)

Ghoshdastidar writes:

We all know that Hindu-Muslim riot has become a part of Bengal politics since the first partitioning of Bengal in 1905. Its consequence was the 'Great Calcutta Killing' followed by a genocide in Noakhali (According to official records, 7,000 people were killed in Noakhali). And since 1947, killing of Hindus in Bangladesh (then East Pakistan) has been a recurrent phenomenon...

When asked about their reticence about the persecution of the minority Hindus and their relatives in Bangladesh, people of Calcutta generally cite two reasons. First, the principle of 'not poking the nose' into the affairs of another state. Secondly, they say,"It would exacerbate the situation of the Hindus in Bangladesh further." We don't know how worse it could be than the exodus of twenty million people (with the new generation it comes to twenty five million), killing of few thousand people and death of many others due to diseases and hunger at the refugee camps, Sealdah station, Dandakaranya and the Andamans.

In a bulk of writings of this kind, memory of the partition is recalled and relived. When memory comes to govern the political perception, it also looks for a continued rationale for the political act of physical

---

\(^9\) Ghoshdastidar, Sabyasachi. "Oi Bangla, Ei Bangla." Desh. August 19, 1989. pp. 63-69. Since 1992, the magazine has been banned in Bangladesh for an article by Nirad C. Chaudhuri, a renowned eccentric Bengali writer living in Oxford, where he mentioned Bangladesh as 'so-called' Bangladesh.
withdrawal from a territory perceived as hostile which was once necessitated by the compulsive sense of nothing-can-be-done-about-it. The loss of the territory is still so tormenting that a renewal of justification for the escape is always called upon. Rationale is thus derived from a perceived continuity of the situation.

But such popular discourses of memory pervade more at the interpersonal levels, and curiously, the images of the other created thus remain confined mainly to the definition of the self mostly at the personal level and do not order the dominant macro-political discourses in West Bengal in any significant way around such perception. This political nonchalance is the result of a perception of inconsequential marginality of Bangladesh as far as India is concerned, and a pervasive belief in cultural superiority of predominantly Hindu West Bengal over predominantly Muslim Bangladesh which keeps the cultural landscape also secure. Besides, partition and the history before it, reminisced as "the dominance of Muslim majority," has also effectuated a considerable psychological disjunction. The constitution of the Muslims across the border as the Other is there mostly to define the exteriority, but not with enough importance to substantively inform the internal politics of West Bengal.

Ghoshdastidar reprimands the Bengalis of West Bengal, particularly the well-placed and influential immigrants from present Bangladesh rather intensely and passionately for
their reluctance in acting against this 'minority repression' in Bangladesh or at least, protesting against it. But other anxieties of these immigrants from East Bengal and their other political-cultural priorities claim more attention than their political action against oppression in Bangladesh. Although they relive their memories quite often, the pervasive feeling of nothing-can-be-done is still there. Besides, the present takes over the past. The struggles of life of the Bengalis born in West Bengal and those who came as refugees are discernibly dissimilar. And the anxiety for cultural acceptance in West Bengal society was also quite manifest up to a certain time. Understandably, there was a strong urge to repudiate at least the psychological

10 In West Bengal, the migrants from East Bengal are called Bangals. Initially, especially in the pre-partition period, the term also used to carry an ignominious connotation as 'unpolished,' 'not adapted to the expected manners in cosmopolitan Calcutta,' 'not able to speak shuddha (standard) Bangla.' But this sociology of the word has largely changed in keeping with the changes in the political representation of the Bangals as the victims of partition. At least, they are not looked down upon. Sunil Gangopadhyay, one of the most celebrated litterateurs, who also happens to be a Bangal, makes a complimentary comment on the sexual prowess of the Bangals in his first novel Atmaprakash. Bhanu Bandopadhyay, the comedian per excellence of West Bengal movies, also a Bangal from Dhaka, has numerous comic records produced over a long period of time and widely played in all over West Bengal. In these comics, Bhanu makes a queer use of an East Bengal dialect. There was a fascinating change both in the contents of the texts of the comics and the social perception of these texts. The fun of listening to an East Bengal dialect in these comics gradually turns into a celebration of the identity represented in them.
displacement which, they thought, would make life in the new territory a bit easier. To act politically against the continuing persecution of the Hindus in Bangladesh, for whom they have, no doubt, all the sympathy, is perceived still to identify themselves with the Bangals and jeopardize their newly acquired identity.

Ghoshdastidar goes on to explode the myth of communal harmony presented generally in the narratives of the short-term travel experiences in Bangladesh of some influential Bengalis from West Bengal. Their representation of reality stemming from selective encounters with it doesn’t narrativize the comprehensive picture. Ghoshdastidar cites an example of a photograph of a Bangladeshi Hindu wearing dhoti printed in a Calcutta daily along with a serialized account of the travel experiences of a highly-esteemed West Bengal politician who visited his desh (own country) after a few decades.11 Understandably, this begets the impression that a lot of Hindus in Bangladesh wear dhoti. Ghoshdastidar asserts that "the Bangladeshis, especially the Hindus there know how incongruent this depiction is with the reality."12 He mentions, according to police record, only in 1988, about 125,000 Hindus haven’t gone back to Bangladesh who entered

India legally with visa, not to mention many more illegal entrants about whom police doesn’t have any record.\textsuperscript{13}

Concern and empathy for the Hindus in Bangladesh have always been significant part of popular discourses in West Bengal at all levels. This has recently been more evident in the incredible popularity of Taslima Nasrin’s novel \textit{Lajja} (Shame) in West Bengal which, although generated an unprecedented controversy,\textsuperscript{14} depicts the plights of a Hindu family in Bangladesh at the time of communal riots immediately following the Babri mosque incident along with factual statistics about deliberate discrimination against the Hindus in Bangladesh. With all these, religion still remains the great divide as it was in 1947.

Reliving the memory is also aided by numerous literary works – novels, short stories, dramas, poems – emanating from West Bengal. Influx of the Hindus is such an overwhelming socio-political reality that the conscientious litterateurs cannot but address this issue in their writings. Besides, many of the illustrious writers of West Bengal are themselves immigrants from East Bengal, kindled by their own experiences of partition and its aftermath.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid. pp. 66 and 68.

\textsuperscript{14} Nasrin is a Bangladeshi feminist and anti-fundamentalist writer. \textit{Lajja} has been banned in Bangladesh. Islamic fundamentalists have recently declared a price on Nasrin’s head which has earned her a Rushdie-like fame. The fundamentalists and the Bangladesh government have lately however denied that any such price has been declared.
Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay, one of the most popular novelists of West Bengal, makes reference to his childhood in Mymensingh and verbalizes his agonizing experiences as a young refugee boy in West Bengal in a number of novels. Samaresh Bose, in his short story Adab, with which he made his debut in the Bengali literary world, presents a vibrant description of the combined survival efforts of two persons transgressing their different religious identities in a situation of riot in Dhaka in the pre-partition era.\(^{15}\)

Narayan Gangopadhyay, in his short story, Simanta, set in an East Bengal village, presents a Muslim character Jikaria who pesters a Hindu girl. The same character says, "There is no property of the Hindus in Pakistan. It’s all Musalmans’."\(^{16}\) Achintya Kumar Sengupta’s famous poem Udbastu (Destitute) written in 1965 describes the tormenting moment of a Hindu family leaving East Bengal.\(^{17}\) Hemanga Bishwas, in his songs ‘Bhanga Banglar tar chhera baul’, ‘Habigonjer jalali koitor’, ‘Padma kao, kao amare’, or ‘Mon kandere Padmar charer laigya’, all set in folk lyrics, reminisces the lost territory with seamless pain.\(^{18}\) Although most of these

---


literary works allude to the period before the inception of Bangladesh, the temporal constraint of their appeal is transgressed due to the fact of continuing mass migration of the Hindus from Bangladesh as known from the media portrayals. Although many of these literary works do not (definitely not the ones mentioned above) contrive to foment communal sentiment, and indeed present a humanist and anticommunal content, the recurring tropes and categories in such writings, no matter what the intent is, are 'partition', 'riot', 'exodus', 'refugee' and 'the lost country.' Such categories when combined with the media portrayal of continued persecution of the Hindus in Bangladesh and recently with the depiction in *Lajja*, retrieve the memory of partition and efface the history of political struggle in Bangladesh against religious identity during the intervening period.

The eclipse of history in these discourses, understandably, continues to regenerate the perceived borders, simplified dichotomies and exteriorities in the psychological landscape of the people in West Bengal. At one point, this amounts to a closure. Closure is reaffirmed by the long-standing perception of cultural superiority of the Hindus authenticated by the known history of uneven development of the two communities since the beginning of the colonial rule.
Buddhadeb Guha, a renowned poet of West Bengal was once asked by Hassan Ferdous, a journalist from Bangladesh in New York, what he thought of the writings of Shamsur Rahman, the most distinguished poet in Bangladesh. To the utter surprise of the journalist and of many people who read the news later, Guha said that he didn't have an opportunity to read Shamsur Rahman, but he is aware of Rahman's literary accomplishments. Closure takes the form of apathy, and sometimes condescension as evident in Pabitra Ghosh's remark that in divided Bengal, the litterateurs of East Bengal don't have to compete with those in West Bengal (obviously implying that such competition would have been tougher for them).

Aparna Sen, an illustrious film-star, on a visit to Bangladesh, was invited by Dr. Rehman Sobhan, one of the most renowned economists of the subcontinent. She couldn't get Rehman Sobhan's name correct in the travelogue she wrote later on her return to Calcutta in the magazine edited by herself. Nor could she write correctly the word Dawat, typically used by the Bengali Muslims for "invitation." Such carelessness and ignorance are again presumably bred in apathy.\textsuperscript{19} While there are some strenuous and pondered

\textsuperscript{19} Many people in Bangladesh, even those who are labelled as 'pro-Indians' by the Islamic fundamentalists for their pronounced belief in a common culture, find this apathy contemptuous, quite logically. As a result, lately a counter-discourse of apathy bred in rancor is in the offing in Bangladesh. Numerous articles, though mostly in the rightist newspapers, have been written
efforts in discursive inscription of a cultural contiguity between two Bengals, this apathy, cloaked in a sense of cultural superiority is perceivably pervasive among all strata of educated people in West Bengal. To many of them, Bangladesh history has retired into a long, irrecuperable hiatus since 1947. The popular construction of the image of the Bangladeshi Muslims hasn’t changed much since then. The brief period of the liberation struggle of Bangladesh in 1971 is an exception. But a reversion to the dominant perception took place within three years with the reincarnation of religion in Bangladesh politics.

Communalist Discourses in West Bengal

When the liberal discourses are fraught with the traces of agony, rancor and apathy, the communalist discourses, understandably, go much further. In addition to

in this regard in the last few years.

A middle-aged house-wife in Calcutta, while interviewed, expressed her astonishment at the fact that performers and newscasters of Bangladesh television can speak shuddha (pure) Bangla. Lutrunnessa, a Muslim student of Journalism at Calcutta University, when asked whether she ever intended to visit her relatives in Bangladesh, told that she was a bit dissuaded by the thought of what kind of people and language she would encounter if she went to Bangladesh.

This characterization is based on the fact they also oppose the conservative fundamentalist penchants in West Bengal quite believably.
the all-India issues like Ram Janam Bhumi in Ayodhya, alleged destruction of temples in Kashmir, atrocities of the Muslim rulers of the past, forcible proselytization, creation of Pakistan on the basis of a two-nation-theory and support of the Indian Muslims to that cause, and lately, the jubilation of some Indian Muslims when the Pakistani cricket team wins against India, they get a few more from Bangladesh, particularly to turmoil the politics in West Bengal where they need them badly. Although Hindu Maha Sabha was considerably strong under the leadership of Shyamaprasad Mukherjee around the time of the partition of Bengal in 1947, since then its influence on the Bengalis has progressively waned, more so after the takeover of the Left-front government. Its recent political reincarnation in Bharatiya Janata Party and its close political cohort Rastriya Shayamsevak Sangh (RSS) active since 1925, didn’t earn much credence among the Bengalis either. In fact, West Bengal was one of the few states in India which could justifiably exult in the absence of manifest communalism until the recent surge of communal riots all over India after the Babri Mosque incident which didn’t spare the city of Calcutta either.

But the political effort of the communalists to cash in on the empathy for the people of East Bengal was always

---

there. Such efforts gave rise to a genre of historiography, highly selective in collating historical facts and conspicuously marked with emotive elements. An example of such writing is thus:

On August 14, 1947, Hindu India was truncated to create a Muslim state, controversial Pakistan... That was the day of ineffable grief and despondency in Bengal and Punjab. Hindu India achieved the glory of independence. And the Hindus of two-thirds of Bengal lost the thousand-year-old glorious tradition of their ancestors, lost their birth right, national identity, their world-wide credential as Indians. Liberated from the British rule, the became the Hindu citizens of a Muslim state. According to the will of the majority community of Pakistan they had to accept a national identity - 'Pakistani' or 'the minorities of Pakistan.' Is this the independence, is this the new nationality for which thousands of youths of East Bengal sacrificed their lives? Binoy Bose, Ullas Kar, Masterda (Surya Sen), Pritilata - did they struggle for this liberation of their compatriots? Congress, that day, accepted the independence of amputated India from the British depriving 15 million Bengali patriots.23

Such writings sometimes provide a harrowing picture of communal riots in East Bengal:

One of the gruesome carnages of 1950 took place at the Bhairab Bridge. The big railway bridge on the river Meghna in the district of Mymensingh was chosen as the killing field. The killers waited on the bridge in the

---

darkness of night. Thousands of destitute Hindus from the riot-stricken areas left their homes in quest of a safer shelter. Every train was stopped at a particular place. Every person was dragged down. The Hindus were singled out, killed and thrown into the streaming water of Meghna. Even the traces of sin were streamed away. The narratives of this kind are replete with numerous episodes of killing, extortion of money and property, abduction of Hindu women etc. The most common element in these accounts is stories of abduction of Hindu women. One such account produces a general picture:

Apart from constant threat to life and property, the most distressing news ticking down from the border is the spate of conversions. Of late, this problem has assumed large proportions. Conversions fall under two categories; firstly, young Hindu girls are being kidnapped and forced to marry Muslim boys. In this case, the modus operandi is that a Muslim boy of the locality straightaway goes to the father of the girl, addresses him as Chacha, and says: "I want to marry your daughter". When the father refuses, he is threatened with dire consequences. The girl is kidnapped. When this is reported to the nearest Thana, the police not only refuse to register the FIR or delay it, but also counsel the father that there is nothing

---

wrong in the honourable proposal. And finally when a
dadherer succeeds in taking the matter to court, proving
his daughter to be minor, the magistrate remands the
girl to police custody. Eventually, when the case comes
up for hearing after about a year or so, the girl is
found to be pregnant. Obviously, the girl prefers to
embrace rather than be disgraced by her own kith and
kin and above all the caste-ridden Hindu society.25

Irrespective of how much of these stories are true,
this historiography has a different objective. It obviously
attempts to reorganize the moral-political space around the
sentiment of partition and deploy a different order of
politics set to the advantage of the communalists. The
endeavor is to reorient people's political consciousness and
reconstitute the subjects, the recipients of this history,
who at one point, would find it legitimate to relocate their
political morals only in the domain of religious sentiment
transgressing the confines of history which is presumably
fraught with other possible interpretations26 and act


26 Undoing the known history can sometimes be a
progressive political stance, as the postmodernists
always do. But in the case of the communalists, it
is conspicuously regressive. Deployment of
sentiment and a subjectively constructed tradition
as modes of historiography and political discourse
here cannot be mistaken for resistance to
modernity. Rather the communalists do politics
within the designated space of modernity and aspire
for everything modernity can deliver. They intend
to situate politics in the space of belief and
sentiment where they are not subjected to any
(continued...)

91
politically accordingly. This idiom of politics is not so much directed to 'correcting' external exteriority as it is to constituting an exteriority inside and doing politics in this self-designated advantageous political terrain. The Muslims - not of Bangladesh, but of India - are redefined as the others in the process. What works behind all these discursive formations is a desire for power. Only a redefined and legitimated self born out of this dichotomy can deliver this power.

The Legacy of Colonial Historiography

While on the one hand, communalist narratives glean legitimacy from the moral sentiment of the people, on the other, they derive incentive from the well-accepted practices of historical writings in Bengal. The appearance of this ahistoric historiography is neither accidental nor something which has been seriously interrogated for authenticity until lately and has been in circulation for rational interrogation. The stance comes not from an opposition to Enlightenment rationality, rather from a surreptitious acceptance of this rationality and the perceived vulnerability of belief to any rational interrogation. Therefore, the attempt is to segregate the domains of reason and belief and situate politics in the domain of belief which would reconfigure power to their advantage. Power, the way they perceive it, is also a modernist category. The same is true about the fundamentalists in Bangladesh.
more than a century. Indeed, these writings are the offshoots of the mainstream historiography in India which vertically divides the identity of the Bengalis along the religious line. Obviously, the mainstream historiography was greatly influenced by the perception of India produced in the historical writings during the colonial period. Notable, among others, were James Mill’s *The History of British India*, completed in 1817 and Elphinstone’s *The History of India* (1841) with their different representations of India and its people which the subsequent nationalist historiographic practices had either to fight against or adopt as authentic.

But one thing is evident that this historiography was accepted as a model which conformed to the demands of modernity and rational perception of the past which instantly discarded a whole range of indigenous writings of the past generally passed on as historical writings. Now, even to counteract the ignominious construction of India, as in James Mill, the burgeoning nationalist historians had to be in dialogue with this colonial history, that too in terms of the perceived demand of modernity and rationality.

Beginning from Tarinicharan Chattopadhyay’s *Bharatbarser Itihas*, first written in 1858, down to the end

---

of twentieth century, all mainstream historians have followed more or less a similar model. For example, taxonomically, history of India is generally divided in three eras - the Hindu era, the Muslim era and the British era. Even when these eras are named as ancient, medieval and modern eras, they are basically the same in terms of the contents and division of time. It may have some justification only when we look at Indian history from the perspective of who was in power in Delhi or in the place considered to be the center of power in India. Otherwise, especially when we look at Indian history from the perspective of social composition and changes in the mode of production and social structure, such division of time is found to be completely arbitrary and counter-factual.

Besides, Hinduism was never a homogeneous religious category. There was not even any universally accepted effort to make it so at the period labelled as Hindu era. Imposing the received notion of Hinduism which was born much later on an earlier period is, at its minimum, anti-historic. On the other hand, the transition from this 'Hindu era' to 'Muslim era' is also problematic. The year taken as a line of demarcation between these two eras is 1206 when the Turks established the sultanate in Delhi. It is true that there

---

were some visible changes in the mode of administration, and some marginal social reorientation because of the encounter with a different culture. But the magnitude of this transformation was largely insignificant compared to the importance it receives from this division of era. Ramsharan Sharma has shown that the changes attributed to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, have indeed their traces in the preceding five centuries.

But there can be another justification, which is perhaps more important, and that is the representation of the colonized who need to be produced in the historical narratives in a way that would justify the colonial intervention, the British rule in India - the distinction already being created in its non-religious designation as opposed to the Hindu rule and the Muslim rule. Early British historical writings on India were discernibly steered to that end. The audience for such historical writings in India being largely the burgeoning Hindu middle class and since legitimation was sought from them, a bias was in place, obscuring its real source and the real intention embedded in this history to present it as though it was seen through the eyes of the Hindus. The bias is explicit in the selection

---

29 Sharma, Ramsharan. 'Problem of Transition from Ancient to Medieval Indian History.' *Indian Historical Review.* March 1974. p. 9.
and the interpretation of 'historical facts' as evidenced in this passage from Henry Elliot: 

In Indian Histories there is little which enables us to penetrate below the glittering surface, and observe the practical operation of a despotic Government. . . . If, however, we turn our eyes to the present Muhammadan kingdoms of India, and examine the character of the princes, . . . we may fairly draw a parallel between ancient and modern times. . . We behold kings, even of our own creation, slunk in sloth and debauchery. . . . Had the authors whom we are compelled to consult, portrayed (sic) their Caesars with the fidelity of Suetonius, instead of more congenial sycophancy of Peterculus, we should not, as now, have to extort from unwilling witnesses, testimony to the truth of these assertions. . . . The few glimpses we have, even among the short Extracts in this single volume, of Hindus slain for disputing with Muhammadans, of general prohibitions against processions, worship, and ablutions, and of other intolerant measures, of idols mutilated, of temples razed, of forcible conversions and marriages, of proscriptions and confiscations, of murders and massacres, and of the sensuality and drunkenness of the tyrants who enjoined them, show us that the picture is not overcharged, and it is much to be regretted that we

---

are left to draw it for ourselves from out of the mass of ordinary occurrences.\footnote{The similarity between this narrative and the ones from the Hindu communalist historical writings of the post-partition period, as in Binoy Bhushan Ghosh quoted earlier, is striking.}

Clearly, according to this British historiography, people of India, i.e., the Hindus needed salvation from this 'libidinous despotism' and 'complete anarchy.' The 'inevitable' colonial intervention is thus justified. Concurrently, a Hindu perspective of history also emerged with due legitimacy at the very outset in which the 'Hindu period' came to be considered as 'the age of glory' and the 'Muslim period' was pictured as 'the age of decline.' "Dominating the chapters from the twelfth century onward in the nationalist history of India would be a stereotypical figure of 'the Muslim,' endowed with a 'national character': fanatical, bigoted, warlike, dissolute, and cruel."\footnote{Chatterjee. Op cit. 102. For details of the discursive construction of Indian nationhood and the representation of 'the Muslims' in nationalist history and Bengali literature, see chapter 4.} On the other hand, the Hindus have been portrayed as a race oppressed throughout the ages, most notably in the hands of the Muslim rulers. Communal strife thus became the determining category in historiography. As Gyanendra Pandey puts it:

The past is historical not only in the obvious sense that the past makes up history. It is historical also
in the sense that 'history' itself - the past recalled - is constructed. The modern history of India, in this sense, was first written in colonial times and by colonialists. It was colonialist writers who established the pattern of the Indian past pretty much as we know it today. And in that pattern, sectarian strife was an important motif.\(^{33}\)

The acclaimed Hindu Bengali historians of the twentieth century, for example, R.C. Majumdar, Pramathnath Banerjee, Rakhal Das Bondopadhyay, Binoy Kumar Sarkar, Upendranath Ghoshal, didn't find any reason to make any significant departure from this historiography. Rather, they found the communal line inviolable. Majumdar writes in a text book published by Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan in 1960:

> For the first time in Indian history, two distinct but important communities and cultures stood face to face, and India was permanently divided into two powerful units, each with marked individuality of its own, which did not prove amenable to a fusion or even any close permanent coordination.\(^{34}\)... Religion, which formed the very basis of culture and the key-note of life, both among the Muslims and the Hindus, kept them apart like the two poles. They differed fundamentally in their theological conception, method of worship, and everything connected with daily devotion to God. To the


Hindus, images and temples were the most sacred objects, but both of these were anathema to the Muslims. Their philosophical notions and sacred literature, their conception of heaven and hell, of this life and the next, in short the whole outlook of men and things lacked a common basis... The fact that the Muslims turned towards the west and the Hindus towards the East, while offering prayers or worship to God, though by itself of no great significance, very correctly symbolized the orientation of the two cultures."

In the whole volume, Majumdar goes on to chronicle the atrocities of the Muslim rulers on the Hindus. History thus derives its incentives from partisan perceptions and gets inextricably imbricated with the socially constructed and reified myths.

The Muslims in West Bengal: The Internal Others

The continuity of a specific construct of history as described above is not inevitable. The dominance of a particular interpretation is indeed the outcome of the continuity of a similar discursive environment and to some extent, is perpetrated by the nation-state itself, at its

35 Majumdar. Ibid. pp. 624-5.

own peril, within which the history is embedded and the historians are authorized. As this history persists, so does the perception of 'the Muslims', only reinforced with the addition of some more selectively collated facts from the recent past and the present.\textsuperscript{37} The primary ingredients derived from the recent past and the present in forging this perception are a) the 'questionable' patriotism of the Bengali Muslims in India stemming from the reminiscence of the role of the 'community' in advancing the cause of Pakistan during the pre-partition period (presently epitomized in, among other things, the jubilation in the Muslim areas of Calcutta at the victory of the Pakistani

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{37} Noticeably, the Muslims in West Bengal are generally called Musalman, as opposed to the Hindus being called Bangali. Clearly, the Muslims are disowned as Bengalis. While this distastation creates an agony and then a rancorous acceptance among the Muslims in West Bengal, it embarrasses the secularists in Bangladesh and provides legitimation to the disavowal of the Bengali identity by the fundamentalists in Bangladesh.}
cricket team against India\textsuperscript{38}); and b) 'persecution of the Hindus' in East Bengal.

In spite of a conscious effort from the state under the left-front government to liberate West Bengal from this idiom of politics and neutralize communal mode of identity construction, this penchant in mainstream historiography which is still largely in circulation and even taught in the class rooms,\textsuperscript{39} combined with the popular middle-class discourses, continues to attribute liminalities\textsuperscript{40} to the Muslims. More explicit and stereotypical attribution of liminality in the writing of a Bengali author is thus:

The vicious circle has certainly not yet stopped spinning. Given the external situation constituted by

\textsuperscript{38} This jubilation is like a mimetic feeling of \textit{deja vu}. Embedded in a pre-partition discursive environment where the construction of identity was predominantly communal, Pakistan was thought to be a rational choice. But now, to some Muslims, 'Pakistan' was like a territory aspired for, but never gained. In post-partition India, the environment for expression of this agony and demonstration of this identity were naturally constrained. But because of the alterity thrust upon them, Pakistan remains still alive. Therefore, when 'Pakistan' wins in cricket against India, in a sudden outburst of emotion, the suppressed identity comes to the fore. All of a sudden, it seems, as though the territorial and psychological confines have disappeared.

\textsuperscript{39} Chandra, Bipan. Op cit. 219-222.

\textsuperscript{40} Liminality refers to in-betweenness. In a positive way it means bringing the outside in contact with the inside. When the constituted 'outside' is considered malevolent, liminality acquires a negative connotation - the internal liminal group being the extension of the malevolent exteriority.
the triangle of Hindus, Pakistan and past history, Indian Muslims are unwilling or unable to cut their ties with Pakistan.41

Liminality is imposed in the name of the nation-state which demands complete allegiance to the given territory. To the Muslims, whose subjectivity in perceiving the nation-state has been constructed historically in the tangled discursive environment of communal politics, both in the past and in the present, the given territory of the nation-state was never unproblematic. Since the partition doesn't match their aspiration, and since a claim to any exclusive territory is impossible unlike the case of the Kashmiri Muslims inasmuch as the Muslim population in West Bengal is largely scattered, imagination comes to substitute the reality. The imagined territory goes far beyond the borders. Indeed, in the psychological landscape, a new territory is created subverting the claim of the given nation-state.

But this subversive stance at the perceptual level doesn't steer them out of the crisis of identity. Indeed, it is exacerbated more because of the invincibility of the territorial reality. Therefore, to shield against the otherwise-insuperable crisis, the Muslims either become overly rigid on the question of religious identity or, over-emphasize their renunciation of religious identity publicly,

both emanating from the received perception of themselves as 'religious minorities' in West Bengal and a pervasive sense of insecurity, and both seeking legitimacy for political maneuver though in diverse ways.

Perception of identity of the first kind is evidenced in the general reaction of the Muslim community to the debate on Muslim personal law triggered by the much-talked-about Shah Bano case of 1985. A recent debate on Madrasah education in West Bengal, although not of the same magnitude, again reflected the perception of insecurity among the Muslims of West Bengal. Two articles written by Abul Bashar and Afsar Ahmed and published in the Ananda Bazar Patrika, provided the ground for this debate where the authors opined against the mode of traditional Muslim religious education in West Bengal which, they consider, has contributed to the alienation and backwardness of the Bengali Muslims in the state.\(^42\)

Numerous letters followed supporting or refuting the authors' arguments. Not unpredictably, most of the respondents who supported Bashar and Ahmed were Hindus and those who ventured to refute their arguments were Muslims except for a few exceptions. The responses against the articles were not so much argumentative as emotional. The

outpourings were caustic, more so because of the fact that both the writers were Muslims and they were perceived as writing 'against the interests of the Muslims.'

While Bashar and Ahmed had their focus on the system of education as the breeding ground of backwardness, some of the respondents emphasized the deprivation of the Muslims as the root cause. The shift is clear. The problem - what the article writers posited as internal - is externalized and immediately politicized. Madrasah education, which is generally meant for a particular community while other communities don’t have any such state-recognized system of religious education in West Bengal, is nudged out of the discursive site. What is brought in place is the 'community.' Suddenly, the debate turns into a rallying point for community cohesion. All this emanates from a deeply sprouted sense of insecurity clearly evident in some of the letters. One such letter says, "Before abolishing the Madrasahs, we need to ponder how much of the Muslim culture and customs is reflected in the syllabi of the mainstream education. Otherwise, abolition of Madrasahs will be tantamount to strangling the ideas and beliefs of a community."

Strong adherence to the religious identity, stemming out of the sense of incertitude and apprehension, causes alienation. A pre-emptive closure of the West Bengal Muslims

\[\text{Ananda Bazar Patrika. January 5, 1993. p. 4.}\]
is gradually putting them into an encystment vis-a-vis the rest of the Bengali society in West Bengal. Any move to bring them out of it is resisted inasmuch as it is also thought to be an assault on their religious identity, therefore, a political move against 'them.'

Envisaged with this internal alienation, part of which is imposed and part of which is self-defined, their psychological proximity to the Islamic states around India increases rather out of desperation. Secession of Bangladesh from Pakistan on the basis of the rejection of religious identity is, however, like a political bafflement to this section of the West Bengal Muslims and is a fact bemoaned and resented, perhaps, not so much for a Muslim country being truncated and weakened as it is for their own religious identity losing legitimacy.

The second kind of insulation against the label of liminality, which is partly ostentatious but thought to be emancipatory, is an over-emphasized renunciation of religious identity by some Muslims, mostly enlightened, as having any significance in their lives. This can result from their non-belief in religion or their indifference to religious practices. But their frequent assertion of a non-religious life-style, unlike and unwarranted among the

---

44 Many political leaders of Bangladesh, who were in West Bengal during the liberation struggle, recount the memory of this resentment. S. K. Ghosh also mentions it in his book. p. 141.
Hindus of West Bengal, spouts from a wobbly claim to legitimacy which is otherwise perceived to be continually subjected to scrutiny. A yearning for social approbation, which may or may not be really necessary, is always there in the ambience. This ardent negation of the religious identity is an inescapable outcome of the relentless reminder of their religious identity from inside. Anxiety to neutralize the debilitating identity is clearly perceivable.

Attribution of liminality to the Muslims in West Bengal, and continual representation of persecution of the Hindus in Bangladesh, though conspicuous in many written narratives claiming historicity and in popular oral discourses, have not really accorded much advantage, as has been discussed before, so far to the communalists who make political use of it. While in the attitude of the West Bengal Hindus toward Bangladesh Muslims, rancor turns into an apathy and a cultural condescension or rejection, in case of West Bengal Muslims, perceived liminality transforms into an indifference to inconsequential marginality. The Muslims in West Bengal in post-partition period have never been

45 The Sunday supplement of Ananda Bazar Patrika dated January 23, 1993 presented an article on inter-religious marriage. Most of the Muslims interviewed mentioned that they always keep religion at abeyance from their lives. Perhaps, in a situation of inter-religious marriage, the question of identity is overly loaded with stake. But in general situation also, found in interviews with some Muslim students of Calcutta University, the urge for negation of religious identity is discernibly strong.
considered a significant threat to the Hindus, either culturally or politically or materially. Therefore, in spite of their 'perceived' malevolence, they are overlooked. Political deployment of the communalist discourse could never reap its desired harvest. But still, in the popular perception of the Bengali Hindus of West Bengal, the Muslims, both of West Bengal and Bangladesh, are more Muslims than Bengalis. This perception is largely informed by the selective construction of history of the subcontinent - the history of communal strife and its outcome - the grievances of the partition. The grief for the broken self refers to the Muslims only adversarially, as the source of all tribulations.
Whenever Suranjan hears about going to Calcutta, he becomes furious. Why should he go to Calcutta? Suranjan’s uncles and aunts are there. But he never thought of Calcutta as his own place. But now-a-days he doesn’t feel the strength in him to cling to this country. Especially, after 1990 he began to feel as though he was nobody in this country, he didn’t belong here, as though he was an alien here. Some people told him, "Then why did you people touch Babri mosque?" ‘You people!’ - Suranjan wondered - who are these ‘you people?’ Are the Hindus of India and Suranjan the same people? Is then India Suranjan’s real homeland? Has he always been an alien in the country of his birth?

*Lajja*. Taslima Nasrin.

pp. 21-22.

*Lajja* has been banned in Bangladesh on the ground that it might foment communal hatred among people. And Taslima Nasrin, the author of this most controversial novel, has gone into hiding with, reportedly, a price declared on her head by the fundamentalists. But in spite of the ban, the book is still in circulation surreptitiously in Bangladesh and openly in West Bengal, where it is more popular for intelligible reasons. Its new edition has been published by
the Ananda Publishers, the most famous publishing house in West Bengal. In West Bengal, the sale of the pirated copies by the hawkers on the streets of Calcutta outnumbers the Ananda publication by a large margin. The sale in such a short time, indeed less than one year,\(^1\) is unprecedented in the history of Bengali literature. The instant impact? Perhaps, there can be only one parallel and that is Bankim’s *Anandamath*, written a little over a century ago. And Bankim’s *Anandamath* definitely didn’t meet with a repercussion of such a global magnitude.

What exactly is the strength of this novel which hardly receives any encomiastic citation for its literary and aesthetic accomplishment? Indeed, Mrinal Sen, one of the most illustrious Bengali film-makers of India stamped it as ‘literary garbage.’ Nasrin claims, it is the strength of the truth, the emphatic iteration of the plain truth\(^2\) so far uniterated in a popular literary genre. She claims that *Lajja* is a documentary novelette. What does she document? Nasrin writes:

> It is true that there is no legal restriction in Bangladesh regarding appointment and promotion of the Hindus to the higher posts in administration, police or armed forces. But in the ministries, there is no one in the ranks of secretary and additional secretary from

---

1. There were seven reprints of the book between February and June of 1993 in Bangladesh before it was banned.

the Hindu community. There is only one joint secretary, or may be two, and a very few deputy secretaries... In the whole country, there are only six Hindu deputy commissioners. Hindus are recruited in the lower ranks of police, but how many SPs are there? Sudhamoy thinks, it is only because he is Sudhamoy Dutta that there are so many impediments on his way to becoming an associate professor. Had he been Mohammad Ali or Salimullah Chowdhury, he wouldn’t face so many problems. Sudhamoy Dutta knows that there is hardly any Hindu in the foreign service and only one Hindu judge in the high court. It is not easy to get license for a business enterprise under a Hindu name unless there is a Muslim partner. Besides, a Hindu doesn’t get loan from the Government controlled banks, especially, Bangladesh Shilpa Rin Sangstha, for any industrial enterprise.

These are the hard facts nobody can contest and are buttressed by numerous fresh instances of obvious discrimination. In December 1993, the Hindu students of the University of Dhaka residing in Jagannath Hall staged a demonstration in front of the Public Service Commission office for alleged exclusion of the Hindus from the recent recruitment. The reality of discrimination at the upper echelons is complemented by the grim facts emanating from the larger social context. One such fact is the quiet and

---

3 Nasrin takes these facts from a research based book, *Baishamyer Shikar Bangladesher Hindu Sampraday* by Matiur Rahman and Syed Azizul Haque. In fact, she could be accused of plagiarism in a different context for the way she has lifted this section from the aforementioned book without any attribution.
gradual disappearance of the Hindus from Bangladesh. The Census reports of the last few decades do show a trend of this gradual decrease of Hindu population. But after the last two rounds of communal disturbance in 1990 and 1992, it is a common knowledge that there was an exodus of the Hindus to West Bengal, especially from the coastal district of Bhola, the district hardest hit by the 1992 disturbance. Therefore, Nasreen is right that she has laid bare the facts hither-to unspoken as vehemently as she does and this definitely is a strength of the novelette. But there are other things too behind her fame.

Distinctly, in this connection, there are at least three different texts in circulation characterized by continual displacement of authorship. First, the content of Lajja itself, initially authored by Taslima Nasrin and then gradually taken over by the Bengali-speaking readership all over the world, particularly in West Bengal where the content of Lajja was laid out in the prevalent larger social text of the perceived persecution of Bengali Hindus in Bangladesh. Here, perhaps, Roland Barthes would reemphasize the aphorism: "The birth of the reader must be at the cost

---

4 According to the reports in Sangbad and other newspapers between December 8 and December 15, 1992, thousands of houses were burnt to ashes, hundreds of Hindu girls were abducted and raped in the villages of Bhola.
of the death of the author." The signature of the original author is, however, kept traceable, as a secondary text because of her identity as a 'Bangladeshi' 'Muslim' 'woman' for the sake of authenticity. But meaning of Lajja has largely been reconstituted politically beyond the imagination and control of Taslima Nasrin. The nothingness of the author, as Foucault might put it, is reaffirmed. Once taken into the contested terrain of politics, new meanings continued to emerge.

The second text is Taslima Nasrin herself authored jointly first by the Bangladesh Government and the fanatics of the Sahaba Movement and then seized initially by the Indian media, soon to be picked up by the world press too. At these three levels, Nasrin appears to signify three different perceptions. To the Bangladesh Government and the religious zealots, Taslima Nasrin is the visible embodiment and expression of an unspoken and politically silenced social reality - the continued discrimination and violence against the religious minorities which, in the political environment of Bangladesh, go without any serious

---


7 A small localized religious movement in Sylhet, one of the districts in Bangladesh.
interrogation. It has been so far, a matter of celebration to the religious zealots. But once on the surface, it is a matter of embarrassing revelation to the Government and therefore to be silenced again.

To the Indian press, Taslima Nasrin is a constituting element in the much needed self-definition of India vis-à-vis a 'malignant orthodox exteriority' made discernible in the skirting Islamic states in the face of a crisis of its own secular identity. To the Western press, informed by a different level of global confrontation, Taslima Nasrin is a victim of Islamic fundamentalism. To the rest of India except West Bengal and to the world, Lajja was unknown. But 'criticism by hearsay,' as Paul de Man would put it, went on. Taslima Nasrin was not read, but was talked about, not as an author of Lajja which aesthetically doesn't take off, but as a text of the repressive nature of the nation-state, as a text of regional and global politics.

The third text emerges from the retrieval of Taslima Nasrin and Lajja to Bangladesh after all this political-textual excursus. This second reading is variously shaded with rancor, regard, jealousy and a second level of embarrassment, this time not only to the Government, but

---


113
also to the pro-liberation\(^9\) literati and intelligentsia, who, all of a sudden, discovered a contrition in themselves for failing to act politically and effectively against "baleful religious sectarianism" engaged in persecution of religious minorities. In a way of self-defence and evasion of the issue, therefore, they sometimes bring back the aesthetic failure of \textit{Lajja} and sometimes complain that Nasrin is pushing Bangladesh politics beyond its limits. Evidently, the latter observation is geared toward a self-vindication too. Discursively, Nasrin is thus rewritten as an enfant terrible, unpredictable and damagingly indulgent in political gimmicks. With this judgement, the anti-fundamentalist intelligentsia came up with a very pondered and discernibly reluctant vituperation of the fundamentalists from a general modernist stance - freedom of expression - emptying the actual space of confrontation of its political content. As though the intelligentsia was inclined to see the damage committed by Nasrin to their complacence. While Nasrin was taking all the shots from the fundamentalists, they were the side-line onlookers.

\(^9\) Discursively, the whole nation is presently vertically divided between two camps: The pro-liberation forces and fundamentalists who didn’t support the liberation struggle of Bangladesh. The fundamentalists indeed formed a paramilitary force to foil the struggle and killed many of the renowned intellectuals of the country when it was sure of the defeat of the Pakistan army.
Discursive Environment: Identities and Their Contentious Histories

In the larger context of politics in Bangladesh, the judgement of the intelligentsia about the limits of politics reveals a changed discursive environment in which persecution of religious minorities is made possible without much effective resistance from inside. The space created for anti-communal politics through the liberation struggle in 1971 now seems to be constrained by the increasingly pervasive religious perception of political-cultural identity and its acceptance by the populace. The preeminence of the issue of identity in Bangladesh politics and its centrality in the configuration of power demand a closer look into these varied perceptions of identity, their emergence, their eminence, the process of silencing and deferment and their relationship to the changing constitution of power.

Discourses of cultural identity in post-liberation Bangladesh, as in the past, have been checkered by contestants claims. The perception of the nation keeps changing and at each moment of new enunciation, a legitimating historical discourse is retrieved, created or reconstituted. The state becomes the amphitheater of the continuing confrontation. With each change in the domination of a perception of identity, the state changes its
character. Also, in the psychological landscape of the convinced populace, the frontiers of the imagined territory of the nation keep changing.

Each perception of identity, claimant of the state power, has its own history, own beginning, own repertoire of important events to construct a preferred past which privileges the perceived identity. In the words of a frontline intellectual and cultural activist in Bangladesh:

Previously, the attitude was as if there was nothing before 1947, there was no country beyond Pakistan except that abode of demons called Hindustan. Now what? Now it seems again as though there was no time before 1975, no world – only an endless impervious darkness. And Bangladesh begins from there! No, no, it’s not a joke. Everybody chooses a convenient time as the beginning of this country. Some people choose 1975, some others choose 1971, die-hard Muslim League attitude begins from 1947. Some people begin from Plassey, some go farther beyond to the time of Ikhtiar Khalji.¹⁰

Each construction of history is contingent upon the identity prioritized and essentialized at present. Presently, there is a contention between two major perceptions of political-cultural identity in Bangladesh advancing their claims to the nation-state: first, the ethnic identity as the ‘Bengalis’ which was the primary

impetus in the liberation struggle of Bangladesh and second, the (apparently) territorial identity as the 'Bangladeshis,' the proponents of which are now in control of the state.

The contention between Bengali nationalism and Bangladeshi nationalism has been going on more vehemently since mid 1970s. When the nationalist politics in Bangladesh is considered in terms of its interior, there is one noticeable distinction between the social forces upholding these two variants of nationalism. Briefly, Bengali nationalism being one of the propelling forces of liberation struggle is in general championed by the pro-liberation forces. And in a bid to resist the secular forces, the politico-religious anti-liberation forces advances the Bangladeshi variant of nationalism. The second is embedded in a fear-syndrome and is meaningful more in terms of a discernible constitution of India as the "political other" and Bengalis in West Bengal as the "cultural other."

Underneath the rhetoric of autonomous perception of the self, there are two things which figure prominently in the perceptions of identity. These are: the political stance vis-a-vis the two-nation theory, and, related to it but more decisive in drawing the line of demarcation, the perception of the other, the political and territorial adversary against which identity is constituted and consolidated. Clearly, in spite of other overlaps, on these two issues,
the opposing socio-political forces are irreconcilably confrontational.

Immediately after liberation in 1971, communal politics was banned in the country and secularism was the avowed principle of the state, indeed, one of the four principles on the basis of which the liberation struggle was fought. The communalist forces were completely subdued and banished from politics not only by a state decree but also by public hatred, because of their collaboration with the Pakistan Army in killing the Bengalis. The ethnic identity of Bengaliness was on the foreground of political discourse, which accommodated people of various religious persuasions. There was a state recognition of this accommodativeness until the military coup d'état of 1975. Obviously, it was the continuity of the counter-discourse of Bengali nationalism of the pre-liberation days which became dominant after 1971.

The emphasis of this nationalism was on the discovery and essentialization of a primordial culture and a history which are a common property of the people of all religious persuasions in Bengal. The base was of course a common language - Bengali. Twenty four years of politics against communalism during the Pakistan period was the propelling impetus to the search for the primordial ethnic culture and history.
But there was a marked discontinuity between its pre-liberation and post-liberation stances toward religious identity. Since religion was the ideological raison d'être for creation of Pakistan, within the idioms of Pakistani politics, negation of religious identity was tantamount to interrogating the rationale of Pakistan — a stance which didn’t surface quite forcefully until the beginning of the liberation struggle. But at the same time, the mode of politics, inherited in Pakistan from the partition of India, provided the legitimation for later deployment of any distinctiveness which would empower the counter-discourses of alternative identities. Religious identity, in this case, didn’t provide the needed distinctiveness in constituting alterity vis-a-vis the West Pakistanis and indeed contrarily reaffirmed a commonness. This in a sense couldn’t be denied inasmuch as Pakistan was created on the basis of a popular support of the Muslim population of India. Therefore, the counter-discourse of Bengali identity was generally evasive on the question of religious identity during the Pakistan period. Instead, it advanced the ethnic and linguistic difference of the Bengalis, exploitation of East Pakistan by the West Pakistanis and discrimination against the Bengalis as the affective elements of counter-discourse, of course, with occasional vituperation of communalism and the political use of religion by the

11 Discussed at length in Chapter 7.
'fanatic politico-religious organizations.' Definitely, the secular forces were on a spectacular rise which naturally constrained the maneuvering space of the religious zealots in politics. But the target of the secular forces being the Pakistani state on a number of other issues too, the question of religious identity could be generally evaded. In the event of inevitable confrontation, the discursive tendency of the secular forces was to label religion as faith as opposed to religion as ideology.

The liberation struggle changed the chemistry of the discursive environment substantially. The alliance of the secular forces participating in the liberation struggle, the counter-alliance of the religious zealots within Bangladesh against the liberation struggle, spontaneous participation of people of all religious persuasions in the struggle, whole-hearted support from the secular state of India, especially the Bengalis of West Bengal, support of the socialist bloc and above all, the ethnic identity of Bengaliness which forged a nation-wide unity created an imperative for the newborn state to be secular through constitutional sanction. In post-liberation Bangladesh, Pakistan still continued to be represented as the Other, with its rationale of existence under interrogation. An inevitable denouement of this metamorphosis of the nation-state was a scrutiny of the two-nation theory.
Within the present discursive ambiance, among other things, repudiation of the two-nation theory was also believed to provide legitimacy to Bangladesh and the dominant discourse of Bengali identity was exuberant in vituperation of the two-nation theory. But this again marked the beginning of another contention. The uncertainty in the popular perception about the relationship between religion and culture and between religion and nation-state couldn’t be deferred any more. Indeed, in the propitious discursive environment of post-liberation Bangladesh, it was not even thought necessary to defer this resolution. The decisive victory in the liberation war was thought to have resolved many unresolved questions too. And to many of the proponents of secular Bengali identity, it seemed, as though history had begun anew. This amnesia made them indifferent to the possible contentions and to the remnants of other perceptions of identity inherited from Pakistan. Or, at least they were thought to be inconsequential in the post-liberation idioms of Bangladesh politics. But they weren’t.

The ambivalence so far maintained about the relationship between religion, culture and nation-state coaxed many into the pro-liberation forces who would otherwise prioritize religious identity over other perceptions. With the enunciation of secularism as the state policy, this group was definitely disenchanted. To many of them, in a country with 85 percent Muslim population, it was
unjust to proclaim secularism as the state policy. Besides, they believed, contrary to the beliefs of the secularists, the predominant trend in the cultural tradition of Bangladesh was religious, i.e., Islamic.

The construction of cultural tradition mainly in terms of religion since late nineteenth century and the perceived inextricability of religion and politics discursively advanced since the beginning of the Pakistan movement were evidently still convincing. Therefore, the new grammar of politics in post-liberation Bangladesh was not readily acceptable. Disenchantment grew further as the state began to take measures in keeping with its pronounced secular policy. On a demand from the Dhaka University Central Students Union (DUCSU),¹² the word 'Muslim' from the names of some of the residential halls was dropped and the halls were opened up for residence of students with other religious creeds. The school text books on history and social sciences were rewritten in keeping with the spirit of secularism. Contrary to what it was during the Pakistan period, the 'important history' didn't begin from Ikhtiar Uddin Mohammad Bakhtiar Khalji, the first Muslim ruler in Bengal. It began from king Shashanka, the first Bengali king who ruled the region centuries before Khalji's advent. Culture now was not to be seen as Islamic culture alone. Redefined cultural parameters highlighted the common life

practices of all people of this land irrespective of their religious beliefs.

To a section of the populace, these measures were considered encroachment on Islamic identity which, they believed, were valued most by the populace. Taking away something what was constituted over a long period of time and given to the people as though it was an irreversible constant, understandably, breeds political contention. Disenchantment continued to grow. The faction of the disenchanted pro-liberation force was soon joined by the anti-liberation forces who were looking for new political space. A territory named 'Muslim Bangla' was surreptitiously born in the mental landscape of these people. The contention featured in the wide-scale whispering about the existence of such a perception, graffiti on the walls even in the remotest small towns, sporadic surfacing, often with violence, of clandestine organizations upholding such perception and growing communal hatred against the Hindus.

The changing discursive environment also took cognizance of the disastrous failure of the government in the economic sphere, the famine of 1974, curbing the freedom of the press, widespread stories of corruption of the Awami League politicians, and increasing coerciveness of the state in the face of a legitimation crisis. All these added grist to the Muslim Bangla mill which was still clandestine with sufficient supportive political ethos on the surface too.
And overarching all these was a growing malice against India, the newly perceived other.

Predicament was also there in the continued constitution of Pakistan as the other. The physical distance of Pakistan and its inconsequentiality in post-liberation Bangladesh was soon found to be bereft of the potential as an element in the edifice of internal self perception. Occasional invocation of the memory was not enough to counteract the growing legitimation crisis of the power circle flowing from its failure in delivering the largess they made people dream of through their pre-liberation political rhetoric. When the legitimation of the government was called to the stand, it was so done to interrogate all its avowed policies too. Secularism was one of those policies.

Secondly, the discursive disavowal of the two-nation theory regenerated a few anxieties anew long embedded in the fear-syndrome on which Pakistan intended to survive and sustain a cohesiveness with its eastern wing. It was the fear of the perceived and politically sustained malevolent exteriority named ‘India.’ While Pakistan was gone, the syndrome persisted, indeed with more discernible nervousness because of the perceived vulnerability of Bangladesh as a smaller state than Pakistan. Compared to Pakistan, India was much more tangible and visible, and readily available just across the border to be constituted as the other.
Differences, not very difficult to rediscover, were recalled again.

Celebration of Bengali identity and repudiation of the two-nation theory immediately created an anxiety in many minds whether it was a first step toward reunion with West Bengal and in turn with India. If the two-nation theory was wrong and if the identity was nothing different from the people of West Bengal, then what would be the rationale for existence of Bangladesh as a separate entity? The only way to correct the historical error would be to unite two Bengals for which there was a political penchant in pre-partition India. From no section of the intelligentsia or of the government circle has it ever been iterated with any seriousness for practical reasons. Besides, the logic of this argument is understandably fragile. There are several instances all over the world of separate state entities in spite of a common linguistic and ethnic identity of the peoples.

Indeed, through a meticulous examination of the perception of Bangalitva (Bengaliness) in two Bengals, one can decipher differences, not so subtle. In the first place, unlike in Bangladesh, Bangalitva in West Bengal doesn’t constitute any perception of nation, not at least in the dominant political discourses. It is deeply, irrecoverably and complacently immersed in Indian nationness. Secondly, the perception of Bangalitva in West Bengal is not fully
secular either. Symbols, images and representations of
Bangalitva in dominant literary discourses and in popular
culture are also religious. Because, Indian religions have
their provenance in the prevalent culture. Religious
practices were born out of the prevalent cultural practices
and they have remained inextricable. In West Bengal, these
practices are now passed on as secular. There is hardly any
resistance to these representations from within.

Even now after witnessing the sacrifice in Bangladesh
in the name of Bangalitva, the popular perception in West
Bengal draws a distinction between the Bangalis, i.e., the
Hindus and the Musalmans or at best, the Bangali Musalmans.
Of course, this perception is not without a history of a
general and legitimate belief in Muslim resistance to the
identity of Bangalitva, especially from the aristocrat
Muslims whose visibility dominated the socio-political
discourses in the pre-partition past.

There were attempts to converge on a common perception
of Bangalitva at several junctures of the history, first in
1905 during the first partition of Bengal, then in 1947 in
the effort for keeping Bengal united during the partition of
India, and then in 1971, rather spontaneously, during the
liberation struggle of Bangladesh. But in each case, the
overall uncongenial dominant discursive environment foiled
the attempt. Bangalitva continued to receive its images and
symbols predominantly from cultural-religious practices of the Hindus in West Bengal.

But in Bangladesh, the situation was quite different. Here, Bengali nationalism emerged as a counter-discourse to religious sectarianism from within. Its authenticity was directly predicated upon its difference from the religious identity. Therefore, perception of Bangalitva in Bangladesh, of necessity, had to be secular and thus also different from the perception prevalent in West Bengal. This difference could also be a safety-valve against the possible reunion with West Bengal. Besides, if Bangalitva was the cause of secession from Pakistan, it could as well be a deterrent to reunion with India. There was no real ground for anxiety.

But discursively, such an anxiety could be resuscitated easily in the minds of the people with flickering perception of the self but firmly rooted perception of difference with India in order to undermine the ambit of secular politics.

13 This difference has been completely overlooked in the political-cultural discourses in either side of the partition. Basant Chatterjee does talk about a difference, but quite differently. He essentializes Bangalitva as an exclusive construct of the Hindu Bhadraloks (gentry) which has, according to him, remained the same. He dismisses the claim of the Bengali Muslims to Bangalitva. Obviously, he is completely swayed by the dominant cultural perception in West Bengal and still inclined to look at the Muslims from the condescending vantage point of perceived cultural superiority of the Bengali Hindus. Therefore he disregards, quite arrogantly, the changed perception of the Bengali Muslims in a changed discursive environment as though it doesn’t matter. See Chatterjee, Basant. *Inside Bangladesh Today*. New Delhi: S. Chand & Co. 1973. pp. 144-159.
and the government which was portrayed as the protege of the 'hegemonic' Indian state.

Moreover, jubilation in West Bengal over the victory of the Bengali identity in Bangladesh, frequent cultural exchanges, and all out celebration in India on the perception that the two-nation theory has been defeated\(^4\) made them only more anguished about whether all this was going on at the cost of their religious self and the difference thus imagined with India. A strong sense of anti-Indianism grew rapidly in post-liberation Bangladesh. Within this political environment, religious identity emerged as a dominant perception in spite of the official ban on politics in the name of religion. The military coup d'etat of 1975, assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and ouster of the Awami League (then called BAKSAL under single-party socialist political system introduced the same year) government instantly opened up the maneuvering space for the so-far-deferred politics of religion. Bangladeshi nationalism was the breed of this new grammar of politics with religious identity as its preeminent element, whether pronounced or not.

General Ziaur Rahman, who came to power after a series of coups d'etat in 1975, was the first statesman-proponent of Bangladeshi nationalism. He had this to say:

---

We call Bangladeshi nationalism a total nationalism. We have national pride, a rich language and a religious tradition. Geographically, we are the inhabitants of an important region. We have a dream for building a new economic structure. And all these are drenched in the consciousness of a bloody liberation struggle. A cluster of so many elements in a nationalist consciousness was never seen before.\textsuperscript{15}

Clearly, in this narrative on Bangladeshi nationalism, Ziaur Rahman appropriates what has so far been passed on as the spirit of Bengali nationalism. But he immediately brings in the first trace of difference in terms of his notion of inextricability of religion and nationalistic spirit:

If anybody thinks that Bangladeshi nationalism doesn’t encompass religion, it would be a mistake. Belief in religion and allegiance to it are magnificent and perennial characteristics of the Bangladeshi nation. Besides, the holy Quran says: \textit{La ikra fidwine}, i.e., there is no compulsion about religion. Therefore, while Bangladeshi nationalism is not based on religion, it is not opposed to religion either. This nationalism ensures religious belief and religious rights of every citizen.\textsuperscript{16}

One might be confused whether it is a narrative of another variant of secularism recognizing the preponderance of religion in the national life. But then Ziaur Rahman goes


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. p.12.
on to contradict himself in this adversarial commentary on secularism practiced in some countries:

The philosophy of Bangladeshi nationalism postulates... an effort for attaining peace of the soul through a preparation for the life beyond death. For this reason, we say, it would be a mistake not to have the element of religion in politics. Many countries introduce themselves as 'secular states.' For example, let's talk about England. I went to the silver jubilee festival of the commonwealth in 1977. The Bible in every words. Nothing begins without an excerpt from the Bible. Then how are they secular? Let's consider India, our neighbor. All over the world, she is known as secular. Is she really so? As I believe, India is not secular... In every walks of Indian life, rites of Hindu religion are observed. People of other religious creeds are not shown proper respect. Hundreds of minorities die in communal riots every year.

Therefore, there's no point in continuing the 'hoax' of secularism. Ziaur Rahman dropped secularism from the state policies. Religious identity received the state recognition as the fountain of nationalistic spirit. The political party he formed to legitimate his power was also named later Bangladesh Nationalist Party, mostly joined by the politicians who were popularly known as dalals, the collaborators of the Pakistan Army during the liberation struggle. He, however, also drew some politicians from splinter leftist organizations who were convinced of their bleak future in Bangladesh politics otherwise and who were
also known for their staunch anti-Indianist stance. The variant of nationalism that rose to political prominence since 1975 was indeed a unifying force for these political activists. Three successive regimes since 1975 have nourished this proclivity of Bangladeshi identity, and exploited this identity to its full for their own legitimation in their confrontation with the political opponents and for construction of popular will that would deliver them power in electoral politics. In the propitious discursive environment, theoreticians of both Bangladeshi nationalism and Islamic nationalism with strong concomitance with the former began to surface.

India: The Convenient Other

Enayetullah Khan, one prominent theoretician, was among the first few to advance the Bangladeshi variety of nationalism for which there was a ready audience since the political change in 1975. Khan theorizes Bangladeshi nationalism as this:

...culture changes in keeping with geographical and political difference, diversity in environment, diverse manifestation of political consciousness and social practices. Therefore, although there is no basic contention between Bangladeshi culture and Bengali

17 Editor of Weekly Holiday, a long known leftist and then a political cohort of Ziaur Rahman.
culture, there is a qualitative difference between Bangladeshi culture and the outline of the universality and geographical indivisibility of Bengali culture. Therefore, those who are haranguing about integrated culture or indivisible tradition, they are indeed engaged in a political roguery of establishing the cultural supremacy of West Bengal which is a part of the compound culture born out of the Indian state and its social system. We have commonness of tradition with West Bengal. But that tradition may not always measure up to the aspiration of national liberation and the nation-state. Practicing tradition is one thing, but paving the way for hegemony of a foreign state in the name of integrated culture and tradition is a different thing.18

Khan privileges political identity over ethno-cultural identity. And this political self-identity is exclusively informed by the perception of India as the malevolent political other and West Bengal, in particular, as the cultural other. Without India and without West Bengal, this political self-perception becomes completely emptied of meaning. Political deployment of the threat of imagined hegemony of the Indian state and cultural supremacy of West Bengal thus provides legitimation to this brand of nationalism. The constitution of this other is more tangible and therefore viable too. In a long-sustained political culture of opposition, a strong and intimidating other,


132
either real or perceived, is a necessary political construction.

Khan doesn't invoke religious identity in his perception of Bangladeshi nationalism, rather opposes it in order to steer political identity out of the terrain of the politics of religion which was becoming increasingly dominant, indeed under state patronage. But others, especially the religious enthusiasts, soon to be his political colleagues in the government of Ziaur Rahman, were not content with this vision of nationalism. Difference was important. And that difference also had to be perceived in terms of religion. A specific history of contention between the Hindus and the Muslims had to be retrieved again. A preference was also discernible and that was to go much beyond the history of Pakistan movement, the retrieval of which was perhaps thought to be particularly debilitating in the context of Bangladesh even in the changed situation. Khondokar Abdul Hamid,\(^\text{19}\) later to be a minister in the Government of Ziaur Rahman, cited R. C. Majumdar to prove the century-old inviolable difference between the Hindus and the Muslims.\(^\text{20}\) In these discourses, the perceivable common

\(^{19}\) As a regular columnist of the *Ittefaq*, the highest circulated daily in Bangladesh, he was well-known by his pen-name *Spastabhashi*. He was also popularly labeled as a *dalal* for his alleged complicity with the Pakistan Army.

tradition of the people of Bengal irrespective of their religious creeds is disowned and the old divisive politics along religious line is resurrected. It is interesting to note that the communalists quote the communalists of the other side to legitimate their claim through a discursive inversion. There is hardly any contention between the communalists of two sides in terms of the perception of difference. Indeed, each survives on and is empowered by the borrowed authenticity of the other. Communalism in India is thought to provide legitimation to communalism in Bangladesh and vice versa.  

Politically speaking, the Babri Mosque incident, in a way, was a bliss to the communal fundamentalist political organizations in Bangladesh, especially in terms of its timing. There are a series of events, commemorations and festivals every year beginning on December 14, the Intellectual Day, the day when some renowned intellectuals of the country were killed by the Al-Badrs, a paramilitary force formed by the communal fundamentalist political organization Jama'ate Islami to collaborate with the Pakistan Army during the liberation struggle. The other events that follow are: December 16, the Victory Day; February 21, the Martyrs' Day commemorating the martyrs of the language movement which entails month-long cultural programs, seminars, symposia and book fair; March 26, the Independence Day and April 14/15, the new year's day of the Bengali calendar celebrated through extravagantly colorful festivities, cultural programs and month-long Baishakhi Mela. All these events sharply bring into ken the spirit of the liberation struggle and Bengali culture. Amidst these celebrations, for about six months beginning December, the communalists are generally constricted in their maneuvering space. But the December of 1992, following the Babri Mosque incident, was quite different. The whole forthcoming extravaganza of pro-liberation jubilation was stalled by a sudden outburst of politically engineered communal upsurge. This time, the political pageant was run by the communalists by creating a havoc in the country.

134
Of course, the communalists try to essentialize the philosophical difference between two religions, but they mainly try to historicize the difference between the Hindus and the Muslims in the context of politics in the subcontinent which is more needed for communalism to flourish. The oft-chosen strategy is, as mentioned before, a discursive inversion of the recent communalist accounts of the other side. So does one Matiur Rahman. Matiur Rahman quotes profusely from Basant Chatterjee’s *Inside Bangladesh Today* to evidence the unbridgeable differences in the perception of identity among the Hindus and the Muslims and thus the ahistoricity of Bengali nationalism. He mentions the works of R. C. Majumdar, Savarkar, Bankim Chatterjee and some others to make his case and for intelligible reasons, not the works of Bipan Chandra, Irfan Habib, Sumit Sarkar, Asgar Ali Engineer and many others who have reproached communalist penchant in their historical writings. Interestingly, in a bid to essentialize the difference, Rahman racks his brains even to invent an ethnic difference between the Hindus and the Muslims residing in Bengal quoting one virtually unknown nineteenth century source and contradicting all other ethnic and anthropological studies, findings of which he partially misrepresents too:

> The Muslims who form the bulk of the Bangladesh Population are not the descendants of the Hindus of the pre-Islamic period...A large proportion are doubtless converts, but even in the case of converts infusion of
blood from other racial groups, made possible by liberal Muslim laws on marriage, has produced a society with a basically different ethnic composition (emphasis mine). The theory that the Muslims are all converts takes no account of the immigration of Turks, Persians, Afghans, Arabs and other northern races into Bengal in the wake of the Muslim conquest, a process which continued over the centuries at a steady rate. Bengal has for ages been a kind of racial cauldron, in which different nationalities have mingled. But the Hindu community which neither accepts converts nor believes in inter-marriage has not been affected by these demographic changes. The rigid caste system among the Hindus and religious taboos ruled out the possibility of Arab or Persian or Turkish or Afghan blood being transfused into Hindu society. A Hindu could undergo such a transfusion only through the process of conversion, by ceasing to be a Hindu. Since there can be no or very little inter-marriage between castes, each Hindu caste is able to preserve a degree of ethnic 'purity' inconceivable for others. Immediately a caste embraced Islam, changes in its ethnic character began because of the removal of religious restrictions on exogamy. Assuming then that a whole segment of Hindu society underwent a conversion en bloc the chances are that within a short time, it would start changing ethnically because of intermarriage between castes, even if no foreign blood was infused by marital ties with other ethnic groups.22 (Emphasis mine).

If everything remains the same or maintains the same tenor of change as narrated by Rahman, though it already

---

doesn’t, then this argument perhaps will hold good in another few thousand years. But as for now, the anthropological difference he intends to ascribe is visibly absent. But the main terrain of this discourse is politics, not anthropology. There, difference can definitely be invoked.

Lately, it appears, Bangladeshi nationalism, though it began as a bedlam of a variety of flustered perceptions, has left the turf exclusively to the religious zealots in its desperate search for allies. The incumbent government, initially the prime proponent of Bangladeshi nationalism, maintains a distinguished reticence these days admitting fully in its silence the religious definition of the effervescent religious zealots. They also provide with the support of the combat police in the case of clashes with the pro-liberation forces on the streets of Dhaka or elsewhere in the country. On the question of identity, the nation seems to be vertically divided into two distinct camps having two rallying platforms too - *Ekattorer Ghatak Dalal Nirmul Committee* (Committee for the elimination of the killers and collaborators of 1971) and *Bharatiya Dalal Protirodh Committee* (Committee for resisting the collaborators of India), quite often meeting each other on the streets with lethal weapons.

Most of the renowned intellectuals in Bangladesh are the staunch supporters of Bengali nationalism and they look
at the state pronouncement of Bangladeshi nationalism with its religious tinge as a sinister design with purely Machiavellian ruse to seize state power which in turn regresses the nation to a formation abandoned earlier. Conversely, the Bengali identity is advanced as essential, as an irreversible given. Hayat Mamud writes:

...My geographical identity is reflected in my culture. My geographical identity as a human being is: I am a Bengali. I don’t need to take into cognizance the whole history of rise and fall of kingdoms and states in this territory and the names they have taken at different times. Because, the states change, but the land and the nature do not. We were Bengalis during the pre-Aryan period, Hindu period, Buddhist period, Mughal and British periods. We were Bengalis during the Pakistani rule and we are still Bengalis. Politics has changed our citizenship, but not our national identity.23

Humayun Azad, another strong supporter of Bengali nationalism, is more acrimonious to the opposing trend. He writes:

In the amendment (of the Constitution), there is no adjective before nationalism. But from what has been written before and from what has been omitted (secularism), Bangladesh clearly becomes a communal state...This basic principle doesn’t recognize the existence of any other religion except Islam. This principle of the state desecrates the religion of the

---

people of other religious creeds constitutionally. No constitution has the right to do so...
The notion Bangali is quite clear. But Bangladeshi nationalism is ominously enigmatic. Had Bangladeshi meant only citizenship, there wouldn’t be any riddle. But it signifies a lot more... A Bangladeshi is always a Bangladeshi, who has no tradition, no culture, no civilization, who has only religion. Bangladeshi nationalism is indeed Islamic nationalism in camouflage, the basis of which is communalism...
A Bangladeshi nationalist is an uprooted person. Not to cite many examples, let’s look at literature only. A Bangladeshi nationalist doesn’t have a great poet, a great novelist or a great thinker, because s/he disowns Rabindranath, Bankim, Vidyasagar, Mukundaram or Kahnnapad. Finally s/he may import a Musalman from elsewhere. A Bangladeshi nationalist is destined to remain in perpetual crisis regarding her/his language, national flag, national anthem. These are the emotive elements of nationalism. But to her/him, these will be the sources of maniacal sentiment. One has gone this far to name Bangla as Bangladeshi language. S/he is destined to suffer from this insanity inasmuch as s/he collects germs from her/his environs...Since the base of Bangladeshi nationalism is concocted, a Bangladeshi nationalist inhabits in a narrow terrain of life and dream. S/he has to be communal. To perceive her/himself, s/he has to go hunting the enemies, real or imagined. S/he will find the enemy in the country and abroad. Once the country itself will become her/his enemy. Because s/he lives in a nightmare.24

Clearly, the stance is modernist. But this doesn't mean that the actual terrain of confrontation is between modernity of the proponents of Bengali identity and exclusive claim of the religionists to indigeneity. Indeed, both the perceptions have their claim to indigeneity in their own ways and both are vying for a political space whose constitution is characteristically modernist. The fundamentalists in Bangladesh who are the protagonists of religious politics are not really fundamentalists in the strict sense of the term. They are more rightists participating in the western form of democracy and not advancing any real alternative political system even discursively. Opposition to the West is more imagined and politically constituted than real.\textsuperscript{25}

A range of strategies are there among the proponents of Bengali identity in their encounter with the religious identity. The spectrum includes atheism of Ahmad Sharif, a renowned intellectual, in outright denial of religious identity, search for a pre-religious primordial identity from the popular and common cultural practices of the past by Jatin Sarkar,\textsuperscript{26} search for a syncretistic identity from the folk religions of the people by Farhad Mazhar, interrogation of the validity of the religious practices by

\textsuperscript{25} I attribute this perception of mine to a consensual discussion with Farhad Mazhar, a poet from Bangladesh.

Taslima Nasreen and an open confrontation with the religious zealots from the rallying point of the ghatak dalal nirmul committee. However, until the recent resurgence of the Bengali nationalistic spirit through an intensive effort to invoke the memory of the liberation struggle from the platform of the nirmul committee, for the last 17 years, the political scenario has been over-ridingly dominated by the proponents of Bangladeshi nationalism.

The relative strength of Bangladeshi nationalism issues from the gullibility of the simple-minded people to the purposive imbrication of religion and politics by its proponents. In electoral politics, it definitely provides a one-upmanship, if other factors are not dismissively counteractive. Once in power, the people running the state continue to generate the same perception of identity in order to secure legitimation. And of course, India was always found handy to be presented as a malevolent exteriority, an always potential threat to the sovereignty of Bangladesh with its proven animus on the issues like Farakka Barrage or Tin Bigha corridor. Political parties with the history of friendship with India, in a changed discursive environment, are now labeled as liminal groups. It is curious that the pro-liberation forces define patriotism in political discourse in terms of the role played during the liberation struggle and the proponents of Bangladeshi nationalism who also include the anti-liberation
forces define patriotism in terms of the political stance toward India. Because of the temporal distance of 1971 and invisibility of Pakistan as the other, use of the state controlled media by the ruling party and the over-arching persuasiveness of religious difference with India which is constantly reminded of by the communal riots in India, the second is in a much advantageous position in politics.

Besides, in addition to the discursive production of India as the malevolent political other, looking at West Bengal as a ‘cultural other’ is also a noteworthy discursive practice. The communalists always embark upon a politics of fear of cultural hegemony of West Bengal. The fear is endorsed by the fact that the cultural products from West Bengal like films, music, literature, theater etc. are extremely popular in Bangladesh though it is not the case the other way around. This is definitely resented by the communalists. The construal of cultural difference with West Bengal sometimes transgresses the alliances on the question of internal national identity. The interpretations of this cultural difference are remarkably diverse. Some intellectuals within the pro-liberation penchant look at it from the perspective of the limit of cultural politics and the permissibility of cultural critique. Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury, the renowned lyricist of the Ekushe song, commemorating the martyrs of the language movement, has this
to say about the difference in the permissibility of cultural critique in two Bengals:

...The fact that there was no big success in the reform and modernization movement in the Bengali Muslim society and culture comparable to that of the Bengali Hindu community is not the denouement of the backwardness and the reluctance in education of the society confined primarily to agriculture, but of the absence of any real sanctuary for the reformers in their own society which was immersed in an alien fundamentalist culture. Ishwarchandra (Vidyasagar), Rammohun, even Madhusudan in the field of literature, hit real hard on the traditional practices and beliefs of the Hindu society. But even in the face of violent counter-attack from the society, they were not utterly shelterless. They didn’t have to flee their society to take refuge in any other society...

This shelter for the reformers in the Bengali Muslim society and culture was very constricted and undependable. This is why the reformers and leaders of the Buddhimukti (Emancipation of Intellect) movement and Shikha group like Quazi Abdul Odud and Abul Hossain had not only to flee Dhaka, they had to take refuge in the neighboring society... Even after partition of Bengal in 1947, Abdul Odud and Humayun Kabir didn’t come back to Dhaka... Maestro Alauddin Khan came to Muktagaccha in Mymensingh drawn by a patriotic urge. But he couldn’t stay here for long. In the face of apathy and disrespect, he went back to India. Syed Muztaba Ali came as the Principal of Bogra College. For his comment, "Rabindranath is a much greater poet than Iqbal," he had to leave Bogra and finally East Pakistan
in the face of incessant rains of pebbles and stones at the beginning of the fifties.\textsuperscript{27}

Another propensity in supporting cultural difference between two Bengals within the pro-liberation intellectuals emanates from a quest for legitimacy of a separate nation-state in East Bengal. Understandably, the impetus here is not religious, but a discursively advanced perception of the responsibility of the Bengalis of Bangladesh in upholding Bengali culture which is, allegedly, forsaken by the Bengalis in West Bengal in the name of a greater national identity of Indianness. While these intellectuals still make their claim to the common heritage of Bengali culture, their historical gaze is more inclined to see the immenseness of the importance of 1971, the events which preceded the liberation struggle of Bangladesh in forging the Bengali nationalism and the inevitability of divergent cultural developments in two Bengals thereafter.\textsuperscript{28}

Taslima Nasrin is peculiarly inserted in this cultural politics and her case is revealing of many facets of political culture in Bangladesh in many ways. What is under scrutiny here is her cultural identity. She realizes the cultural difference between two Bengals in a similar way with Gaffar Chowdhury and has the 'insolence' to say that


Bangladesh is at least 150 years behind West Bengal culturally, but then she singularly attempts to transgress that forbidden boundary of cultural difference by breaking the silence about the long-nourished taboos of cultural politics in Bangladesh. Her identity in terms of the credibility of her iteration in the given context of the political culture in Bangladesh is also at stake, because she gets ‘Ananda literary award’ from Ananda Publishers of West Bengal, which is popularly believed, even in some sections of the pro-liberation groups in Bangladesh, to be communal. It is also at stake because Lajja has been used by BJP to create and fan the public furor in India against persecution of the Hindus in Bangladesh, although completely against her will expressed in repeated iterations.

Clearly, her embeddedness is in the perception of an undifferentiated culture of Bengal. Here, she is different from all other intellectuals both in Bangladesh and in West Bengal who are discernibly anxious about a separate identity. The strand of cultural perception she firmly holds on to is purely secular, hitting hard on all religious superstitions of all religions and persecutions of religious minorities in the name of religion. She is also different from the other pro-liberation intellectuals in Bangladesh in the sense that she doesn’t have any ambivalence regarding the question of religion in politics, the evasiveness regarding which has been the major cause of recurrent
resurfacing of religious politics. In India, BJP uses her writings selectively in order to derive authenticity for its own communal politics in a counter-factual deployment of Taslima Nasrin as a 'Muslim' author. The communalists in Bangladesh, both within the government and outside, finding it difficult to manage this newly emerged phenomenon of cultural politics steered in by Taslima Nasrin which hits right at the root of the political culture that ensures recurrent re-emergence of politics of religion in Bangladesh. They try to stop her, rather violently. In the backyard of this violence is the anxiety of the religious identity, the legitimation of which is, for the first time, put under serious interrogation.

An inevitable result of the re-advent of religious identity under state patronage is the return of political intolerance. What happened to Syed Muztaba Ali, the most renowned Bengali satirist, in the fifties is happening now to Taslima Nasreen. Another expression of intolerance resulting from invocation of cultural difference in the name of religion and constitution of India as the malevolent exteriority is assignation of internal otherness to the Hindus of Bangladesh and ascription of liminality on them. Curiously, ascription of liminality emanates from the perception of the nation-state as an irreversible given which is to be accepted without any interrogation. The dominant mode of politics is always perturbed by and
repressive to such interrogation. But still, the present territorial contour of Bangladesh has come to take the present shape after successive stages of interrogation and successive changes in the perception of the people as to what it should be disregarding considerable repression. And the very process of the change and the contention inside suggest that the present configuration of the nation-state is not permanently settled either. This perceived perennial unsettledness of the nation-state in Bangladesh relates to the agonies and to the dreams of the Hindus in Bangladesh.

It was not by choice that the Hindus became a 'religious minority' in Pakistan which was created on the basis of the two-nation theory pronouncedly for the Muslims of the subcontinent. While there were many secularist Muslims in India, known as nationalist Muslims, who were the strong supporters of a secular undivided India, there were hardly any Hindu in East Bengal who, in that discursive environment of avowed communal politics of the Muslim League, for any reason on earth, could think of the Islamic state of Pakistan in the post-partition period as his/her peaceful abode. Numerous revolutionaries of East Bengal sacrificed their lives for independence of undivided India. That is what they wanted - undivided India. Their descendants, who later became the citizens of the Muslim

---

29 The 'scheduled caste' Hindu leader, Jogendranath Mandal who was lured by his personal interest in supporting Pakistan was soon disillusioned too. He fled the country.
state of Pakistan, for intelligible reasons, were no supporters of the Muslim League or of the emergence of the state named Pakistan. It was no secret. Knowing this, the post-partition political rhetoric in Pakistan was almost paranoically effervescent in identifying the 'enemies of Pakistan,' both inside and outside the country. Understandably, according to general perception, the most identifiable internal enemies were the Hindus who didn't support the Pakistan movement. The state rhetoric fomented the gullibility of the Hindus at the social level too which resulted in recurrent communal disturbances in East Pakistan in spite of the Nehru-Liaquat Pact. In the face of a perceived malevolence of the state there was a mass exodus of the Hindus from East Bengal to West Bengal in the early years of partition. Those who stayed back uncertainty, however, found a beacon of hope in the rise of secular Bengali nationalism and supported it through its pinnacle in 1971. During the liberation struggle of Bangladesh, one of the most pronounced targets of the Pakistan Army was the Hindus. The creation of the secular state of Bangladesh was

---


thought finally to have provided them with a state which they belonged to. But after a sojourn in secularism, the state's reversion to privileging Islamic identity and the consequent inscription of liminality on the identity of the Hindus as malevolent religious minority in a Muslim state surrounded by India, again drove them back to uncertainty. The recurrent reversion of the state to religious identity has convinced many that the Hindus finally cannot live in Bangladesh with peace. After the Babri mosque incident and its violent aftermath in Bangladesh, there is a pervasive whisper amongst the Hindus: "Are you thinking of going to India?" Mostly the answer is "yes," whether said or unsaid.
Section Three
Eavesdropping on the Past
CHAPTER FOUR

The Itinerary of the Colonial Mind
Construction of Hindutva and Fragmented Nationalism

Depicting all the vilest intentions of the British colonization in India, Karl Marx bestowed a responsibility on British colonial rule for transforming the Indian society. He wrote to the New York Daily Tribune in 1853:

England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating - the annihilation of old asiatic, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia.¹

In making this observation, he is inspired by the perception that:

England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfill its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution.²

Marx pictures the rigidity of the age-old village communities of India, their submission to the natural

² Ibid. p. 100.
destiny, humanity as subdued to 'brutalizing worship of nature' and contained within the systems of caste and slavery. He also describes how these village communities would be stirred by the scientific and technological devices that came along with British colonization like railway, electric telegraph, steam vessels etc. With all these paraphernalia, Marx expected a social transformation beyond the control of the British colonizers, especially in Bengal, the seedbed of British colonialism in India, with the emergence of new social classes. As he writes, "From the Indian natives, reluctantly and sparingly educated at Calcutta, under English superintendence, a fresh class is springing up, endowed with the requirements for government and imbued with European science."

Even with a little indulgence to a solely subject-centered history, one is susceptible to find fault with this cosmology as, at its minimum, highly Eurocentric and totally dismissive of the internal dynamics of change in the Indian societies. Nandy writes, "Such a view was bound to contribute handsomely - even if inadvertently - to the racist world view and ethnocentrism that underlay colonialism." The cosmological stance from which India was viewed as a 'semi-civilized community' that "restricted the human mind within the smallest possible compass, making it

---

the unresisting tool of superstition" was also susceptible to drawing upon a homology between infantility and colonized society and that between maturity and Western modernity.\textsuperscript{4} Colonialism is considered to be the vehicle for transition from infantility to maturity. If anything, such perception provides the ground for the legitimating discourse of colonialism. Embedded in such a discourse, the 'fresh class' 'springing up' from the Indian natives that Marx was so optimistic about, had its vision blurred by the lustrous picture of the largess of colonialism, i.e., modernity. Indigenousness, the purest form of which was always perceived to be ignoble to this class and therefore renounceable, had to be recast to match with the rationality of Western modernity, the superiority of which could hardly be interrogated within the legitimated colonial world view. The perception of self-identity of this class was agonizingly stained with a sense of ignominy and therefore to be cast off in favor of a modernist identity. Such was the metamorphosis of the Marxian liberators, who perhaps, more aptly could be described as Macaulayean personae.\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{4} Ashis Nandy presents a brilliant discussion of this homology in \textit{The Intimate Enemy}.

\textsuperscript{5} Macaulay in his "Minute on Education" presented to Governor Bentinck in 1835 stated that the objective of English education in India should be the creation of a class of "Indians in blood and colour, but English in opinions, in morals and in intellect." See Spear, Percival. \textit{India - A Modern History}. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1972. p.260.
An example of the itinerary of the colonial mind is graphically displayed in Raja Rammohun Roy’s intellectual translocation. Remarkable changes were taking place in his colonial mind-set over time. This itinerary has to be understood in terms of the contextual constraints imposed on it. Rammohun, in his early days, was indeed much more radical than after his persuasive contact with Western modernity. His *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhiddin*, written in 1803-04 when his English was still not perfect enough to grasp even "the most common topics of discourse,"6 encoded a strong critique of the prevalent religious practices, albeit one unaware of Western rationalism. Rather his critique of religious practices was discernibly assuaged by his later-day perception of preferences of the colonial worldview.

Colonization of Indian History and Tradition

In case of India, the colonial world view was confronted by the pre-existence of India’s innate philosophical richness and its irreconcilability with Western rationalism that legitimated colonialism. Unlike many other colonized societies, India was understood to have a rich past, whose richness predated Western civilization and therefore, could not be altogether ignored. But granting

---

legitimacy to these self-contained (and ascetic) Indian cosmologies was contrary to the legitimacy of colonialism. One way to retain the vaunted self-image of colonial rule as the savior was to reconstruct India from its specific past marked with discernible features of gullibility while seen from the vantage point of Western rationalism and endowed with a suasive linear notion of "history" and of "important past." The orientalist interest in late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century thus pulled together the strands of a history of the Indian people to cohere exactly with the Western rationale of authenticity, which in a single stroke, marginalized the multifarious popular practices emerging out of alternative historical experiences. Sacred books from the past were recalled with renewed veneration. The rich past of India was revisualized through the prism of Western rationality, thanks to William Jones for his pioneering effort to locate those strands of history. Since the history was designated the task of legitimating colonialism already in place, a precolonial cleavage between the rich past and the 'disgraceful' present.

had to be found. Given the teleology of social progress, according to this rationale, colonialism had to be perceived as a 'chance' for recovering the rich past and move beyond this past. Once the supremacy of this cosmic view is instituted at the cognitive level through such orientalist discourses, colonialism remains legitimated in spite of endless counter-dictions at the surface level. In Edward Said's words:

...so authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action.8

Within this discursive environment, Rammohun came to know about the post-Enlightenment West and how the West looked at his own society. By 1818, when he wrote the first pamphlet on 'sati,' he knew the demand of the colonial world view, its preference for selective scriptural interpretation that conforms to Western rationalism. And he did nothing less. His precolonial mindset, manifested in Tahfat, was caught into a complicity with the Orientalist discourses in painting a specific picture of India. Indeed, his antagonists in the reformist debate couldn't do anything.

better either. Their dexterity in managing both the intra-social reformist penchant and the extra-social proclivity to tug reform into the colonial juridical space was seriously restricted by a 'preferred' notion of history the terms of which were set to the advantage of the orientalist view. In complete abnegation of the prevalent practices, which the colonialists found in 'disarray' and so did the local burgeoning intellectuals seeing through the masters' eyes, a very specific tradition of India was constructed based on selective Vedic scriptures and modelled after Western history. While reformism itself was under scrutiny, the model and the sources of history, prioritized by the colonialists, were never seriously questioned. Legitimacy granted to such tradition, instantly marginalized other non-Vedic practices, and even non-Vedic and post-Vedic scriptures that emerged out of human experiences outside the Vedic Dicta. 9

'Sati,' as the first topic of reformist discourse, paved the way for the conquest of Western rationalism and

---

9 It shouldn't be forgotten that apart from Islam, which all along maintained its distinctiveness in India in spite of some overlaps here and there, there were many other indigenous religious creeds, even greater religions like Buddhism and Jainism, which eventually got partly assimilated into the general religious practices of the people who were later conveniently named Hindus. These non-Vedic practices, and their supportive scriptures (e.g. some Smritis) largely lost their authenticity in the process of this specific construction of history.
the official discourse emanating from it. While the Indian societies, through the legal abolition of 'sati' (1829), were purged of a long-standing social evil, there were a few other things that happened surreptitiously along with this abolition. Firstly, the colonialists got virtually total control over Indian history. The official discourse on 'sati' first hierarchized the 'authentic' sources of history and then generated a specific knowledge of 'sati' to make juridicization legitimate. The colonial officials asked specific questions to the pundits of the Nizamat Adalat (the Provincial Court). On the basis of those questions, the court pundits gave their vyawasthas (prescriptions). Two court pundits could provide two different interpretations basing their arguments on two different texts, or even two different interpretations of the same text. But "the privilege of the final authoritative interpretation of their vyawasthas was appropriated by colonial officials. For it was the Nizamat Adulat judges, the governor-general and his council who determined which vyawasthas were 'essential' and which 'peripheral'." The reformist and anti-reformist

---

10 In fact, in all colonized societies, the colonizers found one or other pretext to marginalize the local cultures in order to validate the supremacy of the Western rationalism.

discourses came much later to be cited selectively in favor of a juridical action against the practice of 'sati'. It was basically the colonialist discourse that constructed an "authentic tradition" in Bengal (or in India, in general) of their own choice, thoroughly informed by Western rationalism.

Besides, women, who are expected to be the focus of the debate on the practice of 'sati,' were decentered in the discourses of 'sati.' Due to the obsessive colonial preoccupation with its own rationalism, tradition became the chosen site of the discourses where the sufferings of women became largely inconsequential. The condescending benevolence of patriarchy and its malevolent other self wrestled with each other in that designated terrain. This banishment of women from the discourses of 'sati' and the symbiotic complicity between local patriarchy and the rationalist colonial world view easily dissipated the feminine traits of tradition. Out of all these, what emerged was a celebration of masculinity - masculinity that legitimated colonialism, masculinity in the renunciation of one's own feminized identity as the colonized, masculinity redeemed from the 'golden age' of India to brave the masculinity of colonialism and masculinity also defined in terms of its ability to protect the 'female.'

12 Not until M.K. Gandhi came to the scene in early twentieth century, these traits could be recovered.
The first casualty of this phallogocentric cosmology was the reformist discourse itself. In spite of the enactment of certain reforms (e.g., abolition of 'sati', remarriage of Hindu widow), the encounter with colonial masculinity from the very outset feminized the reformist discourse which more and more came to be pictured as a protege of colonial rule. Within the masculinist cosmology imparted by colonialism, this feminized self-identity soon came to be recognized as ignominious, and disempowering. Two propensities were manifest among the emerging elites. One, to reject this feminized identity along with the total rejection of an 'ignoble' heritage for an identity as the direct progenies of Enlightenment as seen among the 'Young Bengalis' under the leadership of Derozio. Here the masculinity is borrowed straight away from the Enlightenment tradition which is considered to be a universal cosmic view. To a section of the 'Young Bengalis', however, it was not exactly Enlightenment, rather an undifferentiated endowment of the West, including Christianity, the religion of the conquerors, that could be perceived to have the masculinizing effect. Within this terrain of social politics, anything to be more effective had to be presented as more masculine in its stance, or conversely, had to present its discursive opposite as feminized. While the renegade Young Bengalis were understandably inclined to look at their own actions as recalcitrance to the norms and
rituals of the native society and therefore masculine, the larger elite society of Calcutta looked at it more as a total submission to the West. The local Patriarchy, with its allegedly agonizing reminiscence of the forcible abduction of its women in the past, couldn't see the seduced apostasy of the brightest students of the Hindu College as anything different.

This feminization of the reformist bent and the Young Bengal movement, in spite of the constellation of the brightest people of early nineteenth century Bengal around them, made it impossible for them to be the principal impetus for the development of nationalism in late nineteenth century. Nationalism to be effective in the colonial setting had to be constructed as equally masculine in confronting colonialism which gave rise to the second propensity. Given the prioritization of a specific 'tradition' and a specific 'history' in the colonized social discourse, that masculinity had to be retrieved from the 'glorious past', rejection and/or reforms of which were perceivably debilitating.

The quick decline of these two prominent trends cannot slip unnoticed. Contradictions were pointed to in Rammohun's own life-style. The newspapers of the 1880s and 1890s are abundant in evidence of the progressive attenuation of the reformist discourses. Brahmoism gradually lost its distinctive religious character and came to be labeled as
"true reformed Hinduism" even by some of its leading proponents like Rajnarain Bose. Keshub Chandra Sen, the leader of the more radical other faction of Brahmo Samaj, largely lost his moral credibility on the charge of his failure to overcome the lures of mundane gains after his daughter’s pre-pubescent marriage with the Raja of Coochbehaz. The Derozians, by their middle age, were sobered down both by the deprivation stemming from social alienation and by their urge to attain social respectability. All these were happening at a time when a cultural nationalism heavily drawn upon Hindu orthodoxy was on the rise.

There are many interpretations of why the reformist discourses failed to provide the inspirational ground for burgeoning cultural nationalism in late nineteenth century. The Marxist Bengali intellectuals generally

---


14 David Kopf has painstakingly made a case, almost successfully, to rationalize Keshub Sen’s action on the ground that his daughter and the Raja didn’t have any pre-pubescent conjugal life.


16 There are many historians, both of liberal and Marxist persuasions, including renowned historians like Sumit Sarkar, who assert that reformist discourses were the sources of nationalism. Such assertion has to be solely accented upon post-1905 anticolonial politics in complete oblivion of the pre-existence of nationalist thoughts. Even the secular modernist nationalism of the post-1905
account for this failure from a class analysis of the reformers, the unchanging nature of the exploitative material relations, the constraint in bourgeois development in a colonial setting and the consequent superficiality of cultural reforms. Sumit Sarkar points out the constraints of the objective conditions of colonial subjugation as detrimental to Rammohun’s modernity. Asok Sen examines economic constraints of the so-called renaissance under colonial condition. He discusses the inevitable failure of Vidyasagar’s arduous reformist efforts in terms of the ‘colonial constraints on Bengal’s economy and society,’ and also the ‘historical complex of imperialism which Vidyasagar could not really clarify for himself or for his society.’ Arabinda Poddar traces the economic roots of the urban elites of Calcutta who were at the center of the reformist activities. About the alienation of these urban elites,

period is always scrutinizable, as I’ll discuss later. Not to take it into cognizance the significance of religious orthodoxy in informing Indian nationalism gives rise to a historiographical tendency which is incapable of grasping the political contentions over identity in the subcontinent.


Poddar notes, "the mobility caused by western impact and the resultant ferment remained confined to the fences of Calcutta, the banian metropolis. Intellectual ferment hardly moved beyond its outer fringes, where the pull of traditional restraints were still strongly felt and where cultural regenerative aspirations remained largely atrophied."²⁰

While the material relations are a very important aspect in comprehending, in a broader stroke, the power relations and the structure of the society, the importance of the cultural epiphenomena, to use a Marxist term, can hardly be ignored, especially after the rediscovery of Gramsci. The reductionist singularity of Marxist explanatory structure, lopsided toward the economic relations of the society in conspicuous negation of at least some autonomy of the superstructure, has promoted certain methodological norms that conditioned the emergence of an invariant meaning. This interpretation, of course to the dismay of the Marxists now groping for alternative pathways, failed to explain convincingly the actual changes in the intellectual arena, though there was no remarkable change in the economic relations of the society.

Besides, the proponents of religious revivalism, which was the primary source of nationalist inspiration in late

nineteenth century, shared the same class affiliation with the reformers and fitted into the same material relation. Still their success in molding the nationalist spirit can hardly be dismissed inasmuch as it didn’t fit into the Marxist explanatory structure.

A case could be made, with some justification, from the Habermasian perspective. As Habermas says, the type of validity claim attached to cultural values doesn’t transcend local boundaries. Cultural values do not count as universal. They are located within the horizon of the life-world of a specific group or culture. "And values can be made plausible only in the context of a particular form of life."21 Such values as derived from a common religious heritage in India structured and unified the world-views of the Bengalis, provided them with a socially validated mythic model of interpretation of social realities and permeated their life practices. Anything to be intelligible and acceptable had to conform to this pre-existing model.

Along this line, one could argue that the rational conduct of life that Rammohun and other reformers were trying to transplant in the Bengali society was anchored in occidental orientation, but came with the claim of universality. The cultural interpretive system of the

---

Bengalis which derived its rationale from the local mythical sources identified the occidental rationality as completely alien and therefore disruptive. While reforms could be imposed on the people with some or no success, the mythico-cultural interpretive system warded off western rationalism from being an internalized source of political self-definition.

The argument for an autonomous cultural boundary can be stretched a little farther to test both its agility and fragility. Here we can begin with the argument that the cryptic influence of the meta-language of 'traditionalism' gradually overtook the reformist discourse. The conceptual frames passed as natural in language and used unguardedly in depicting the 'reconstituted' and 'reformed' reality surreptitiously legitimated the existing worldview and brought the reformist penchant back into the circuit of the dominant perception. Rammohun went back to the mythic sources like Vedanta to refashion it in the mold of the unitarian faith asserting that monotheism was central to 'authentic' Hindu tradition. The allegiant search for 'authentic Hindu tradition' at the very outset subdues reformism. Widow remarriage, enacted in 1856 but still not much in practice in Bengal, can be put forward as another example.

Vidyasagar found a support for widow remarriage from Parasar Samhita. But citing Parasar Samhita as a legitimate
source itself is an act of legitimation of other mythic sources that were definitely not too benign to Vidyasagar’s reformist desire, but were readily available as a support to the prevalent cosmology within which oppressive practices were authenticated. The prevalent cosmology provided a specific meaning of ‘marriage’ epitomized in the Sanskrit expression, Putrarthe kriote varya (Man takes wife to get son). The Asvalayana Grhya Sutra describes four accepted forms of marriage and four other unaccepted forms. Only a son born of one of the accepted forms of marriage can deliver several generations of descendants and ancestors, the number of generations being determined by the kind of marriage. 22

Clearly, in the act of marriage, man is the subject and the wife is the object. Even this objectification of woman is secondary in importance to getting a son which again signifies the primacy of manhood. The son also takes over the material responsibilities. The whole mythological discourse and the materiality that stems from this is about a male continuity. Woman comes in only as an object to prop up the phallogocentric discourse. This overwhelming male primacy proliferate in every aspect of social life. Within this belief-structure, a stray effort for widow remarriage on the basis of what has been said in Parasar Samhita, or

---

any enactment thereof, could hardly be effective. Besides, marriage is entangled with the concept of reincarnation in Hindu cosmology which makes remarriage even more unacceptable. Unless this cosmology is contested at its very basic premise, which of course the reformers didn't, its totalizing effect would inescapably bring back all superficial commotion to an invariant cultural homeostasis.

Now if we stop the argument here, the Habermasian notion of impervious boundary of local culture would seem totally convincing. But then of course we have to keep aside the lasting effects of colonialism on the native cultures. Such argument would be flawed on the charge of its closure on a perception as fluid as that of culture. The over-emphasis on local boundaries of culture, practically negates the possibility of any cultural change based on outside influence -- an assertion difficult to be proved as universal. Besides, the perception of an impervious silhouette of a colonized culture presupposes much more autonomy for the culture than it actually enjoys. The very construct of nationalism as an anti-colonialist stance, not to speak of its masculinist traits, itself is a proof of the culture's perviousness. Had it been an all out success for people like Debendranath Tagore, or even Vidyasagar, such explanation could have gained some ground. If the Young Bengals failed, Akhsay Kumar Dutta and the Keshubites failed, so did Debendranath and Vidyasagar, not to mention
the throng of conservative Calcutta elites caught in a pervasive agony over loosing ground to colonial cultural intrusion.

What is important here is to comprehend the itinerary of the shifting discursive trends, and the perception of the self vis-a-vis the "Other," the colonizers, in the changing discursive environment. The anguishing task of the early nationalists was to recover a 'respectable' self-image from the colonially privileged "tradition" that was legitimate in that discursive terrain and at the same time, subvert the given power relations in that unpropitious terrain.

Obviously, it all began with the controversies on the issues like 'sati', widow remarriage or age of consent which epitomized the concerns of the local patriarchy about its loosening grip over power to determine the destiny of its own possession - women. Colonialism, in the process of feminizing the colonial society, was rendering the local patriarchy 'emasculated.'

All the years preceding the

---

23 The general tenor of argument among feminist writings is that there is a discernible complicity between local patriarchy and colonialism which is incontrovertible. In fact, the reformist group in nineteenth century Bengal, in their bid to recirculate the 'hapless women' in the male-dominated society were indeed complicit with colonialism. Neither colonialism, nor local patriarchy question the male-dominated social configuration or tradition. They start from this uninterrogated tradition, strenuously made authentic, and return to that tradition reassured after an excursus into reformism. Women, as ever, are extraneous to this patriarchal-colonial discourse. But there is a level of confrontation too
1870s, the burgeoning nationalist penchant within local patriarchy was gradually narrowing its focus on colonizers, the most important political Other, and groping for the 'right' strings to pull on. By 1870s, this trend came to realize that in anti-reformism, like a blindfolded bull tethered to a pole, it lost sight of this Other - colonialism. By then, the society in general was taught to depend on its selective tradition. It was sensitized to its patriarchal character over the reformist issues. And now its perception of the masculinist nature of colonialism was much more focused. It constructed its own masculinity on the basis of selective tradition to confront colonialism. As has been said before, colonialism had its first impact on social practices, constituted anew and perceived also as religious practices in the reformist efforts. The acts of reformation were validated in the name of a discovered/reconstituted tradition. In late nineteenth century, as a result of discursive continuity, tradition was still the designated site for confrontation with colonialism. But now it came to be informed both by the

---

between colonialism and local patriarchy. After initial complicity, the local patriarchy began to find its own masculinity at stake. The masculinist traits of pre-Gandhian nationalism in India simply cannot be explained without taking this confrontation into cognizance.

Marx would have been much better off depicting this specific construction of tradition as the "unconscious tool of history" given to the natives by the British colonialism which was later found to be opulent in masculinist traits.
reconstituted perception of religion, arduously made coherent and celebrated, and a specific construct of history, nuanced by burgeoning nationalism which emerged within that discursive terrain. Religion was a strong component in its constitution. The discursive terrain, of course, was initially produced within the strong orientalist interest in recovering 'authentic Hinduism' from the ancient scriptures, as discussed earlier, which to some extent validated the nationalist pursuit along the religious line.

Cultural Nationalism and Hindutva: Celebration of Masculinity

In recounting the birth of nationalism in Bengal, Partha Chatterjee adds another dimension to the rationale of the preponderance of religion thus:

...the very definition of a 'Hindu' religion had become enmeshed in the complex interplay between the thematic and problematic of nationalism. For the national-cultural project was not only to define a distinct cultural identity for the nation and to assert its claim to modernity, it was also to find a viable cultural basis for the convergence of the national and the popular. In the Indian case, unlike that of many countries in central and southern Europe, neither language nor racial distinctiveness was a suitable criterion for defining national solidarity. Rather, within this thematic and problematic, two elements combined to identify Hinduism as a likely candidate
which could provide Indian nationalism with a viable cultural foundation of nationhood: first, the possibility of a large popular basis, and second, the very identification by modern Orientalist scholarship of the great spiritual qualities of classical Hinduism.\footnote{Chatterjee, Partha. \textit{Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World - A Derivative Discourse}? London: Zed for the United Nations University. 1986. p. 75.}

While the racial and linguistic diversities in India were a major consideration in constituting the thematic of the national, the choice of Hinduism definitely didn’t do justice to the popular. This makes one skeptical about the autonomy of the choice of religion as a constituent of nationalism implicit in this statement.\footnote{A secular identity of ‘Indianness’ would have been a much better choice, as the history of twentieth century political strife in the subcontinent would come to prove later. The element of Indianness was not too unknown to the protagonists of nationalism around that time. But within the discursive economy, it never had as much prominence as religion for reasons mentioned earlier. Besides, as we’ll discuss soon, colonial history was also complicit in steering religion to prominence.} What emerged as more important was the colonial discursive environment in which choices were made less autonomously and a host of literary and historical narratives emerged, sometimes undifferentiated, having the imprint of coloniality.

Bankim Chattopadhyay, one of the most erudite writers of nineteenth century Bengal, looked meticulously into the concept of Hinduism which would surprise an Edward Said of...
the late twentieth century. He took on the orientalists like William Jones, H.H. Wilson, Thomas Colebrooke, Albrecht Weber, Fredrich Max Muller and others to interrogate the authenticity of knowledge of 'India' and Hinduism produced in their writings. In depicting the orientalist penchant in constructing a strenuously cohered category of 'Hinduism' out of diverse beliefs and practices, he wrote:

Search through all the vast written literature of India, and you will not, except in modern writings where the Hindu has sought obsequiously to translate the phraseology of his conquerors, meet with any mention of such a thing as the Hindu religion. Search through all the vast records of pre-Mohamedan India, nowhere you will meet with such a word as religion. The Dharma, which is used in the modern vernaculars as its equivalent, was never used in pre-Mohamedan India in the same sense as religion.

...There was no Hindu conception answering to the term 'Hinduism', and the question with which I began this letter, what is Hinduism, can only be answered by defining what it is that the foreigners who use the word mean by the term.27

But in Bankim, the dismissal of this orientalist construct of consistent Hinduism converges on an alternative mode of search for the primordial, more rationalized and more historicized in keeping with the demands of

Enlightenment and at the same time generating, presumably, a more empowering self in the face of colonial denigration.

In doing so, he fell back on the concept of dharma "to be extracted out of the impurities of folk religion." But, no matter how noble the objective was, he fell prey to the same delusive tendencies he wanted to get rid of. He asserted the superiority of a reformed Hindu religion as a complete "system of culture." Invariably, in his search for a system of culture, he had to reduce the differences and look for homogeneity which, by his own admission, didn’t exist. Besides, while this reform was expected to reveal India’s spiritual superiority and thus confront Western materiality from its own vantage point, it, curiously for its legitimation, appealed again to Western rationality perhaps because of the imperceptible acceptance of the Western epistemology as superior to that of India. Bankim could never step out of this snare.

But Bankim’s endeavor to historicize Hindu mythological characters, for example the character of Krishna in *Krsnacaritra* (1886), sieving them out of the folk impurities and modelling them after the Western perception of historicity drawing analogy from historicized Greek

---

28 Chatterjee. Op cit. p. 77

29 Ibid. p.77.

30 Bankim’s bondage to Western knowledge is strikingly similar to what we see in Edward Said, manifest in ‘Orientalism.’

174
mythological characters, did provide a propitious ground in which religious identity could be reasserted, as though rationally, with a claim to legitimacy even within the Enlightenment pursuit of knowledge. Around Bankim’s time, literature, narratives on perceived tradition, history of burgeoning nationalism, all drew prepotently from this celebrated perception of religion. Bankim himself wrote in *Sitaram*:

> Who polished the stone with such delicate artistry, was a Hindu like any of us? Who wreathed them together without a thread, was he a Hindu like any of us?... Who carved those female figures, were they Hindus like us? Then I remembered the Hindus. Then I recollected the Upanishads, Gita, Ramayana, Mahabharat, Kumarasambhava, Sakuntala, Panini, Katyayana, Samkhya, patanjal, Vedanta, Vaisheshika - all were the achievements of the Hindus... Then I thought, ‘blessed I am that I was born a Hindu.’

Hemchandra retrieved a Hindu mythic story for his most famous epic poem *Vrtrasamhar* which is about the war between the gods and the demon Vrtra. The victory of the gods is ensured only through the self-sacrifice of the sage Dadhichi. This was immediately accepted as a tropic

---


representation of the on-going struggle against colonialism and as a source of inspiration for self-sacrifice in liberating the 'motherland' equated with 'mother Goddess.' Similarly, James Todd's "Annals Of Rajasthan," which was based on oral stories of Rajasthan, in spite of its questionable historicity, presented itself as an indispensable source of inspiration for Hindu virility and was used profusely in all branches of Bengali literature. As Rabindranath puts it, in the endless desert of ignominious history of recurrent defeats of India since the time of Alexander to that of Robert Clive, the heroic deeds of the Rajputs were the only oasis. "Bengali poetry, drama, novels... with an irresistible urge, milked Todd's Rajasthan." Poet Rangalal Bandopadhyay gleaned stories from Todd's annals for his narrative poems like Padminir Upakhyan (1858), Karmmadevi (1862) and Shur-sundari (1868). Other poets, namely, Swarnakumari Devi (Kharga-Parinoy), Pyarishankar Dasgupta (Maharana Pratap Simha), Rajendranarayan Mukhopadhyay (Rajmangal) and Bipinbihari Nandy (Sachitra Saptakanda Rajasthan) soon followed to draw emotive elements from Todd's Rajasthan and build a big repertoire of narrative Bengali poems. On the other hand, Jyotirindranath Tagore's drama Sarojini (1875) and Ashrumati (1879), Dwijendralal Roy's Tarabai (1903), Pratapsimha

---


176
(1905), *Durgadas* (1906) and *Mebarpatan* (1908), and numerous contribution by other playwrights helped the educated Hindus rediscover a glorified past, be it real or imagined, which rekindled a sense of 'national pride.' Soon the themes were taken over by traditional folk theater, known in Bengal as *Yatra*, which galvanized a popular perception of nationness based on Hindu glory. Numerous novels written by, among others, Swarnakumari Devi, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Rameshchandra, Damodar Mukhopadhyay, Haranchandra Rakshit, Sitanath Chakraborty brought the glorified religious identity, culled from Todd’s Rajasthan, to the foreground of enlightened social discourse. Swami Vivekananda, commenting upon Bengali literature of his time said, "two-thirds of the nationalistic sentiment prevalent in modern Bengali literature is derived from this Book."34

There was no concealment of the intention in the selective reconstruction of a glorified tradition and a popular history and their political use through the media of literature and performing arts. Girishchandra Ghosh, a front-line playwright and organizer of early Bengali theater, wrote:

The heart of the nation in India lies in religion. Nobody can touch the heart of India only with patriotic parlance. India is religious. Those who plough the land in the sun of summer, they also know the name of lord

---

Krsna... If drama demands a universal appeal in India, it has to fall back on Krsna... National progress can't be achieved through imitating the foreigners. Progress is founded upon the heart of the nation.

... If we intend to resort to that heart, we have to resort to religion. Religion, lodged in the heart could never be banished by the foreign sword...
All the acclaimed books of all nations are based on mythology...He who doesn't understand the power of mythology, doesn't understand his responsibility.36

At the cusp of the two centuries, in Bengali literature, it was all a celebration of Hinduism. So much was the sway of this social proclivity that even Rabindranath, in spite of the pioneering role of his family in reforming Hindu religious practices37 and his own early acrimonious remarks about these practices, later came to concede to the ‘celebrated rationality’ of such practices. In the years just preceding the first partitioning of Bengal (1905), Rabindranath wrote that there were virtues in functional specialization through caste system.38 Even Sati received an

35 The name of Krsna is used here figuratively, what it really means is religion.


37 Rabindranath himself was the secretary of Adi Brahmo Samaj.

honorable mention in Rabindranath.\textsuperscript{39} In the poem \textit{Sivaji Utsav}, written in 1904, Rabindranath paid homage to 'national hero' Sivaji for his effort to 'unite sundered India under one religious kingdom.'\textsuperscript{40} Earlier, He published two articles in \textit{Bangadarshan} (Sravana, 1308/1901), 'Nation Ki' and 'Hindutva' where he ventured to present a theory of a Hindu nation different from European notion of nationalism.\textsuperscript{41}

\textbf{Estranging the Muslims}

In anti-colonial politics, the preeminence of rediscovered masculinity in Hindu religious identity was initially found to be empowering. The whole anti-colonial nationalist discourse was replete with religious imagery, all drawn from Hinduism. It was because of the overwhelming predominance of the Hindus in the elite class who participated in the political discourses. But this delirious

\begin{footnotes}
\item[40] \textit{Rabindra Rachanabali}. Vol III. Centennial Anniversary Edition. Calcutta: Govt. of West Bengal. 1961. p. 917. Because of the controversial tonality of this poem, it was not later included in the volume published by Viswa Bharati.
\end{footnotes}
imbrication of religion and national identity had a natural, inevitable and disempowering outcome too in the discursive environment of national politics which, around the same time, began to open up its silhouette for other agonistic construction of identities.⁴² Coextensive with the celebration of the Hindu religious identity in forging the ‘nation’ was the estrangement of the people of other religious persuasions, especially the Muslims who constituted more than half the population in Bengal. The celebration of Hindu religious identity obviously posed a preemptive closure to the ambition of the politicized middle class Muslims, newly emerging after a long hiatus.⁴³ Besides, the elements and tropics of discourse chosen from the near past, historic or imagined, to constitute the religious identity were also the sources of a contemptuous portrait of the Muslims. Most of the stories borrowed from Todd’s Rajasthan were about conflict between the Rajput kings and the Muslim emperors who were mostly pictured as invaders brimming their treasure with the loot from the Hindu kingdoms and acceding Hindu territories by resorting to ineffable atrocities. They were also introduced in literature and popular history as lascivious, lowly creatures and abductors of Hindu women. In Rangalal’s

⁴² There is a Bengali adage: "The more you rejoice, the more you will lament later - says Ram Shanna."

⁴³ The itinerary of Islamic religious identity in Bengal is traced in chapter 5.
Padminir Upakhyan, the first Bengali literary work to borrow a theme from Todd’s annals, the story is about the libidinous design of Alauddin Khalji, a Muslim ruler, to abduct the Rajput queen Padmini and Padmini’s wit in outclassing Alauddin and freeing her captive husband. Padmini’s story was the theme of a number of dramas. All the heart-rending stories of Rana Pratap Singh depicted in Bengali novels, dramas and narrative poems of the time point to Akbar, the Mughal emperor, as the source of all tribulation of the patriotic Rajput King. In all these literary works and popular history, the Muslims were called yavana, derey (the bearded), nerey (the circumcized) and other opprobrious epithets tinged with sufficient ignominy and rancor to outrage the contemporary Muslims. Bankim’s novel Anandamath, written in 1882, had a legendary effect in galvanizing the nationalist spirit. "Anandamath preached a new ideal of patriotism and nationalism in India...To the patriots it was like a sacred book - Swaraj-Gita (Gita that inspires independence).”

But it has also been the most controversial novel in Bengali literature for its apparent

---

44 The congruence of rediscovered masculinity and nationalism didn’t stop at seeing masculinity in man, especially the Hindu heroes of the past but also activated masculinity in women. Such was the celebration of the masculinity. There is doubt among the historians whether Padmini was at all a historical character.


181
malice against the Muslims and this time, it was not the Muslim ruler, as in other novels, but the Muslim people.  

The situation was exacerbated by the mainstream historical writings too. Situated at the crossroads of this narrowly-forged nationalist discursive environment of their time and a colonial enterprise of historical writings which were believed to conform with the authentic mode of historicism, historians like Tarinicharan Chattopadhyay gleaned facts from the repository of the past selectively that would satisfy the nationalist penchant and presented them in historical writings in a manner that would meet the demand of colonial historiography. Indeed, Tarinicharan, as a historian, was the function of the intertextuality in circulation at his time. In spirit, this history was no

---

46 In 1983, one hundred years after Anandamath was written, there was a heated debate in the West Bengal state legislative assembly on the question whether there should be a centennial of the publication of Anandamath. Finally, the centennial passed unremarkably.

47 For a brief sketching of the influence of the English historians on Indian nationalist historiography, see chapter 2.

48 Partha Chatterjee, in his book The Nation and Its Fragments, argues that the nationalist historians like Tarinicharan had considerable autonomy in writing history evident in the recovery of a glorified Hindu past and challenging the historical writings of some colonial historians like James Mill. But if we delve into these counter-discourses of historical writings to comprehend why a ‘gloried Hindu past’ both in terms of physical prowess and intellectual attainment had to be recovered in stead of a common past of all Indians and why the Muslims were demonized in spite of the possibility of other perceptions, perhaps, we won’t concede that much autonomy to these counter-discourses vis-a-vis the
different from Rangalal's *Padminir Upakhyan* or Bankim's *Rajsingha*. Nor was it dissimilar from the works of Western historians in terms of diabolic representation of the Muslim rulers. In all these literary works, popular forms of history and mainstream historical writings, a new history of India was reconstructed singularly based on authenticized Hindu civilization in which the Muslims were presented as a pernicious exteriority. The emerging nationalism had no pretense of making claim on Islamic conquest or heroism of the Muslim rulers who definitely excelled their Hindu counterparts. The protagonists, blindly influenced by the prevalent discursive ambience, were so convinced by their own exclusive visibility in the political arena that they were largely oblivious of the feelings of the Muslims. It was soon bemoaned. The subcontinent has not yet been able to correct this blunder.

This fragmented construction of identity was, however, effective in interrogating the colonial state. The identity was now thought to be historicized in terms acceptable to Western historiography. It made a claim to an imagined and dominant colonial discourse. It was more a tailored response to the colonial historiography. The resuscitation of the 'inner domain,' to which Chatterjee attributes 'sovereignty,' was largely reconstituted by the official discourse. As discussed earlier, even the terrain in which the political confrontation took place, e.g., culture predominantly informed by religion, was pre-designated. But this critique of the historians' autonomy, by no means, disparages their contribution to emerging nationalism.

183
decolonized ‘modern’ state. Definitely, this claim put the self-designated and vaunted alterity, and thus the legitimacy, of the colonial state at stake. In spite of the initial colonial authority over the subjugated counter-discourse, coloniality came to be interrogated more and more seriously, particularly from the perspective of modernity with which coloniality, on occasion, was discernibly at odds.

To offset the political power of the nationalist trend, the colonial discourse soon identified its faultline and made full use of it. The ground was already propitious. In addition to the pronounced acrimony of the Hindus against the Muslims manifest in the vast body of writings was the appraisal of the injustice done to the Muslims in W. W. Hunter’s The Indian Musalmans first published in 1871. An ‘auspicious’ moment was also soon found, indeed created in order to widen the rift. And that was the partition of Bengal in 1905. While the partition, the events around partition and the generated perceptions of conflicting

---

49 By modernity, a particular strand of modernity is alluded here which is not completely convinced of the rationale of colonialism. The Hindu elite of late nineteenth century was eclectic in its deployment of Western knowledge in the anti-colonial discourse. Bankim’s writings are an excellent example in this case.


51 The plenitude of mainstream history about the ‘divide and rule’ policy of the colonial rulers makes it redundant to delve into details here.
communal interests deepened the chasm between the Muslims and the Hindus, it, at the same time, helped sharpen the anticolonial stance and peopled the history of nationalism for the first time completely changing the idiom of politics for the remaining colonial period. The first was intended by the colonizers and the second was not even dreamt of. Sumit Sarkar writes:

"Conceive the howls! They will almost slay me in Bengal" - wrote Curzon in high good humour to Amptill on 8 June 1905, conveying the news that the partition plan had been sanctioned at last. The governor of Madras agreed that the "howls" would be terrible - "but from what Sir Andrew Fraser told me I should imagine that they would not last long or lead to any real disturbance of the peace." The campaign against the partition so far had followed the beaten track of petitions, conferences, and verbal pyrotechnics, and so the bureaucrats still believed with Ibbetson that "the native...will quickly become accustomed to the new conditions." But, with startling rapidity after July 1905 the movement broke away from all traditional moorings, developed new technics of militant action, and broadened into struggle for swaraj...all the calculations of the officials went awry.52

The paramount significance of the Partition of Bengal and politics around that event was that it entailed a massive political action and an all-out popular resistance to colonial rule. The resistance took many different forms

informed by varying perceptions of identity of the colonized, and their perceived strength in encountering the colonial rule.

The most prominent form born directly out of the Partition of Bengal was the Swadeshi ("of my country") movement. The movement drew a large following, at least at the beginning, among the populace. Erected upon the discourse of atmasakti (self-strength), initially, it was a passive resistance groping for an identity and a social formation strong enough to ignore the presence of the colonial rule. The first few priorities in this scheme of things were: development of indigenous industries; setting the ground for national education uncontaminated by colonial inscriptions; a resort to indigenous legal system. Soon after partition, the discourse of atmasakti became so pervasive that for a time the whole of Bengal was overtaken by it. Sarkar calls this phase 'constructive Swadeshi movement.' Indigenous textile mills and improved handlooms, earthenware and tanneries all provided a good account of development. National education garnered substantial achievements even in the early years of the partition through the Bengal National College and School and Society for the Promotion of Technical Education by using vernacular as the medium of instruction. A rural development scheme outlined by poet Rabindranath Tagore (who won the Nobel prize for literature in 1913) and drawn upon indigenous
customs and institutions was also being experimented. The call for boycotting Manchester cloth and Liverpool salt was well-received in Bengali Hindu society. And the festivities that featured Hindu customs and practices swept all over Bengal since partitioning of Bengal.

But soon strategic differences in encountering coloniality began to surface within the Swadeshi movement and generated tension. Exclusively preoccupied with various modes of confrontation with the colonial rule, however, these subtrends within Swadeshi movement didn’t pay enough attention to the issues of communal conflict of interest which surfaced through the crevice of partition and left it imprudently to the future to take its toll. The militants in the movement like Bipin Chandra Pal, Brahmobandhav Upadhyay and Aurobindo Ghose were intent upon developing the boycott into a fullscale movement of resistance. Newspapers like Bande Mataram, Jugantar, Sandhya, Sanjibani, which were the most popular newspapers of the time, provided a supportive discursive ground for this militant movement of resistance. Aurobindo in his articles on passive resistance advocated for the organization of Swadeshi enterprise, national schools and arbitration courts, but only as secondary to the

___

more important program of paralyzing the foreign administration through the means of total boycott.\textsuperscript{54}

Between 1905 and 1907, a third distinctive trend emerged in Bengal politics which took it as its aim a complete and unadulterated Swaraj (home rule); and not piecemeal constitutional reform or slow self-regeneration. Born out of the passive resistance of Swadeshi movement, soon it entailed terrorism. While the passive resistance implied a bid to organize a mass movement, terrorism came to rely almost entirely on the heroism of a section of the elite. Symbols and images accepted as sources of inspiration in terrorism were mostly derived from Hindu mythologies and the tradition of Hindu cult. The literature on terrorism "preached revolution as a religion. Brahmins were in the fore-front of this struggle and secret societies dedicated their murderous operations to one Hindu deity or the other. Their vows were taken on the sacred water of the Ganges, the ceremony of initiation being accompanied by the chanting of imprecations. The sanction for bloodshed was sought from Hindu scriptures arguing that the Bhagwat Gita had spoken of murder as a divinely inspired deed when committed in defence of Hinduism. The oaths of swadeshi were taken in the courtyard of the famous Kali temple, incorporating Hindu


188
rituals more than ever into the movement."\(^{55}\) Jugantar, Bande Mataram, Sanjibani and Sandhya, the most popular newspapers of the time, quoted from Gita to convince people that "killing was not a sin" and Krsna himself incited Arjuna to war when it was thought necessary. In the prevalent masculinist anticolonial discourse, the country came to be represented as the mother who was to be protected. Hindu imageries were profusely strewn in these political discourses. For the Muslims, already cautious and protective of their religious identity, among other quandaries, it was intelligibly difficult to identify with these symbols, images and rituals.

In the wake of this mass political reincarnation of Hindu traditionalism, the conscience of Enlightenment, born in early nineteenth century, reappeared too, albeit with a feeble voice. A parallel discourse emerged that cautioned against the backslide that the excesses in Swadeshism might entail. Shibnath Shastri, a stern anti-colonialist, wrote, "The patriotism which glorifies our past as ideal and beyond improvement and which rejects the need for further progress is a disease."\(^{56}\) Deploring the rationalization of 'superstitious' religious practices in the writings of

---


Rabindranath in the years just preceding the partition, Pritwishchandra Ray commented rather acrimoniously:

It is enough to make one feel like dying of shame and sorrow to find a man like Rabibabu declaring that all opportunities for the cultivation of human qualities had been available to every villager under the traditional social organization.  

A transformative view of cultural identity anchored in indigenousness and purged of its evils was evidently prioritized by this parallel discourse. Rabindranath, after his early excursion into traditionalism, sharply changed his views. The best example comes from Rabindranath’s literary masterpiece "Gora" written between 1907 and 1909. Rabindranath’s romanticized vision of the future Bengali society during the constructive phase of the movement makes a distinctive shift at the end of his timeless novel "Gora." The young man in this novel, set ablaze by a strong sense of patriotism, thought that a comeback to traditional religion which forms the base of the samaj (society) would be the means of his liberation. But he soon realized that because of the heinous caste system and deplorable schism along religious line which set people apart, "The ties of the samaj (society), the devotion to customs, do not give them any strength in practice... Gora realized that samaj provides no help in times of needs, no support in the face

of danger - it can only harass men by enforcing a rigid conformity... In the immobility of rural life Gora saw the real weakness of our country in an absolutely unadorned form... No longer could Gora delude himself with a romantic make-believe world of his own." This parallel discourse against the extreme form of traditionalism had its follow-up in the development of liberal politics which, although originated in the late nineteenth century with the establishment of Indian National Congress in 1885, gained ground actually after the constraints of the Swadeshi movement surfaced.

Search for a Hindu-Muslim Amity:
Constraints of the Known Discursive Practices

The constraint of the swadeshi movement, largely deriving inspiration from Hindu religious tradition, in garnering the support of the Muslims was obvious. During the partition of Bengal in 1905, it was seriously understood, for the first time, how much the Muslims mattered in Bengal politics. Therefore, a concurrent discursive propensity soon appeared. The vilified Muslim rulers of late nineteenth century literature and popular history, now came to be portrayed as patriotic and benevolent rulers. Nawab Siraj-ud

---

-Doula, the last Nawab of Bengal, who had all along been described in history, written both by the local and English historians, as a tyrant, haughty, irrational and cruel ruler, resurrected with new veneration in, among other writings, Akshoy Kumar Maitreyo’s historical account on the Nawab, Kshirodprasad Vidyabinod’s drama Palashir Prayshchitta and Girishchandra’s drama Sirajddoula. It was the same Girishchandra, who in his early dramas in late nineteenth century labeled the Muslims with the contemptuous epithet - yavanas and attempted earnestly to invoke a Hindu religious zealotry within nationalist politics. Rabindranath took the central role in championing the unity of the Hindus and the Muslims. At Bijaya-samilians, arranged at the residence of Pashupati Basu of Baghbazar on Kartik 21, 1312 (1905), Rabindranath said:

The peasant who has just come back home after ploughing the land - greet him. The shepherd who has just driven the cattle back home - greet him. The person who has just come to offer puja at the abode of God (temple) which is resonating with the sound of blowing conch shell - greet him. The Musalman who has just offered his namaj facing the setting sun - greet him.

---


60 A congregation after the end of Durga Puja, the greatest Hindu religious festival in Bengal where people greet each other.

Rabindranath's agony over the Hindu-Muslim conflict was the theme of numerous articles written in the partition years. Tracing the genealogy of the problem and its contemporary political use, Rabindranath wrote:

Now we all anguish over the fact that the British are inciting the Musalmans against the Hindus secretly. If it is true, why should we be angry with the British?... We need to ponder the fact the Musalmans can be incited against the Hindus more seriously than the fact that someone is inciting them... Our enemy will make use of our failing... We have a sin in our country regarding the Hindu-Musalmman relations. This sin has been persisting for a long time. There won't be any absolution before we suffer for this sin...

We know, the Hindus and the Musalmans do not sit on the same carpet. If a Musalman enters the room, a part of the mattress is folded...

If it is a dictum of sastra, then one cannot establish own state (swadesh) - own nation (swajati) - own rule (swaraj) with this sastra. If the dictum of religion is to despise human beings, if one's life-beyond-death is ruined for taking water from the hand of one's own neighbor, if one has to insult others in order to protect one's jati, then it is the destiny of these people (Hindus) to be insulted by others for ever.62

Rabindranath detested the fact that the effort for Hindu-Muslim unity was springing only out of a political

---

expediency, not out of any humanist urge, love or selflessness, which he thought would never succeed.

With all these, a serious rethinking on the newly discovered necessity of good Hindu-Muslim relation in politics was underway... But perhaps it was too late and too constrained by discernible political motive. The effect of the last fifty years of anti-Muslim political discourse could not be offset by the fresh locution trying to woo the support of the Muslims. Besides, there were other reasons too. First, the promised colonial largess in accepting the partition was awaiting the emerging Muslim elite who began to get organized under the Muslim League since 1906. Second, other propensities within the anti-partition agitation were strong enough, indeed stronger, to neutralize any faith the Muslims possibly garnered about the possible congenial relationship. And third, recurrent communal riots during the partition years and mutual recrimination set the stage permanently for the continuance of communal politics.63

With this formally pronounced cleavage, the discourse of religious identity was for the first time realized to be disempowering, more so in Bengal where the Muslims constituted the larger section of the populace. Even the blanket identity as "the Bengalis" didn't hold out enough incentive. Still politics, in its anti-colonial pursuit

63 See the next chapter for a detailed discussion of the Muslim politics of identity.
needed an identity that would bring all people together in their anti-colonial struggle. A discourse of non-religious and modernist identity was immediately underway which had to be shifted away from the embattled ground of Bengal. This was the identity as Bharatbarniya (Indians). It was already present in literature, popular history and mainstream history but with less prominence than religious identity. Now, in quest for a new configuration of power in anti-colonial politics, the identity as Bharatbarniya was deployed to the foreground. The new perception had its reflection on contemporary literature too. Rabindranath cast Gora into this identity in his novel "Gora" (1907-09):

Now I am an Indian. There is no strife between the Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities within me. Today, all the races (jat) of this India are my races... Now induct me to the worship of that God who is dear to all, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Brahmos... who is not only a Hindu God but the God of India. 64

Evidently, tradition had still to be invoked albeit with a different perception. The locutionary mood was still religious, and the acceptance of a protean God who would be reconstructed in keeping with the demand of politics was discernibly tilted toward the Hindu perception of God, who could be changed if necessary. The tropics of politics and

---

the perception of self thus stayed devotedly within the
given discursive ambience.
The followers of the Vedas became very powerful, they went out in bands and destroyed the Buddhists... Dhamma (the presiding Deity of the Buddhists) was greatly pained at all this and assumed in his mystery the forms of Mussalmans with black caps on their heads and bows and arrows in their hands. They rode powerful horses which struck terror on all sides, and they cried out one name, ‘Khuda.’ Brahma became Mahammed, Vishnu became the prophet and Siva became Adam: Ganesh became Gazi and Kartik became the Qazi and all the ancient Rishis became Faqirs and Dervishes – goddess Chandi became Hava (Eve), and Padmavati became the Lady of Light (Fatima, daughter of the prophet). All the gods and goddesses entered Jaipur (a big village) in a body. They went on pulling down walls and gates, feasted merrily upon booty and cried out – catch them, catch them.

Ramai Pundit
Shunya Puran¹

In spite of the constraint of not having enough parallels from the history and mythologies of the Islamic world for numerous Hindu deities (and hence the duplication

¹ The abridged English translation is from Wadud, Kazi Abdul. 'The Mussalmans of Bengal' in Studies in the Bengal Renaissance. Calcutta: Jadavpur University. 1977.
of Prophet Muhammad for both Brahma and Vishnu), the medieval poet stretched his imagination as much as possible to find semblance in them. He was inclined to believe that the Muslims who invaded the land were indeed the reincarnations of gods and goddesses of heaven who descended with the divine intention of saving the Satdharmis (Buddhists) from the oppression of the followers of the Vedas (the caste Hindus). Needless to say, this view about the Muslims as the saviors of the downtrodden people, and the preaching of Islamic egalitarianism by the mystic Dervishes and Fakirs, who were widely believed to be endowed with spiritual and supernatural power, contributed to large-scale conversions of the people in the country-side of Bengal to Islam. It was also possible because the religious belief of the people in Bengal was highly malleable.

Evident in this short but refulgent narrative verse by Ramai Pundit is the convergence of three cosmologies and their undifferentiated presence in the Bengali minds which is indicative of the common discursive culture in which the Bengalis were embedded with their discrete religions. The well-being of the Satdharmis and the downtrodden people of Bengal was not only the concern of Dhamma, the presiding Buddhist deity of Baikuntha (heaven), but also of the Hindu deities like Shulapani (Siva), Vishnu, Chandi and others. In the belief structure of the Satdharmis, the deities of the Hindu pantheon, the ones derived from the Vedic scriptures
handed down through generations of people with successive and endless metamorphoses, and the ones created by the adivasis (aboriginal) in their veneration and supplication to the nature, were still alive. The fatalist and hapless people in their moments of tribulation, desperately looked for divine intervention. They believed in the Hindu mythologies which told them that God descended to this wretched earth to the rescue of humanity when it was in great distress and when religious practices were abandoned in the past. He promised to come back again and again whenever it would be necessary. Krishna told Arjuna at the battle of Kuruksetra:

\[
\text{yada yada hi dharmasya glanir bhavati bharata}
\text{abhyutthanam adharmasya tadatmanam srjamy aham}
\text{paritranaya sadhunam vinasaya ca dusktam}
\text{dharma-samsthapanarthaya sambhavami yuge yuge}
\]

(Whenever and wherever there is a decline in religious practices, O descendent of Bharata, and a predominant rise of irreligion - at that time I descend Myself. To deliver the pious and to annihilate the miscreants, as well as to reestablish the principles of religion, I myself appear, millennium after millennium.)

Illiterate people couldn’t read Bhagavad Gita written in Sanskrit. But they learned about God’s promise from the

---

oral culture which was exceedingly developed in rural Bengal. When the stranger Muslims came at the time of their distress and got into war with those who caused their tribulation, there were people to believe that these strangers were the avatars (incarnations) of Gods. In believing this, obviously, they didn’t care to take into cognizance that these strangers themselves had a complete disbelief in God’s incarnation. Islam, the new religion of these Gods, was embraced without any explicit abjuration of the belief in the deities of the Hindu pantheon. Those who didn’t embrace Islam, but perceived religion with all suppleness as a mode of expression of awe and reverence to the deities having enormous power to affect the lives of the people, were also inclined, in all earnestness, to show the same awe and reverence to the fakirs and dervishes. Because, they believed that the fakirs were endowed with divine spirit.

While the religions were discrete, their presence in the belief system prevalent in the simplest minds of rural Bengal were completely undifferentiated. There is no doubt that contention was there between religions, as it was between castes even among the non-Muslim locals. But in a symbiotic survival system, culture, of necessity, had to be syncretistic. Besides, cultural practices evolved within a given frame of intelligibility which didn’t allow discrete space for different cosmogonies. Unfortunately, there is no
significant written history of these people who lived in the unrenowned villages of interior Bengal. Historians of the past never thought of these people as historically important. The accounts of the foreign travellers like Ibn Battuta and Ma-huan provide some pictures of these villages. But perhaps, a much better cartography of the psychological landscape of these people which is characterized by extraordinary religious lissomeness, is possible through recovery of the oral tradition of literature, found in the *punthis*, especially the ones authored by the rural Muslims after the advent of Islam.

**Syncretism: Gleanings from the Oral Tradition**

Indeed, syncretism begins from the very acceptance of the Bengali language for religious-literary practices in the face of a perceived malevolence against and aversion to the

---

*Punthis* literally mean books. These are generally handwritten manuscripts of narrative verses, some of which were later printed after the printing presses were available to the rural poets. *Punthis* strictly belonged to the oral tradition of literary practices in Bengal and were meant for recital and singing in front of a small gathering in a public place or a private courtyard, and sometimes as a part of an on-going rural festival. This genre was exceedingly popular with the illiterate rural populace, and has now almost disappeared. But the old punthis, with their religious, mythico-historical and romantic elements, are still an unparalleled reservoir of information about the minds of the precursors of the present-day Bengalis which is still to be exploited in full.
local language by the Ashraf\(^4\) class. They thought Bengali, being the language of the infidels, was unworthy of any religious discourse.\(^5\) The fatwa (dictum) was so strong that those who indulged in using this language for religious discourses were stigmatized as 'sinners.' About the tension immanent in such literary practices, Roy provides some examples, all explicitly present in different punthis:

Shah Muhammad Saghir fought against his feeling of "sin, fear, and shame" associated with his literary venture in Bengali on an Islamic tradition. He spoke of the apprehension and blame associated with an attempt at writing religious books in Bengali. Another prolific pir-writer of great standing among his followers and also among the following generations, Saiyid Sultan, who showed remarkable concern for the helpless people "born in Bengal and unable to follow Arabic," found himself "blamed," for having composed his magnum opus in Bengali, Nabi-vamsa, or the Line of the Prophets, a history of the creation and of the prophets from Adam to Muhammad. For his critics the attempt amounted to making the book "Hinduized." Shaikh Muttalib, who wrote on Muslim religious laws, fiqh, found difficulty in getting over his sense of "sin" for having rendered "Islamic religious matters into Bengali." Abd al-Nabi,

\(^4\) The Bengal census of 1901 describes this ashraf class as 'noble' and 'persons of high extraction' comprising 'all undoubted descendents of foreigners and converts from higher castes of Hindus.' See Census of India. 1901. Vol vii:i. p. 439.

\(^5\) This attitude is strikingly similar to that of the literate upper caste non-Muslims who despised the loukik Bhasa (popular language) as unworthy for literary practices. They preferred Sanskrit.
who spoke of the "mental anguish of the people, unable to follow the story of Amir Hamza in Persian," was also rather "apprehensive about incurring the wrath of the lord" for having rendered "Islamic matters into Bengali."\(^6\)

But the inaccessibility of Arabic or Persian to the Bengali Muslim rural masses, and their aesthetic urge made them overcome this tension. Saghir vindicates his act of writing religious matters in Bengali by saying:

\begin{verbatim}
Guniya dekhinu ahmi
Iha bhoi michha
Na hoi bhasay kichhu
Hoye katha sacha
\end{verbatim}

(Pondering about this matter, I have come to realize that this apprehension is baseless. If the utterance is true, the language is immaterial.)\(^7\) Saiyid Sultan raises the question: if the prophet speaks one language and the followers another, how can there be a dialogue?\(^8\) And, of course, the strongest conviction is evident in Abdul Hakim:


Whatever language people speak in a country, God understands it. God understands all languages, be it of the Hindus, or of Bengal or any other language... Those who are born in Bengal, but despise Bengali language, I have doubt in their parentage. The people, who are not appeased by learning their own language, should leave the country and go abroad.  

The second level of syncretism is in the style and structure of the punthi. It takes its place in the continuum of the same oral literary tradition of Bengal with its pre-Islamic predecessors. The lineage includes the earliest popular proto-Bengali compositions like Charya-giti authored primarily by the Buddhist siddhacharyas and the mangal-kavyas, popularly known as panchalis authored by the non-Muslim locals. Punthis like the other narrative verses popular in the rural Bengali society, were composed both in the structure of payar, the short couplets, and tripadi, the long couplets with two caesurae. Their public performance

---

9  Jei dese jei baksha kahe naragan  
Sei baksha bujhe prabhu ap niranjan  
Sarbba baksha bujhe prabhu kiba hinduani  
Banga desi baksha kiba jata iti bani...  
Je sabe bangete jarmi hingse bangabani  
Se saba kahar jarma nirnoye na jani  
Desi bhasa bidya jar mane na juyaye  
nija des tyagi keha bidese na jaye.


10 For better details of the structure of the narrative verses and their public performances within the oral tradition, see Roy, Asim. The Islamic Syncretistic
was similar to that of Ram-mangal of the rural non-Muslim population, and unless restricted, drew the same social audience irrespective of religious belief.

*Mangal-kavyas*, the immediate antecedents of the punthis, largely drew upon mythico-religious stories of the deities who were humanized in their perceived relationship of love and hatred with humans. In the case of the *punthis* authored by the Muslims, a similar religious impulse was evidently there only constrained by the fact that the history of Islam, whatever little of it was really known to the rural Muslims in Bengal, didn’t happen to have too many divinities to compose the verses upon. But this constraint did not, however, bridle the enthusiasm in imagining stories, sometimes by counter-factual representation of the known figures of the history of Islam. This counter-factual imagination itself was a cultural product legitimated by the prevalent discursive environment in which, in the same process, numerous divinities of the Hindu pantheon have been produced. And operating in the same belief system, the Muslim poets were still convinced of the reproducibility of the Hindu gods in their own verses, as though they were real and believable, side by side with the actual Islamic historical figures of West Asia either in harmony or in

---


*Indeed, this constraint steered them toward creation of a rich repertoire of romantic narrative verses.*

205
conflict with them. This created a resplendent texture of textual culture embodied with local elements of religious belief and the exogenous religion they later embraced giving rise to a syncretistic cosmogony not quite congruent with Islamic world view but well accepted at the popular level without much interrogation of its authenticity.

Thus the imaginary great war between Ali and Jaykum in Rasul-Vijay was intelligible only through an analogy from the wars described in Ramayana and Mahabharata. The prominent Hindu gods were there to witness the dual between Ali and Jaykum’s son, Jana which excelled all fierce battles of the past, definitely the one between Rama and Ravana of Ramayana, and the ones at Kurukshetra, described in Mahabharata. Both Ali and Jana had to be compared with the warriors like Arjuna, Dronacharya and Bhishma to be appreciated for their valor, heroism and military prowess. In Isup-Jalikha, Isup (Yusuf) was no less philanthropic than Bali and Karna. Amir Hamza, another great warrior and Muhammad’s uncle, was to be visualized through a comparison with Indra, the presiding Hindu deity of the heaven. And the beauty of Hamza’s beloved couldn’t be less stunning than Sachi, Indra’s most beautiful wife. In the romantic narrative verse of Saifulmuluk-Badiuzzamal, Saifulmuluk had to be even more handsome than Kam-dev, the Hindu god of love, to win the heart of Badiuzzamal at the very first sight. Many important Hindu deities were invited to their
marriage and they attended the marriage. Saifulmuluk received boons that can only be provided by the Gods. In Fatimar Surat Nama, Fatima, the daughter of the prophet, was found as beautiful as Bengali aesthetics and allegories permitted. The story of Abu Jahl, Muhammad's uncle, in Shab-i-Miraj was not very different from the story of King Kans, Krishna's uncle. And the climactic syncretism is in Saiyid Sultan's Nabi-Bangsha where Muhammad is placed in the same lineage of God's incarnations along with the avatars like Rama and Krishna derived from the Hindu mythologies.12

Obviously, the history of Islam was only a remote informant to these literary practices. The stories were primarily built upon imagination drawing their elements from the social milieu, the belief system and the system of intelligibility prevalent in the society. Roy writes:

The supreme object of securing a receptive audience prompted these writers to move unfettered by conditions of purity, either historical or religious. It was not history or reason but the hero and his religion that

---

were to be vindicated for simple believers, not theologians or scholars.\textsuperscript{13}

**Power, Contention and the Punthis**

The anxiety for receptivity among the Bengali audience was there. If we look exclusively at the syncretistic propensity, it does appear that the impetus came singularly from the urge to operate within the given belief system. But if we also probe into the agonistics immanent in these literary practices, perhaps we will come across a different anxiety too. And that was about the reconfiguration of power at the social milieu. At a time when poets like Shah Muhammad Saghir and Saiyid Sultan wrote their *punthis*, Bengal was definitely under Muslim rule.\textsuperscript{14} But this didn’t automatically ensure power for the Muslims in rural Bengal. Major land-holdings were all along in the hands of the


\textsuperscript{14} Enamul Haq claims that *Isup Zalikha* was written during the reign of Sultan Giasuddin Azam Shah, 1389-1410 A.D. (*Muslim Bangla Sahitya*. p. 56; *Mahenao*. Independence Issue. August, 1959). This is also accepted by Ahmad Sharif (*Punthi Parichiti*. p. 17). Asim Roy, however, dismisses this observation through a meticulous examination of the linguistic traces which, he asserts quite convincingly, cannot be found in literary writings before the seventeenth century (Roy. Op cit. pp.13-14, 74). In any case, even if it was written in the seventeenth century, the point that it was written under Muslim rule is still valid. Saiyid Sultan completed *Nabi-Bangsha* in 1586 (*Punthi Parichiti*. pp. 44 and 248). Quite logically, *Shab-i-Miraj* was also written around the same time. The Muslim rule continued in Bengal, almost uninterruptedly, until 1757.
caste-Hindus. They socially looked down upon the Muslims, who, predominantly, happened to be converts from the lower caste Hindus. The contention began there. Conversion itself was a move toward power accented upon renunciation of the social hierarchy. But this renunciation from the bottom, understandably, didn’t meet with social approbation immediately. Therefore, the move toward power which began in conversion had to be followed through.

Literary practices of the Muslims carried on the task and hence the portrayal of relative superiority of Islam over Hinduism narrated through tangibles like war victories against the ‘Hindus’, either real or imagined and relative superiority of Muhammad over avatars like Krishna. Thus the infidel king Jaikum of Iraq had to be a Hindu. Abu Jahl, Muhammad’s uncle, was also a Hindu. In these punthis, the term kafir (infidel) was unquestionably interchangeable with the word Hindu which of course was not the identity of the non-believing people of West Asia during the period narrated in the punthis. The ultimate acclaim of the warriorship of Abu Hanifa is to be found in conquering, converting and marrying the Brahmin girls. Although there couldn’t be any Brahmin family on the way from Karbala to Damuscus, the poet of Shahid-e-Karbala

\[15\] Mss. no. 615. Sl. no. 459.
The idea of converting a Brahmin family was understandably born out of the contention prevalent not in West Asia, but in Bengal. It was this contention bearing an indelible mark of yearning for reconfiguration of the power-relations in the social milieu of Bengal that provided the primary impetus to the imagination of the poets. History of Islam and its propagation were only of secondary importance. The punthi literature authored by the rural Muslims of Bengal thus becomes a counter-discourse aimed at subversion of the given power-relations where the caste-Hindus were in advantage.

Indeed, the texts of these punthi literature provide a classic example of a counter-discourse in which an interplay of subversion and assimilation is going on concurrently. They exploited the prevalent belief system characterized by pervasive belief in divine intervention in earthly things and the system of social intelligibility to its full in order to affect the subversion. But in this strategy, imagination sometimes carried the poets so far as to believing the deities of the Hindu pantheon. The mode of reorienting the belief structure was discernibly the pre-existing mode of speculative theology. There were numerous stories of strife among the Hindu deities in the prevalent puranic literature. The relative strength of a particular deity proven in such a strife as depicted in literature was quite often the source of social judgement as to who should
command reverence. Islamic heroes were also placed in the same order only with excelling bravery in order to command more reverence. Romantic narrative verses composed by the Muslim poets sometimes drew their themes from the Hindu puranic literature. This convergence could also be schizophrenically labelled as assimilation into the same system of religious creed. Some indicators were already there to support this schizophrenia. Shaikh Fayjullah’s Goraksha Vijay,16 Kamar Ali’s Radhar Sangbad17 and Padabali,18 Shaikh Chand’s Hara-Gouri Sangbad19 are just a few examples of Muslim poets propagating Hindu religious themes in punthis.

Besides, regarding strategies for reconfiguration of power, there were alternative perceptions too, particularly since the beginning of the British rule. In the face of growing importance of these alternative strategies, the social acceptability of syncretism gradually waned. One such strategy emerged from some religious-reformist movements among the Muslims in the second half of the nineteenth century. And the other important strategy owed its origin in the gradual emergence of leadership of the community in modernist politics from the ashraf class in Bengal. They

16 Mss. no. 424. Sl no. 107.
17 Mss. no. 476. Sl. no. 30.
18 Mss. no. 301. Sl. no. 265.
19 Mss. no. 559. Sl. no. 556.
claimed to be the descendants of the Muslim conquerors/settlers, largely dissociated from the rural Muslim masses, and they chose to forswear Bengaliness in every aspect of their public image. Both these strategies demand meticulous examination for an understanding of the Bengali Muslim psyche which accepted an essentialized and politicized religious identity and pressed for a separate nation-state in the 1940s.

Waning Syncretism and the Islamic Reformist Movements

By the middle of the nineteenth century, there were a number of strong religious-reformist movements among the Bengali Muslims inspired by the developments in the Muslim world outside India. Most prominent among these were Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya, also known as Wahhabi movement, and Faraizi movement. A combination of a number of important elements was the source of strength in both of these movements. In the first place, these movements reactivated a dream of restoring the Muslim rule in India to be realized through an open confrontation with the colonial rulers.20 It was a jihad, a Holy War against the infidels in this dar-ul-

harb, the country of the enemy. This jihad sentiment was so strong among the Bengali Muslims in 1860s that they provided all kinds of support to the rebels whenever and wherever there was a rebellion against the British rule. In Hunter's depiction of the rebellion in the Punjab frontiers:

The Bengal Muhammedans are again in a strange state. For years a Rebel Colony has threatened our Frontier; from time to time sending forth fanatic swarms, who have attacked our camps... and involved our troops in three costly Wars. Month by month, this hostile Settlement across the border has been systematically recruited from the heart of Bengal. Successive State Trials prove that a network of conspiracy had spread itself over our Provinces, and that the bleak mountains which rise beyond the Punjab are united by an unbroken chain of treason-depots with the tropical swamps through which the Ganges merges into the sea. They disclose an organization which systematically levies money and men in the Delta, and forwards them by regular stages along our high-roads to the Rebel Camp two thousand miles off.

In Bengal itself there were numerous rebellions against the colonial rule which drew their impetus from religious

---


22 The Indian Musalmans. p. 1.
Islamic identity. Most important among them, as mentioned earlier, were the Faraizi movement and the Muhammadiya movement. While in the political strife against colonial rule, the successes of these movements were tangential, sporadic and transient, there was a lasting impact of the cultural component of these movements on the Bengali Muslim psyche. Jayanti Maitra writes:

...the growing process of assimilation between the two communities through nearly six hundred and fifty years received a setback from the impact of these reformist doctrines. These nineteenth century campaigns of islamization attempted to reject 'virtually all that was Bengali in the life of a Muslim' and to rediscover a 'national past', 'now believed to be entirely different from, if not antithetical to, that of the Hindus'. The Collector of Pabna reported in 1873 that under the influence of the Faraizi doctrines 'class rules were daily becoming more rigid, and the separation between Hindus and Muhammadans more marked.'

Having strong connections with the rural masses, the Faraizi and the Muhammadiya movements were extremely successful in translating the upper class dream of a recovered Muslim India into a common aspiration of all


Muslims. Surprisingly, this aspiration got a much stronger support from the atrap class Muslims than from the higher class people who soon found the stakes in this jihad against the British rulers too high for them. Unlike many other later-day political movements against British rule which earned prominence in anti-colonial politics in India, these movements were characteristically subaltern having widespread support from the Muslim peasants.

Understandably, the acceptability of these movements among the rural Muslim masses also brought about a significant change in the cultural chemistry of the rural Muslim society where syncretism had long been a way of life. Since the political movement was based on the religious identity, this identity to be adequately empowering had to be distinct in all possible ways. Culturally, Faraizi and Muhammadiya movements raised serious question about the syncretistic literary-religious practices. Both the movements were in favor of strict adherence to the principles of shariah. Obviously such principles were in sharp contradiction with the life-practices of the Muslims in rural Bengal. The converts still clung to many practices and beliefs that were unmistakably Hindu. As James Wise noted about the Muslims in Dacca, "...when small-pox attacks their families, Sitala is worshipped with as much faith as is shown by the Hindu Malakars."25

---

The reformists of the Faraizi and Tariqah movements aimed at a thorough cleansing of the religious identity in order to bring it in strict conformity with 'authentic Islamic practices.' To quote Aziz Ahmed:

It meant the whole-sale destruction of a pantheon of confused beliefs which had accumulated semi-divine deities from multi-religious and multi-cultural contacts, superstition, animism, demotic syncretism, Bhakti movements, sufi tolerance, ontological monism, poetic license and several other sources, Indian as well as foreign, but all of them alien to fundamentalist Islam.26

This is not to say that the reformist movements were fully successful in transforming the lives of the rural Muslims. Indeed, many of the beliefs and practices are still prevalent among the Bengali Muslims after centuries of preaching of authentic monotheistic Islam. But these movements definitely put the legitimacy of the syncretistic cultural practices under serious interrogation. As mentioned earlier, the syncretistic practices were never without a tension as evident in the apprehension of the medieval Bengali Muslim poets for writing 'Islamic matters' in Bangla. Now the reformist political-cultural discourse came to equate syncretism with ignorance about the 'true tradition of Islam.' In the face of this onslaught, the

syncretistic penchant in rural Muslim society didn't have any effective defence, more so because of the large-scale acceptability of the movements among the rural masses for their political objectives. Given the anti-colonial credence of these movements, and the mobilized aspiration of the Muslims of all levels for a reconquered Muslim India, the rural Muslim masses, in the process of politicization, readied themselves to abjure the cultural practices which they now thought to be disempowering in redeeming the necessary political-religious identity. Thus the influence of syncretism gradually waned.

Even the punthis of the later days reflected this shift in the social propensity. Abdul Aziz in Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya and Munshi Samiruddin in Bedar al-Ghafilin were sharply vituperative of the Muslims practicing Hindu rites.\(^7\) While the anti-colonial politics, in a way became stronger in the name of a stronger and distinctive identity, the gradual delegitimation of cultural syncretism also marked the beginning of another aspect of colonial politics which gradually brought to the fore the separate communal identities of the Muslims and the Hindus, eventually to torment the politics of the sub-continent.

The Sharif Muslims: The New Chaperons

A logical corollary in such an anti-syncretistic discursive environment was a delegitimation of any leadership of the community from the rural masses, the local converts, who didn’t practice authentic Islam. Understandably, it had to come from the Sharif (aristocrat) Muslims who braggingly sought their origin in places under Muslim rule, outside Bengal. This, in turn, again contributed to the process of delegitimating syncretism.

The Sharif Muslims, by effort, distanced themselves from the cultural practices of the rural Bengali Muslims. Considering themselves to be the expatriates from the land of Islam, they had a strong indifference to the local converts. In identifying the attributes of these people, Gordon writes:

There is difficulty in lumping together all the Muslims resident in Bengal as an ethnic category. Many of those in the small Muslim elite were Urdu-speaking Muslims who did not think themselves ‘Bengalis’. They usually did not speak Bengali and did not identify with the masses of Muslims in Bengal who were Bengali speakers. The models followed by the Urdu-speaking Muslims were the Arabic and North Indian aristocratic, cultural and religious ones. Appeal was made to the Great Tradition of Islam and prestige was given to foreign birth, Arabic names, descent from the Prophet, Urdu speech, and membership in the Ashraf, or upper class Muslim community in India. Members of this group were
descended from families who have lived in Bengal for generations or were recent arrivals, but in either case they identified themselves as Muslims rather than as Bengalis. They may well have not felt any Bengali identification at all; in fact, they looked down upon all those who spoke Bengali, to them the language of idolatry and of cowards. They saw Bengali-speaking Muslims as closer to Hindus than to the world of Islam. 28

The resurgence of the Sharif Muslims to social and political importance was in many ways a significant event in the politics of the subcontinent. Earlier, numerous anti-colonial resistance movements from the subaltern class Muslims, the flurry of colorful cultural-literary practices of the local Muslims which largely met the aesthetic needs of the community, the deliberate distancing of the supercilious aristocrats from the masses, withdrawal of the Persian as the official language in 1837 - all these contributed to the progressive attenuation of social and political influence of these aristocrats until 1850s. But from then on, the cumulative effect of the failures of the resistance movements, serious interrogation of the life-practices of the rural Muslims from the 'deployed' perspective of 'authentic Islamic tradition,' the gradual

rise of the Ashraf Muslims again to social prominence in the colonial setting through the acceptance of English education, patronage of the colonial rulers to this class especially since late nineteenth century, the quest for a distinctive and authentic religious identity, and the irresistible urge for representing the community effectively in colonial politics brought back the community to the educated aristocrats again.

The members of the Ashraf class Muslims assumed the leadership of the community, but largely attributed their ascendence to their origin, English education and colonial patronage. Therefore, their discursive preoccupation was concentrated mainly in these areas ignoring the rest of the community with the same superciliousness as before. Their abjuration of any trace of localness from their identity was now even more emphatic. There is ample evidence of this renunciation. For example, all deliberations of the Mohomedan Literary Society of Calcutta, founded in 1863 by Nawab Abdul Latif, were in English, Urdu, or even Persian, but never in Bengali which was completely disavowed because of its alleged Sankritic connection.29 The aristocrat Muslims in Bengal always spoke Urdu amongst themselves.30


Talking about Syed Amir Ali (1847-1929), a front-line Muslim aristocrat in Bengal, David Kopf observes:

Though born in Chinsura, West Bengal, his family was Persian by origin. He became the equal of any professional Hindu bhadralok, but preferred to identify neither with the Bengal renaissance which he saw as intrinsically as Hindu, nor with the flowering of Bengali language and literature from which he remained aloof for the same reason. Though he lived mostly in Calcutta, he retained Urdu as his "mother tongue," worked hard for the renaissance of the Indian Muslims... His Short History of Saracens (1900) illustrates clearly the heterogenous identity of the Muslim Bengali intelligentsia; so intense was Amir Ali's concern with the temporally remote happenings of physically remote Arabia, that if one did not already know his Bengali origins, one could easily imagine the author to have been born an Arab.\(^{31}\)

This complete indifference of the Muslim aristocrats of Bengal to the community at large which in a way they began to represent socially and politically in late nineteenth century can be explained only in terms of the reconfiguration of power under colonial rule around that period and the discursive environment within which they were steered to the position of leadership of an unknown

community. After a century of neglect and apprehension since the Battle of Plassey, the British Raj found it necessary to patronize the dwindling Muslim aristocrats when a section of it began to accept English education.\textsuperscript{32} W. W. Hunter's \textit{The Indian Musalmans} provided the rationale to believe that partly, the discontent of the Muslim community against the British Raj, manifested in sporadic subaltern class resistances, was born out of the negligence so far shown to the community. The most visible section of the community was of course the resuscitating aristocrats now educated in English who could be easily inducted into colonial government and other respectable positions. A government circular in 1897 clearly stated that where qualified Muhammadans are available they should get a preference in filling up a fair proportion [appointments];...if there are two candidates for one appointment, each of them possessing the requisite qualifications, the Lieutenant Governor considers that

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{32} English education among the Muslims in Bengal began way before it was prescribed for the community by Sir Syed Ahmed in West India. By 1850s, there was a considerable segment of aristocrat Muslims in Bengal educated in English. It was the economic problem, as opposed to the aversion to English education (as is commonly believed) that kept the Muslim community away from education. Since the second decade of nineteenth century, several academic institutions meant for the Muslim community introduced English education. It was around the same time when the Hindus did the same time. So the general thesis that the Muslims repulsed from English education out of aversion does not hold good, at least in case of Bengal. See Anisuzzaman. \textit{Muslim Manas O Bangla Sahitya 1757-1918}. Dhaka: Lekhak Sangha Prakashani. 1964. pp. 30-36.
\end{flushright}
a preference should be given to the Muhammadan candidate.\textsuperscript{33}

Lord Curzon himself put the Government policy in 1899 thus:

For the posts which are decided by public competition, discrimination and selection is obviously impossible; but in the case of posts which are filled by Government by nomination or otherwise the object is to secure fair and proportionate representation.\textsuperscript{34}

The same year, the Government officially decided to fill two-thirds of the positions in Subordinate Executive Service from the Muslims by nomination. In late nineteenth century, a series of circular, letters, government notes and memoranda created a bulk of official discourse which all of a sudden created an environment of celebration of the religious identity of the Muslims. The lure of possible material advancement created an imperative to drift away from the construction of any other syncretistic identity and rally along the religious line. Of course, the prime beneficiaries of this official discourse and the consequent government actions were the educated aristocrat Muslims, and mostly the renegades from the local Muslim community. But it made the rest of the community realize the new-found

\textsuperscript{33} Letter from the Secretary, Government of Bengal, to all Commissioners of Divisions, 15 September 1897. Quoted in Ahmed, Rafiuddin. The Bengali Muslims. p. 158.

significance of the religious identity within the idioms of colonial politics. And of course, religious identity was now not to be constructed in terms of the faith as it was, at least partly, during the reformist movement. It was reconstructed more explicitly as the instrumental political ideology of the community, the basis of subsequent contentions and negotiation.

Within the environment of the given official discourse, the growing aspiration of the resurfacing Muslim aristocrats, now sufficiently bolstered by the colonial rulers, was understandably caught into a contention with that of their Hindu counterparts. This contention was thought necessary by the colonial rulers in pursuance of their much-talked-about 'divide and rule' policy. In the colonial setting of late nineteenth century, power was not something earned through popular support. It was given. Of course, it was given in the name of a community. But that community was only in the background with the possibility of the redemption of imaginary support. A large-scale support for the Sharif Muslims from the community was not really necessary, nor even desired by the colonial rulers as long as they were convinced that the Sharif Muslims were representing their community. And in all earnestness, the rulers were disposed to believe that they were representing the Muslim community, not on the count of how much they were
looking after the interest of the community, but for the sake of the colonial policy of ‘divide and rule.’

Since the 1880s, they desperately needed to have some representation from the Muslim community to offset the effect of surging cultural nationalism of the educated Hindus. Contention between the communities on the question of representability was brought into focus immediately. To be effective in such a contention, the colonial rulers really needed the upper class educated Muslims, no matter whether they really represented their community.\textsuperscript{35} For a long time, the subjective Ashraf class perception of the Muslim interest was passed on as the interest of the community in the political discourses, as evident in their incessant negotiation for increased official positions. A major section of the Sharif Muslims, now very much involved in communal politics, could continue to ignore the rest of the community, still assured of its support,\textsuperscript{36} and without

\textsuperscript{35} For example, the Deputation which met the Viceroy, Lord Minto on October 1, 1906 to apprise the Government of the Muslim grievances in India included members from Bengal like Sharfuddin, Nawab Ali Chaudhry, Syed Ameer Husain, Naseer Husain Khyal, Syed Ali Imam and Abdur Rahim – all belonging to the old Muslim aristocracy. For greater details of the representation of the aristocrat Muslims in the name of the community, see Ahmad, Muhammad Saleem. \textit{The All India Muslim League: From the Late Nineteenth Century to 1919}. Bahawalpur, Pakistan: Ilham Publishers. 1988. pp. 55-96.

\textsuperscript{36} This support, which otherwise seems unqualified, is to be understood in terms of the rising aspiration of the community which was molded in such a way in the dominant political discourse of the community by the Sharif Muslims that the rest of the community unknowingly began
any difficulty getting the desired attention from the colonial rulers. The Muslim League, the officially designated organization to speak for the community - since its inception in 1906 in Dacca until very late 1930s - was almost exclusively a club of the Muslim educated and landed gentry. As one author opines:

...the constitution of the League was far from democratic. Its membership was open to the privileged class and not to the masses. For many years it was accused of being a coterie of arm-chair politicians with a frankly sectional appeal.\(^\text{37}\)

Even in the language of Choudhry Khaliquzzaman, one of the leading stalwarts of pre-independence Muslim League, "The Muslim League...was dominated by the titled gentry, Nawabs, landlords and Jee Huzoors [yes men]...Since its very birth in 1906, the Muslim League's activities had always

been confined to indoor political shows. Even its annual sessions were held either in well-decorated *pandals* or in big halls where a few honourable visitors were allowed by special cards. Mass public meetings were unknown to the Muslim League organization.\(^{38}\) The ‘valued’ members of the League had two primary concerns: "(1) to protect their cultural heritage with the Urdu language forming a vital part of it and (2) as successor to the previous imperial traditions to preserve their position as holders of important positions and places in the new imperial order..."\(^{39}\) In Bengal, where the Muslim League was born, the composition of the members and their objectives were no different. Until the failure in the Provincial Assembly elections of 1937, the Muslim League was not particularly anxious about their alienation from the Muslim masses. Still they represented them. Positions, places and power were given to them under discretion of the colonial rulers in the name of the community.


\(^{39}\) Ahmad, Muhammad Saleem. *The All India Muslim League*. p. 87.
The Bengali Muslims: Desiring Subjects on the Border

The palming-off of power to a small section of the community had a significant effect on the discourse of religious-cultural identity of the rest of the community which was otherwise frustrated of its failures in numerous resistance movements against the colonial rule, and confused over the contentions on authentic religious practices. Since power was delegated to the Sharif Muslims, and their material advancement under colonial patronage was fast and spectacular, there was a yearning in some of the local Bengali Muslims to identify themselves with the Sharif Muslims and emulate their life-style. Some educated local Muslims even introduced Urdu in their families as an everyday language.

However, an entry into aristocracy was not an easy one. Education, which was lately available to some local Muslims, was not the only criterion, definitely not until the beginning of large-scale electoral politics in late 1930s when the aristocracy needed a larger popular base. Until then, the most important factor was of course foreign birth or ancestry. Obviously, the relationship between the local Muslims and the exogenous aristocrats was fraught with some tension. The contemptuous indifference of the aristocrats, their abhorrence to Bengali language and to the Bengalis in general could not be fully condoned. The agony was
heightened by the fact that the cultural discourse of the time was fraught with many instances where many local Muslims began to identify themselves as Muslims renouncing their Bengaliness as though these two identities were mutually and irreconcilably exclusionary. To many of the local Muslims, allowing this cultural discourse any dominance in the society was tantamount to allowing themselves to be marginalized. Therefore, this discursive propensity was to be resisted. There were numerous articles at the cusp of the two centuries in Bengali periodicals and journals owned by the Bengali Muslims which reproached this attitude in the strongest possible language. In one such article, one Moulvi Yaqinuddin wrote in The Moslem Chronicle:

In Calcutta the Hindus are called Bengalees by every Mahomedan who has never travelled beyond the Mahratta Ditch, as if such Mahomedans, by the fact of their professing the faith of the Great Arabian Prophet, have a right to be non-Bengalees.⁴⁰

Nur-al-Iman wrote, "...the Sharif people [in Bengal] and their underlings speak Urdu and despise Bengali. But far from being able to express themselves in Urdu, they can’t even properly use the cliched words of the people of the

West." One Hamed Ali wrote, "What is more surprising and lamentable than the fact that we still do not consider this country as ours where we have been living for the last seven hundred years?...We are still not purged of our many illusions. They sleep in the hovels surrounded by bamboo and mango trees and still dream of Baghdad, Bokhara, Kabul and Kandahar. Some of them are deeply deluded even to make Urdu their mother-tongue instead of Bengali. Like the weak people expecting miracle to happen to them, a fallen jati (community or nation) sticks to improbable caprices."42 Numerous articles in Nur-al-Iman, Nabanur, Islam Pracharak, Kohinoor, Al-Eslam, Banganur, Nur and many other periodicals owned by the Muslims resented the Anti-Bengali attitude.43

This could very well be a bone of contention within the Muslim community right from the beginning of its politicization within the new mode of colonial politics. But the imperative of representing the Muslim community as a whole, created by the official colonial discourse, deferred the internal tension which was not to resurface with much significance before the creation of Pakistan in 1947.44

41 'Bangiya Mosalman Bhai Bahiner Khedmate Nur-al Imaner apil.' Nur-al-Iman. 1st Year. 3rd Issue. 1307 B.Y. (1900 A.D?)


44 Then, of course, it did, and did rend the country.
The contentious Terrain

The growing communalism since the late nineteenth century also subordinated the internal tension within the Muslim community of Bengal. The Muslims, in the communal political environment, found it necessary to be reassured of its religious identity as politically significant and undisputed from inside. The political discourse of a common Muslim identity was thus mostly preoccupied with its agonistics with the socially and politically dominant Hindus.

Besides, opprobrious references to the Muslim rulers of India of the past and their 'misdeeds' in the historical and literary writings of the Hindu literati of the late nineteenth century, though a continuity of the colonial historiography, could not be condoned by the Muslims. For such references had a direct implication to the way the contemporary Muslims were looked upon. The Bengali Muslim writers, now quite a handful of them writing regularly in the Muslim periodicals, reacted sharply to these historical and literary writings. Here again, the onus was on the Bengali Muslims engaged in literary practices in Bengali to exonerate the community from the stigma of depravity. The Muslim aristocrats were equally apathetical to the Bengali Hindu writers out of scorn and chose to remain ignorant.
about what was going on in their literary and historical discourses.\textsuperscript{45}

The objection was expressed in a spectrum of linguistic intensities – from reconciliatory to overly confrontational. People like Mir Mosharraf Hossain, a renowned Muslim litterateur, were in favor of a pragmatic reconciliation. He went as far as to ask the Muslims not to slaughter cows since it has been the source of so many disturbances in Bengal.\textsuperscript{46} But most others had a confrontational tone. While social issues like cow-slaughtering or beating drums in front of the mosques were quite often the sources of instant disturbances about which there were numerous articles, the bulk of writings issued out of the protest against the contemptuous portrayal of the Muslims in the literary and historical writings of the Hindus and their theatrical performances.

\textsuperscript{45} Of course, since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Muslim aristocrats found these discourses useful in their communal politics.

One M. Serajul Haque Miah listed a number of books like Rizia, Shahjahan, Nababnandini, Mogol Mohila, Mogol Pathan, Durgesh Nandini, Debala Debi, Ananda Math, authored by people like D.L. Roy, Bankim Chatterjee, and Ishwargupta which have attacked the Muslims with acrimony. To these, he adds up the contemporary social scenario of economic exploitation by the Hindu Mahajans (money-lenders) and the social discrimination against the Muslims who are treated as untouchables by the Hindus.\(^47\) One Ahmad Ali wrote:

The modern Bengali litterateurs are predominantly from the Hindus. These litterateurs have represented the Muslim Kings of India and their rules in such a distorted way and they have portrayed the characters of the empresses and the princesses in such a perverse way in their dramas, novels, so-called history books and even in the school text books that it is completely unbearable to the Muslims. Again, when these ineffable things are performed on the stage, it becomes a matter of unfathomable shame to the Muslims. It will be difficult to refute if anybody claims that the whole Bengali literature presently is founded upon malice against the Muslims.\(^48\)

Rafiuddin Ahmed notes, "how deeply this feeling affected the educated Muslims may be seen from the pages of Muslim journals. The Moslem Chronicle thus complained in


233
1898 that there was not even a single volume produced by the Hindus where some vituperative language had not been used against the Muslims.\textsuperscript{49} Such observations are only seconded by authors like Nirad Chaudhuri.\textsuperscript{50}

The stringent attack was on Bankim Chatterjee who was revered by the Bengali Hindus as the father of Indian nationalism. Panegyrics about Bankimchandra as the savior of the Hindu community were innumerable.\textsuperscript{51} But the Muslim community reacted acrimoniously to his genre of \textquote{historical novels.}' Qazi Abdul Wadud has rightly observed, \textquote{to one group, he is the devil, and to the other, he is a deity.}\textsuperscript{52}

The legendary Muslim kings and heroes, who are the sources of pride in the Bengali Muslim community, attained very different and despicable characters in the hands of Bankimchandra. Bakhtiar Khalji, the first Muslim conqueror of Bengal, came to be labelled as a traitor. Mir Qasim was represented more as a person gullible to sexual urges than as a patriot. Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, the most

\textsuperscript{49} Ahmed, Rafiuddin. \textit{The Bengal Muslims.} pp. 126-27.


\textsuperscript{52} Wadud, Qazi Abdul. \textquote{Bankimchandra.'} \textit{Shashwata Banga.} Dhaka: BRAC. 1983. p. 126.
controversial of the emperors for his alleged malice against
the Hindus, is portrayed as a coward in the battle against
Rajsingh. Obviously, the Bengali Muslims did not like this
vilification.

The first among the Muslim critics of Bankimchandra,
according to Sarwar Jahan,\textsuperscript{53} Sekh Abdos Sobhan wrote, "there
is no lie they cannot write. Nature has not been able to
produce what they can produce in their imagination." He
continues with enormous contempt, talking about
Bankimchandra's \textit{Durgesh Nandini}, that the Muslim Princess
Ayesha, whom even the moon and the sun do not get to see, is
made to fall in love with a mere Hindu General Jagatsingha.
Syed Ismail Hossain Siraji is even more bitter. He writes,
"drag the Muslim princesses from the interior of the palace,
where even the sun does not see them, for the Hindu heroes -
hurt and ridicule the poor Muslims... that makes an
excellent novel! If the malice between the Hindus and the
Muslims are set ablaze, so what with you? You are still Rai
Bahadur Bankim."\textsuperscript{54} Siraji observes that every Hindu writer

\textsuperscript{53} Jahan, Sarwar. \textit{Bankim Upanyase Muslim Prasanga O

\textsuperscript{54} Siraji, Ismail Hossain. 'Sahitya Shakti O Jati
Sangathan.' \textit{Nabanur}. Jaistha 1310 B.Y. P. 61. Also quoted
in Jahan, Sarwar. \textit{Bankim Upanyase Muslim Prasanga O
is an enemy to the Muslims, a second Bankim, a second Nabin Chandra.\textsuperscript{55}

Remarkable in this resentment is the particular objection to the Muslim women being in love with the Hindu heroes in the literary writings of the Hindus. The tradition begins from Bhudev Mukhopadhyay's Anguriya Binimoy which, however, didn't draw as much attention from the Muslims as Bankim's Durgesh Nandini did, mostly because of Bankim's literary attainments. It is needless to say that the religious-cultural identity of the Muslims constituted within the political discourse was from the very outset exclusively a masculine one like that of the Hindus.\textsuperscript{56} In its contention with the Hindu religious-cultural identity, which in its anti-colonial and anti-Muslim stance was caught in a frenzy of celebrating its masculine identity, the religious-cultural identity of the Muslims, now vying for a similar discursive space, could not afford to be less masculine. When 'their heroes' like Bakhtiar Khalji, Aurangzeb or Mir Qasim were shown as cowards and traitors, they resented it. When 'their women' Roshinara or Ayesha were shown in love with the Hindu heroes, it was strongly objected to. Thus all strands of nationalism and communalism


\textsuperscript{56} Discussed in Chapter Four.
that led up to the partition of Bengal finally in 1947 were intrinsically masculine in nature.

Parting of Ways

The cumulative effect of the contention between the newly constituted and ideologized religious identities of the Hindus and the Muslims drifted the 'two communities' away from each other and from the syncretistic penchants. Communalism continued to grow. Until the partition took place, nobody looked back into the repository of history to consider what was deferred, what was suppressed. Except for the communal strand of history, other strands were deliberately considered inconsequential and therefore, to be marginalized as effectively as possible. All the dominant elements in the prevalent discursive environment convinced the people to imagine themselves as two different communities, exclusively in terms of their religious identities. Such imaginings were clearly a 'movement' away from the syncretistic penchant of the preceding centuries. This movement was geared toward a stasis: realization of post-colonial states in the name of the religious communities. The result was partition. Once the stasis was achieved, history proves, things began to move again to a
different imagining. Of course, the contention over power was always behind these contentious imaginings.
CHAPTER SIX

Partition: The Less Historical Other Story

Immediately after the carnage in Calcutta beginning on August 16, 1946, the Direct Action Day of the Muslim League, there was a communal riot of unprecedented nature in Noakhali and Tippera. Commenting on this riot, Governor F. J. Burrows wrote in a letter to Sir John Colville on December 6, 1946:

I have gone into this in some detail because the scene did make me realize what an extremely difficult and slow task it will be to restore confidence. It will take a dozen Gandhis to make the Muslim leopard and the Hindu kid lie down together again in that part of the world...¹

At this stage, after massive communal disturbance in Bengal and in some other parts of India, a reconciliation between the two communities in order to work toward a unified India was thought impossible by many with rational mind. Therefore, a partition of India, by then, was more or less an accepted solution. Talking about the political mood of the time, Suranjan Das observes:

---


238
A consistent critic of the 'two-nation theory', Nehru became resigned to the idea that partition of the Punjab and Bengal represented the 'real alternative. In April 1947 the Congress President Kripalani formally informed Mountbatten: 'Rather than have a battle, we shall let them (the Muslim League) have their Pakistan, provided you will allow the Punjab and Bengal to be partitioned in a fair manner. This Congress stance tallied well with Hindu communalist opinion after the 1946 riots. The Hindu mercantilist interests shared similar feelings, as is evident from G.D. Birla’s assertion: 'I do not think it (Partition) is impracticable or against the interests of Hindus or of India... The communal warfare of 1946-47 helped Jinnah to win the 'Muslim brief' that the Pakistan proposal was 'the only way out.'...At the popular level, too, an overwhelming proportion of Hindus and Muslims were now resigned to the inevitability of Partition.²

This is exactly the situation the Muslim League and Mohammad Ali Jinnah, now the undisputed leader of the Muslim League, tried to achieve to push their Pakistan demand through. In fact, before the 1946 elections which they won, Muslim League was not particularly known for its popularity in Bengal. In the 1937 elections to the Provincial Assembly, they failed miserably.³ The popular sentiment of the Bengali


³ In an Assembly of 250 members, 119 seats were reserved for the Muslims. Apart from this, there were other general categories too in which the Muslims were eligible as candidates. Muslim League won only 40 seats. See Chattopadhyay, Gautam. Bengal Electoral Politics and
Muslims was clearly in favor of Krishak Praja Party (KPP - Peasants and Tenants Party) which, under the leadership of Sher-e-Bangla A.K. Fazlul Huq, then a defector from the Muslim League, was secular in its political objectives. The most important redress sought by KPP through 1937 elections was an agrarian reform in Bengal in favor of the peasants irrespective of their religious identities, although a major section of them was constituted by the Muslim peasants. Indeed, the literary-cultural discourses and its trickle-down effect on the oral culture of the predominantly illiterate masses since late nineteenth century did sensitize the Muslim people of their religious identity and their contention with the Hindus. This could have created an effective condition for a communalist organization like the Muslim League to garner Muslim support. But its own alienation from the masses was vividly evident in the 1937 elections. M.J. Akbar observes, "By the conditions of the Communal Award of 1932, the Muslims had been given 485 seats in the provinces. The party which was allegedly going to save the Muslims from annihilation won only 108 of those seats! And this was the party which the British kept calling 'the voice of the Indian Muslims'."4 The demand for Pakistan as a separate state for the Indian Muslims began to be

---


widely known only after the Lahore Resolution of 1940 of the Muslim League which the newspapers supporting united India labelled as Pakistan Resolution soon to be delightedly accepted in the Muslim League parlance and in the vocabulary of its leader, Mohammad Ali Jinnah. Given the communalist discourses in Bengal in the preceding decades, it was not unusual that such a demand would get a ready audience in the Bengali Muslim minds. The question was how much was the Muslim League to be taken into confidence for making such a demand which did not have any significant popular base among the Bengali Muslims? A confidential official report on Muslim League popularity had this to say:

A Muslim League students meeting was also held at Bashirhat at which the speakers were Sir Nazimuddin and Md. Tamizuddin Khan. In spite of the presence of these speakers... the audience is reported to have numbered only four to five hundred. An interesting comment by the Commissioner of the Division on Muslim League meetings is that Muslim meetings which attract really big audiences are the purely religious meetings, whereas a purely Muslim League or Pakistan meeting usually only attracts two to three hundred persons.\(^5\)

In spite of the well-known alienation of the Muslim League from the Muslim masses, the 1946 elections proved that by then the Muslim League was accepted by the Muslim

---

electorate as its representative at least in the Muslim majority provinces. The claim for a separate Muslim state, the war-cry of the Muslim League, *Larke Lenge Pakistan*, obviously got an unprecedented attestation in the election results. There were many factors extraneous to Muslim League’s own endeavor in communalist politics that helped Muslim League attain this popular profile within the decade between 1937 and 1946.

Apart from the heightened perception of cultural-religious identities of the communities received from the literary-historical discourses subjectively produced and brought to prominence in the preceding decades, there were at least three important factors that contributed to this shift in the political scenario. First, as discussed earlier, the decision of the colonial rulers to deploy the Muslim League from the very beginning as the representative organization of the Muslim community. The seriousness of the government in this regard, reflected in numerous and recurrent actions even at the zenith of its dissociation from the masses, made the Muslim populace believe, at one point, that they needed to stand by the Muslim League in order to realize the Muslim interest. Secondly, the process by which the communalist discourse earned currency was also a significant factor. Failure of the Congress to put things in non-communal terms legitimated the discursive environment in the preceding years within which the communalist
discourse of the Muslim League almost got a smooth passage. Mushirul Hasan puts it thus:

The development of parties on non-communal lines did not take place for several reasons. One was that in mobilizing support for their political campaigns, most Congress leaders hardly ever emphasised the common economic and political interests of the vast majority of the Indian people. Instead, they often sought a following by exploiting narrow sectarian and religious issues, and by concluding agreements and pacts for short-term political gains. In relation to the Muslims they assumed, quite wrongly, that the community not only possessed common political and economic interests but was also distinct from the Hindus. The logic of negotiating the Lucknow Pact and many similar agreements lay in the recognition of the fact that the followers of Islam required special safeguards and concessions because their interests were different from those of the Hindus. In this way, the Congress accepted and perpetuated the communal categories created by the Raj. Not surprisingly, this encouraged certain vested interests amongst Muslims to assert their separatist claims, facilitated the growth of communal alignments...6

Both the factors contributed to a reconfiguration of power in which the Muslim identity was found to be an effective constituent. Therefore, it was natural that political discourses would be molded around this identity to buttress the new configuration of power. Such a political

environment was conducive to the rise of the Muslim League which was made to champion this religious identity.

Thirdly, there were a number of very influential Hindu communalists masquerading as nationalists and using the Congress platform to its full in propagating communalist politics. Leaders like Lajpat Rai, Dr. Moonje, Madan Mohan Malaviya commanded enough influence within Congress to offset, in many occasions, the efforts of Gandhi, Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru for reconciliation with the Muslims.  

In Bengal, their rank was joined by Hindu Mahasabha leaders like Shyama Prasad Mukherjee who, like his Muslim counterparts in communal politics, provoked the Hindus of Calcutta in extreme language to lead Bengal to an unprecedented catastrophe in 1946.  

In spite of Muslim League’s growing popularity among the Muslims, manifested in the 1946 elections, the organization could not fully rely on constitutional politics alone for realization of Pakistan. After all, all India politics was dominated by Congress which did not accept the

---


8 There is a debatable thesis that while the Muslim League wanted the communal disturbance in 1946 to prove the two-nation theory and the inevitability of two separate states, the Hindu communalists of Bengal also wanted to make it a case through this disturbance that Bengal also needed to be partitioned which would otherwise be dominated by the 'brute majority' of the Muslims. For a brief reference to this thesis, see Das, Suranjan. Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947. Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1991. pp. 190-1.
idea of Pakistan until March 1947. Congress's refusal to fully accept the Cabinet Mission Plan made Muslim League more suspicious. Therefore, Muslim League thought it needed to disavow, at least as a gesture, the constitutional politics. Jinnah himself bid 'goodbye to constitutional methods.' The strategy now was an open and physical confrontation just on the eve of the transfer of power to convince everyone else of the irreconcilability of the two communities under a single state and the inevitability of a partition. The 1946 disturbances did their best job in proving Jinnah's two-nation theory. Everyone except Gandhi accepted the necessity of partition. Talking about the communal strife which made partition inevitable, Sir F. Burrows wrote to Wavell, "...its causes can only be removed by a genuine coalition of Bengal's Hindu and Muslim leaders, and in their present mood they are about as likely to coalesce as oil and water."  

Bengal: United or Divided?  

In the wake of this realization, the question was raised: what will happen to Bengal, so bitterly torn by communal disturbances? With a Muslim League government in

---

Bengal and a Muslim majority in the province, it would have been natural for Muslim League to try to annex the whole of the province to Pakistan. In fact, Jinnah, almost assured of the partition in 1946, was quick in putting a claim over whole of Bengal. A good example of the politics of expediency concentrating on the vision of future power rather than principle was quite manifest in Jinnah. He even contradicted his own two-nation theory to say to Mountbatten that 'a man is a Punjabi or a Bengali before he is a Hindu or Moslem.'11 Clearly, the prospect of getting the whole of Bengal under Pakistan prompted Jinnah to undermine his own theory.12 It is interesting to notice a reversal of role manifested in the contemporary political discourse. So far, the Congress and the Indian nationalists were trying hard to put in the most cogent way the essence of Indian unity and the Muslim League was making a separatist communal demand. Now when Pakistan was about to come into existence, the same


12 Later, Mountbatten recalled the stunning rigidity and the futility of Jinnah’s arguments in the discussion as bitterly as this:

I never would have believed... that an intelligent man, well educated , trained in the Inns of Court, was capable of simply closing his mind as Jinnah did. It wasn’t that he didn’t see the point. He did, but a kind of shutter came down. He was the evil genius in the whole thing. The others could be persuaded, but not Jinnah. While he was alive nothing could be done.

nationalists and the same Congress were completely attuned to the communalist interest of the Hindus and the Muslim League was pretending as though religious identity was inconsequential.

In the administrative and the official political discourses however, which have played a major role in shaping the perceptions of identity so far, Bengal was generally shown as two distinguishable parts - West Bengal, predominantly populated by the Hindus, and East Bengal largely inhabited by the Muslims, more emphatically since the planning of the first partitioning of Bengal in 1905. What was rejected by the Indian nationalists in 1905, was now half-heartedly welcomed by them: since Pakistan would be created anyway, Bengal must be partitioned to leave one part to India. Regarding this change of mind, Sir F. J. Burrows commented in a letter to Lord Wavell 'Curzon must be chuckling in his grave.'\(^\text{13}\) Communalist organizations like Hindu Mahasabha went as far as to ask for an exchange of populations. After the 1946 carnage, the general mood among the Hindus was also in favor of a partition of Bengal which would relieve them of a Muslim majority. The Amrita Bazar Patrika wrote, "...almost everybody concerned has forgotten that there is a large part of India called 'West Bengal' and a large city called Calcutta which are inhabited by a

population predominantly non-Muslim... Bengal as a whole has never given a carte blanche to the Muslim League to do whatever it likes with the province and its non-Muslim population."\(^{14}\)

It is interesting to notice that *Amrita Bazar*, one of the staunchest supporters of Indian nationalism which had supported United India so far all the way through, was now deploying 'West Bengal' as a separate geo-political category, claiming a legitimate space in the political discourse. "Most of the influential Hindu dailies such as *The Amrita Bazar Patrika, Ananda Bazar Patrika, Hindustan Standard* were engaged in constant propaganda, championing the partition demand."\(^{15}\)

Obviously, the anxious consideration here was the perception of reconstituted power in the future decolonized Bengal. The elections of 1937 and 1946 were adequate proof that in this Muslim majority state, the Hindus didn't stand much chance ever to get to power inasmuch as politics, at least at that time, was thought to be organized exclusively around the religious identities. As regards physical violence, misery, dislocation and destitution that followed the 1946 disturbance, there was a pervasive belief among the nationalist newspapers, shared by


the common Hindus that mostly, the Hindus were the victims. And they attributed these tribulations of the Hindus to the Muslim rule in the province. In the given configuration of politics, it was believed that power would permanently slip away from the Hindus if Bengal were not partitioned and a part it were not saved for the Hindus.

While this was one perception of power, the discursive environment in Bengal at the moment of partition was saturated with some other propensities too. These propensities, though deferred or suppressed at that time, began to resurface with enormous political significance even shortly after the partition. Therefore, we need to look into other probable configurations of power which were deferred or suppressed by the overarching religious-political discourse. This would help us understand the recurrence of some perceptions which later claimed legitimacy, attempted to subvert the known history, the known boundaries of the nation-state and even the perception of nation-state.

A Move for Independent United Bengal

Against the mainstream tendency in support of the partition, there was one strand in the political discourse, garnering its support from some nationalist Hindu leaders and also from a faction of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League, which opted for United Bengal. Bengal had the
distinction of being the seedbed of anticolonial political
activism. Early nationalist leaders were mostly from Bengal.
It was the enormous rise of violence in anticolonial
politics, following the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the
contemporary Swadeshi movement, which among other important
considerations, convinced the colonial rulers to shift the
capital from Calcutta to New Delhi. The Bengali Hindus took
pride in their contribution to the Indian politics.\textsuperscript{16} They
had their own icons like Netaji Subhas Bose, the most
charismatic Bengali leader of pre-partition India. With its
rich culture, literary tradition, numerous visionaries of
the past who substantively contributed to the transformation
of the Indian society, and a number of outstanding political
leaders of the present, the Bengalis were constantly
reminded of their Bengaliness with pride. But the gradual
marginalization of the Bengalis in Indian politics since the
beginning of the twentieth century was a fact bemoaned by
many Bengalis who were anxious about their distinctiveness.
The Bengalis never forgot that Subhas Bose was compelled to
leave Congress as a result of a schism between Gandhi and

\textsuperscript{16} Later, A \textit{Statesman} editorial observed in June, 1950,
rather with contrition, "They (the Bengalis) are
constantly aware also of the past glories and present
potentialities. They do not forget either that Calcutta
was long the country's capital or that Bengalis took the
lead in the freedom movement. Once they swayed the
destinies of India; now they cannot even determine their
own." See Broomfield, John H. \textit{Elite Conflict in a Plural
Society: Twentieth Century Bengal}. Berkeley: University

250
Subhas Bose, then the President-elect of the Indian National Congress. All this, in the years preceding the partition, has been seen by the Bengalis as diminishing their power in Indian politics. With the seat of power in North India, many thought, Bengal had no chance but to remain as marginal. Some of them were even inclined, at the moment before partition, to reconstitute a political discourse of Bengali identity supportive of an 'independent united Bengal.'

Indeed, a continuity was now sought with the political trend developed during the first partitioning of Bengal in 1905. The most important politicization and articulation of a common Bengali identity, during the intervening period since then, was to be found in the political efforts and speeches of Chittaranjan Das, whom the Bengalis adored as Deshbandhu - the friend of the country. In one such speech, famous for its emotive elements, Das said at Bhawanipore in Calcutta:

I have understood that a Bengalee, whether he is a Hindu or a Muslim or a Christian, is a Bengalee. The Bengalees have a distinct image, a distinct nature and distinct dharma. Bengalees have a place, their rights and duties in this world.... Whatever may be the kind of blood that flows through the veins of a Bengalee, he cannot forget that he is a Bengalee, that he has been sustained by the soil and water of Bengal, that there has been a regular reciprocation of these soil and water with him, and that this relation of reciprocation
expresses a general and living truth on which is founded the nationality of Bengal.\textsuperscript{17}

The same discourse was again found redeemable immediately before the partition. Most prominent among the Hindu proponents of United Bengal was Sarat Chandra Bose, the elder brother of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. Immediately after the Congress Resolution of March 8, 1947 for partition of the Punjab,\textsuperscript{18} and Congress President Kripalani’s interpretation that the resolution would also apply to Bengal,\textsuperscript{19} Sarat Bose fiercely retorted to it, pointing out contradictions in the basic principles of the Congress. In a lengthy press statement, he said:

By accepting religion as the sole basis of the distribution of provinces, the Congress has cut itself away from its moorings and has almost undone the work it has been doing for the last sixty years. The resolution in question...is the result of the defeatist mentality. To my mind a division of Provinces on the religious basis is no solution of the communal problem. Even if the Provinces were to be divided, Hindus and Muslims will still have to live side by side in them and the risk of communal conflicts will remain...The solution of the communal problem lies ultimately in social justice, and, so far as our collective life is concerned, in an emphasis on the political and economic

\textsuperscript{17} Quoted in De, Soumitra. \textit{Nationalism and Separatism in Bengal}. p. 217.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Star of India}. March 9, 1947.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Star of India}. March 11, 1947.
aspects and interests of life and in the divorce of religion from politics and economics...\textsuperscript{20}

Apart from appealing to the sentiment of the Bengalis, and issuing a number of press statements regarding the outline of the future independent united Bengal in collaboration with some members of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League, Sarat Bose made every effort to convince both Congress and Muslim League High Commands to accept his plan. It appeared from a letter from Gandhi to Sarat Bose that Gandhi agreed to Sarat Bose's plan and proposed to discuss the draft plan with the Congress Working Committee.\textsuperscript{21} But later Gandhi said in a prayer speech that he 'had been taken to task for supporting Sarat Babu's move.'\textsuperscript{22}

In fact, the Congress High Command was inalienably rigid on the question of Partition of Bengal. Knowing that some Congress stalwarts like Kiran Shankar Roy and Dhirendra Nath Dutta were collaborating with Sarat Bose, who resigned from Congress earlier in January, 1947, Patel cautioned Roy in the strongest language:

..It is incumbent on all Congressmen to set aside personal predilections and to stand united on the


\textsuperscript{22} Ibid. p. 194.
Official policy of the Congress. Individual expression of views must fit into that policy, and there should not be any discordant note. As a disciplined Congressman, I am sure you will appreciate this advice.\(^{21}\)

Patel took personal initiative to get in touch with many eminent Bengali Hindus to talk them out of the Muslim League 'trap.' Indeed, as mentioned earlier, the general opinion among the Bengali Hindus, particularly of West Bengal, was also in favor of a partition inasmuch as they were overly sensitized about their religious identity, more so after the 1946 incidents. There were numerous letters to newspapers around this time urging for a partition of Bengal. Anticipating the creation of Pakistan and the probable incorporation of the whole of Bengal in it, opinions were converging on a claim for a separate province of West Bengal as early as January of 1947, indeed before the Congress acceptance of Pakistan, as a preemptive measure to take a slice of Bengal out of Pakistan. Anxiety was expressed that if Bengal were not partitioned, 'a particular community on the strength of their brute majority in East Bengal will dominate the administration of the whole of the

---

province of Bengal. One such letter is worth quoting at length:

Many thoughtful people are agreed that the only way out of this sure impending doom is the creation of a separate province of West Bengal in which is concentrated about 60 per cent of the total Hindu population of Bengal and in which the Hindus are yet in an overwhelming majority. With the Muslim League in power fast making West Bengal the happy hunting ground or the happy dumping ground for Muslim refugees from Bihar even this opportunity may not last very long. But if it can be done before it is too late, the creation of such a province as has repeatedly been pointed out would mean the salvation of Hindus in East and West Bengal alike. It would save the priceless heritage of their culture... it would give them a homeland in which they can verily call their souls their own and in which they would find unfettered and limitless scope for self-expression and self-realization.

In May, 1947, Amrita Bazar Patrika conducted an opinion survey among the Bengali Hindus. Reportedly, ninety seven per cent of them supported partition of Bengal.


25 'Letters to the Editor.' Amrita Bazar Patrika. January 21, 1947. The letter was written by one Shyama Prasad Mookherjee. It is not quite clear whether it was the same Shyama Prasad Mookherjee as the leader of the Hindu Mahasabha.

In such an environment, in spite of Sarat Bose's firm conviction for a united Bengal, he didn't have any significant following among the Bengali Hindus. But definitely such a move left a permanent imprint on the history of political discourse. Nobody knows when it will reincarnate in West Bengal politics, if at all, from its deferment for a political reconstruction of a common heritage and a common identity again to bring about a cartographic change in South Asia.\textsuperscript{27} It once happened in East Bengal. As the bases of contention keep changing, so does the territorial contour of the imagined nation.

The Muslim League Position

The opinions among the Bengali Muslims regarding independent united Bengal were extremely complex. It is marked by many twists and many surprises. A parallel social discourse of a common Bengali identity was always there which was gradually marginalized by increasing politicization of the religious identity since nineteenth century. But in the macro-political discourse vis-a-vis the demand for Pakistan, this identity attained a new significance since the adoption of the Lahore Resolution in

\textsuperscript{27} However, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, Jyoti Basu, in a brief conversation with a Bangladeshi journalist, Abdul Gaffar Chowdhury of \textit{Ekushe} song fame, recently opined that he didn't foresee the possibility of a reunion of two Bengals in the next five hundred years.
March 1940 by the All India Muslim League. The Lahore Resolution clearly stated:

No constitutional plan would be workable in this country or acceptable to the Muslims unless it is designed on the following basic principles, viz., that geographically contiguous units are demarcated into regions which should be so constituted, with such territorial adjustments as may be necessary, that the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in a majority as in the North-Western and Eastern zones of India should be grouped to constitute Independent States in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign.28

It was quite likely that the Bengali Muslims interpreted the Resolution as a principle on the basis of which they could think of an independent state in the Eastern zone with a Muslim majority, i.e., Bengal. In fact, many of the newspapers supporting the Muslim League, including Azad29 which was later known for its relentless


29 For example, Azad, owned by Moulana Akram Khan, then a Vice President of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League, wrote in an editorial on September 14, 1940 that an independent state incorporating Assam and Bengal will be completely sustainable both in terms of military power and physical resources.
support for single Pakistan, wrote articles and editorials immediately after the adoption of the Resolution where this understanding was clearly articulated. And there were reasons for this conviction. Amalendu De points out that Jinnah is on record as one who praised B.R. Ambedkar’s book Pakistan or the Partition of India published in 1940 which discusses at length the implications of the Resolution and critically raises a few questions about the envisioned independent Muslim ‘states.’ De quotes Ambedkar:

Does the Resolution contemplate that these Muslim provinces, after being incorporated into states, will remain each an independent sovereign state or will they be joined together into one constitution as members of a single state, federal or unitary?30

Jinnah’s silence in this regard allowed the speculation to go on. Even in the Madras Convention of the All India Muslim League in April 1941, no amendment was made. After six long years, in the Delhi Convention of the Muslim League Legislators on April 7-10, 1946, the matter was finally discussed and amendments were made. The ‘independent states’ of the original Lahore Resolution was now substituted with ‘a sovereign independent state.’ And Jinnah, rather indefensibly, attributed the previous expression to a printing mistake. It is no surprise that the objection to this amendment came from a member from Bengal. Abul Hashim,

then the Secretary of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League recollects the moment as this:

Earlier, in the subjects committee of the convention, Mr. Jinnah placed a resolution demanding one Pakistan state. I rose on a point of order...I said, 'Your resolution is void and ultra vires'...The Lahore resolution of 1940 was accepted by the All India Muslim League in its Madras session of 1941 as the creed of the All India Muslim League. The Lahore resolution of 1940 does not contemplate one Pakistan state but it contemplates two independent and sovereign Pakistan states and homelands for the Muslims of India... Mr. Jinnah said, 'I see the Moulana Saheb is banking upon the plural 's' which is an obvious printing mistake. I requested Nawabzada Liaquat Ali Khan, General Secretary of the India Muslim League to produce the original minute-book. The Nawabzada produced it and in it Mr. Jinnah saw under his own signature the plural 's'. Nawabzada Liaquat Ali said,'Qaid-e-Azam we have lost our case'.

In any case, the amendment was tabled in the open session of the Convention. Jinnah asked Suhrawardy to move the amendment. Knowing that it would be the Bengalis who might object to it, Jinnah needed some one from Bengal to move the amendment. Abul Hashim stayed away from this open session for fear of being asked to move the amendment. It is interesting to note that the original Lahore Resolution

32 Hashim, Abul. Ibid. p.110.
was tabled by A.K. Fazlul Huq and its controversial amendment was moved by Suhrawardy. Both the leaders were from Bengal. Both of them had later serious disagreements with Jinnah on many issues including the two-nation theory and the demand for one Pakistan.

Fazlul Huq is on record for his many rebuttals to Jinnah. Quite often these confrontations were informed by his adherence to the interest of Bengal as a distinct entity. While resigning from the League Working Committee, as a protest against Jinnah's decision about the resignation of all Muslim League members of the Defence Council, Huq wrote in the most stringent language about Jinnah's 'dictatorship' to Liaquat Ali:

...I protest emphatically against manner in which Bengal and Punjab Muslim interests are being imperilled by Muslim leaders of 'Minority Provinces...They should not meddle too much with politics of majority provinces. At present I feel that Bengal does not count much in counsels of political leaders outside province...33

On many occasions, he was explicit, though not consistent, about his rejection of the two-nation theory of Jinnah based exclusively on religious terms.34 In the early


34 For details of Fazlul Huq’s role in this regard, see De, Amalendu. Pakistan Prastab O Fazlul Huq. Calcutta: West Bengal State Book Board. 1989.

260
1940s, his attempt as the Chief Minister of Bengal for Hindu-Muslim amity, deployment of the Bengali-non-Bengali distinction in Bengal politics, helped create at least a feeble counter-discourse of Bengali identity in the midst of surging and dominant communalist discourses. While discussing on the Secondary Education Bill in the Bengal Legislative Assembly in September, 1941, Huq said:

I appeal to friends... to approach this Bill from a purely nationalist standpoint. A new order is coming upon us, whether we will it or not. The new order calls for a synthesis of the different cultures which exist in this land... Do not do anything which will destroy that synthesis of cultures which is the result of the last few centuries. Do not do anything which will make our children and our children’s children consider that they are Hindus and against Muslims or that they are Muslims and against Hindus. Do not forget that Bengal is our common land for common purposes... Let Hindus and Muslims today co-mingle and unite in one determined march for the creation of a new order...35

In the years of his turbulent relationship with the Muslim League, Fazlul Huq, in a number of speeches, articulated his deep sentimental attachment to the cause of

35 Gordon. Ibid. p.435. Noticeable in this speech is an admission of distinct religious cultures which have been synthesized over centuries and which are still to be synthesized. Bengaliness, which definitely predated religious identities, is thus emptied of its own claim except from the point of territoriality and a later acceptance of synthesis. Clearly, this is the surreptitious influence of the dominant communalist discourse of the time which determined the horizon of one’s understanding of identity.
Bengali nationalism. One such memorable occasion was his speech in Bengal Legislative Assembly on August 12, 1941, after the death of the great Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore. Hug said:

Speaking as a Bengalee, belonging to the province which gave Rabindra Nath birth, speaking the very language which Rabindra Nath spoke, it is impossible to lose sight of the fact that the great man who earned for the Bengali literature one of the highest positions in the languages and literatures of the world is no more with us, and that all that now lives are his works enshrined not merely in books but in the hearts of millions of his country men... I hope that the few words which I have been privileged to speak on this occasion will be taken to be indicative of our deep sense of sorrow not as individuals, not as members of a community but as members of this great Bengalee race who are proud today that we had in our midst one like Rabindra Nath...36

Fazlul Hug’s conflict with the Central Muslim League leaders, especially Jinnah, and his frequent assertion as the leader of the Bengalees in such conflicts created an environment even inside the Muslim League, which in spite of the growing communalism, had to take into cognizance the distinctiveness of Bengali identity. For example, the Lucknow Session of the All India Muslim League in 1937 tried to move a resolution for adoption of Urdu as the official language of the League. This was strongly opposed by Fazlul


262
Huq and other Bengal delegates. Eventually the resolution was dropped. 37

It is not very difficult to decipher that in the politics of expediency and calculations, as was the case of Bengal around that time, many of Fazlul Huq's moves were geared toward acquisition of more power or retention of power that was slipping away from him for various reasons. His deployment of the Bengali identity in the politics of Bengal was understandably one such move. But what was possible with the secular objectives of Krishak Praja Party in 1937, was not possible from the beginning of 1940s because of the increasing dominance of communalism in politics. Besides, Huq was himself not always consistent in his convictions due to the conflicting demands of two identities in the prevalent situation. A populist leader, sometimes desperate in his attempts to remain popular in his political constituency, which was predominantly Muslim, he was swayed by the communalist discourses. All these gradually reduced his popularity. For about half a decade during the last days of British rule in India, the once most popular leader of Bengal was almost in oblivion. Nevertheless, whatever might be the ulterior motive, Huq, during the days of his political visibility, contributed to the clearing of a space for the parallel presence of the

37 Star of India. October 11, 1937.

263
common Bengali identity. The identity reemerged with considerable political significance in 1947.

The 1947 opportunity came after the declaration of the British Premier Attlee on February 20 that in any case the British would leave India by June 1948 and if necessary, leaving power 'in some areas to existing Provincial Governments.' In Bengal, Provincial Government was run by the Muslim League. The Chief Minister was H. S. Suhrawardy, who, around that time, happened to have a bitter relationship with the central leaders of the Muslim League and was estranged from them also by the Nazimuddin-Akram Khan faction of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League, the group known for its subservience to the central leadership. It was not difficult for Suhrawardy to foresee trouble for himself in Pakistani politics had Bengal been a part of it. On his own merit, Suhrawardy was quite strong in Bengal politics with his base in Calcutta, no matter how much opposition he faced from his opponents in BPML and their widely circulated newspapers. If the umbilical chord of central support to the Nazimuddin-Akram Khan faction were cut off, he would be much better off. This he could envision in a future Bengal as an independent state. Suhrawardy had Abul Hashim with him who was the secretary of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League and was known as a left-winger in

---

38 Harun-Or-Rashid. The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh. p.274.

264
Bengal Muslim League and a staunch supporter of the Bengal’s cause.

As has been discussed earlier, a united Bengal was an idea that was in circulation for quite a long time. A dialogue was also continuing with some Hindu leaders like Sarat Bose who were equally interested in keeping Bengal united. But the real boost came after the Attlee declaration. Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister of Bengal and the prospective Prime Minister of independent united Bengal took the center stage in this initiative. The initiative attained more seriousness when Suhrawardy made a press statement on April 27, 1947 on his scheme of an independent united Bengal after his discussion with the Viceroy and Jinnah. He asserted that he had all along visualized Bengal as an independent state and no part of any Union of India.

Earlier, in March, he had said that Bengal belonged to the Bengalees and Bengal was indivisible. Millat, a newspaper supporting the Hashim-Suhrawardy group claimed in an editorial that the public opinion in Bengal was ‘completely in favor of an independent sovereign Bengal.’ Regarding the attitude of the Hashim-Suhrawardy faction, Harun-Or-Rashid observes:


40 Star of India. April 28, 1947.

41 Star of India. March 18, 1947.

For the Hashim-Suhrawardy group, there was nothing new about the scheme for a United Independent Bengal. It was there Pakistan demand 'strictly in accordance with the Lahore Resolution, as they understood, 'to which and which alone and not this or that interpretation thereof, Muslims of India [they claimed] owe allegiance. That resolution never contemplated the creation of any Akhand Muslim state...It gives Bengal...complete sovereignty'. They believed in Bengal's distinct identities which separated it from other parts of India. Both Hashim and Suhrawardy came out with their thesis of a common Bengali culture and tradition, as the latter declared: 'Bengalees are one race and have one language and...many points in common.' Hashim's progressive supporters (may also be called the Millat group) were categorical about the question of language and Bengali-non-Bengali controversy. They warned Bengali Muslims that in Akhand Pakistan (meaning united Pakistan) they would be under the domination of West Pakistanis and Urdu would be the state language. They could not expect a better position than becoming peons under Urdu-speaking judges and magistrates.43

While Abul Hashim and his close associates were engaged primarily in agitating the Bengali sentiment, which, for the reality prevalent in Bengal, was not to be found very propitious, Suhrawardy was more into the juridical-political and administrative aspects of the feasibility of a united Bengal. And in the prevalent mood of Muslim politics,

43 Harun-Or-Rashid. The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh. p.299-300
Suhrawardy, unless very desperate, could not take any initiative without discussing it with Jinnah.

While Suhrawardy claimed that he had Jinnah's consent on this scheme, Jinnah's reticence in public on such an important issue led the deeply divided Bengal Muslim League into a wide array of speculations. There were reasons for Jinnah to want united Bengal which was then ruled by the Muslim League. And he was quite explicit about it in his discussion with Mountbatten, as mentioned earlier. But it is unlikely that he would support the demand for a separate state in Bengal out of any conviction, especially after his own initiative in the 1946 amendment to the original Lahore Resolution. He would have consented to such a move only for tactical reasons in order to evade the otherwise inevitable partition of Bengal and with an eye on eventual accession of united Bengal dominated by the Muslim League to Pakistan. Jinnah, in the course of his discussion with the Viceroy said that he would be 'delighted' to see united Bengal even if it remained out of Pakistan. He observed:

What is the use of Bengal without Calcutta; they had better remain united and independent; I am sure that they would be on friendly terms with us.45

But Bengal Muslim League was always a trouble-spot to Jinnah regarding acquiescence to his leadership. After his estrangement from the Suhrawardy-Abul Hashim faction of BPML - the faction taking active role in the creation of an independent united Bengal in collaboration with Hindu leaders like Sarat Bose and Kiran Shankar Roy - Jinnah couldn’t be seriously optimistic about Bengal acceding to Pakistan. Definitely the Hindus, now overly sensitive about their communal identity, and a section of nationalist Bengali Muslims with people like Abul Hashem at the top would foil any attempt for accession to Pakistan. It is unlikely that a person of Jinnah’s political prudence would not see the risks involved. Assured of at least a part of Bengal in Pakistan, Jinnah chose reticence.

Reading his mind and the dominant mood prevalent in central Muslim League, the acquiescent Nazimuddin-Akram Khan faction and its widely circulated newspapers like Azad, Morning News and Star of India launched a vigorous campaign for a single state of Pakistan.

Indeed, apart from pursuing a general Muslim League line of politics in a very conservative way, there were two other tendencies which figured quite prominently in the politics of the Nazimuddin-Akram Khan faction and the newspapers supporting this faction. These were: an indiscriminate opposition to the Hashim-Suhrawardy faction and a complete allegiance to the central Muslim League. In fact, not knowing the preference of the central Muslim League, this faction began to advocate for partition of Bengal in early 1946 since the other faction was trying to keep Bengal united through negotiations with the Bengali Hindu leaders. In order to rally public opinion against Suhrawardy’s move for united Bengal during the presence of the Cabinet Mission, Azad opined that ‘the dream of united Bengal would incur nothing but loss’ to the Muslims of Bengal and that Suhrawardy’s effort would end up in digging a ‘grave for East Pakistan’. 46 To Azad, ‘the life practices of the Hindus and Muslims, their national ideologies and literary expressions were all different.’ Not to recognize these differences is to ‘live in a hallucination’. 47 Clearly, the allusion is to the other faction of Bengal Muslim League, ‘the despicable standard-bearers of united


47 Azad. April 24, 1946.
Bengal. Obviously, the Nazimuddin-Akram Khan axis was quite comfortable in its stance against united Bengal on the ground that it was providing ideological support to the two-nation theory and at the same time, was opposing the Hashim-Suhrawardy faction from an 'authentic' Muslim League position.

But right after the position of Jinnah and of the central Muslim League for united Bengal was known in 1947, the Nazimuddin-Akram Khan faction took no time for a reversal of its earlier position. But it still continued to oppose the scheme of an independent state in Bengal. On May 4, 1947, Akram Khan, the President of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League, gave a press statement that 'there was no question of forming a separate independent state in Bengal away from the other regions of Pakistan' and that the Muslims of all regions of India constituted a single nation and the goal of the Muslim League was to have a single state for all Indian Muslims. If we scan through the history, we definitely find a lot of shifts and inconsistencies in the politics of Nazimuddin-Akram Khan faction, most of which are however, in keeping with similar changes in general Muslim League positions. But from numerous articles, editorials, press statements, and speeches published during this period, it is evident that this faction was unequivocal in

48 Azad. April 26, 1946.
representing the Muslim identity in the most conservative way, even when it presented its claim for united Bengal. This earned this group a credence among the Muslim populace who, in the communal environment, were more inclined to look at themselves as Muslims.

On the other hand, the Hashim-Suhrawardy faction, speaking from a Muslim League platform whose goal was nothing less than the creation of Pakistan, was under tremendous pressure to tailor their views to match the aspiration of the Bengali Muslims aroused by the Muslim League in the preceding decades of communal politics, and at the same time, convince them of a common Bengali identity. Indeed, by their own complicity with the communal politics of the Muslim League, they had reduced the space for a discourse of a common Bengali identity in the past. 'The Muslim populace', so constituted in the political discourse, was in no mood in early 1947, when the creation of the Muslim state of Pakistan was imminent, to believe in a secular identity. And since the Hashim-Suhrawardy faction was still using the Muslim League platform, they couldn't command much credence among the Hindus. Besides, the 1946 disturbance was widely believed among the Hindus as the machination of Suhrawardy, the Chief Minister of Bengal. Therefore, he was not to be taken into confidence by the Hindus either. All this led to the inevitable goal of partition - partition on the basis of separate identities of
the Muslims and the Hindus of Bengal. From the mood prevalent in Bengal at the moment of partition, one could perhaps think that this was the catharsis of a long drawn history of strife between two communities. They got two separate states as they wanted. But it was just the beginning of another story. The identities that were immanent in partition and regarded as decisive were soon to be interrogated. It was the beginning of another phase of ‘movement’ away from the perception and imagination of community produced hitherto. Communities were to be re-imagined and reproduced in the discursive practices in keeping with a reconceptualization of power. A new period of strife was to begin. The secular linguistic identity which was deferred and marginalized so far, was found to be the most empowering constituent of politics in post-partition Pakistan.
Many people believed that the construction of the 'self' and the 'other' in post-colonial (post-1947) East Bengal would not be unproblematic. At least the dominant mood of politics during the creation of Pakistan was suggestive of an unequivocal resolution about 'us' and 'them,' apparent in the designation of exclusive spaces for 'us' and 'them.' Religion was the inviolable 'great divide.' Obviously, there were two choices of 'other' instantly to be gleaned from the politics of partition for self-identity in postcolonial Pakistan, first the colonizers, the Western rulers and second, the Hindus, who were also concurrently liberated. But as we know, most of the energy of the Pakistan movement was exerted on finding a persuasive distinction with the Hindus. Therefore, the idiom of politics inherited and immanent in postcolonial Pakistan had an obvious preference for the latter as its chosen 'other.' Colonialism in this politics largely appeared unproblematic and post-coloniality inconsequential, as though the partition in 1947 didn't pose any discursive breach. People in power thus sought an otherwise impossible mimesis of a colonial politics which kept the 'others' alive for the sake of a particular self-definition. But such a self-definition immediately plunged into a number of crises. The discussion
of these crises can begin with an arguable presumption that the post-colonial politics of identity, of necessity, was nothing less colonial than the colonial politics itself.

Modernity Vs. Premodernist Politics of Religion

The imbroglio ensuing from the pro-Pakistan politics of religious identities immediately before the partition of India resulted in a near amnesia about the colonial history. A selective construction of tradition, and thus of an empowering identity, needed to disregard the immediate history of colonialism in preference for a constructed distant past. This was because colonialism, as a target of opposition of this religious discourse, was thought to be secondary in importance to the perceived Hindutva of the anti-colonial politics. Colonialism was a distant object of politics, hence perhaps initially forgettable too. This oblivion was also a choice because, only in a decisive deferment of the encounter with the meta-discourse of modernity that a Pakistan movement in the name of a religious identity could be launched.

However, the politics of identities in post-independence Pakistan had to recover, though reluctantly, from its chosen oblivion. Once Pakistan was achieved that inevitable history came back. Even if the politics of religious identity was apparently premodern in its
contention on religious ground, the deployment of this identity with a nationalist cause in the colonial mode of politics was incontrovertibly modernist in its nature. Here the Muslim League shared the same values with the Indian National Congress, both subdued by the accepted superiority of the Enlightenment tradition and its gift - modernity. Indeed, a particular notion of modernity was legitimated by colonialism which always had the West as its indelible reference point. Once the initial frenzy was gone and Pakistan was created, this modernity came to settle its account with religious nationalism. The outcome was an insuperable crisis that the subcontinent is still hopelessly trying to grapple with.

Jinnah: The Progeny of the Politics of Convenience

Jinnah, a known agnostic, but a champion of pre-partition politics of religious identity, understood this crisis at the very beginning. Once Pakistan was created in the name of religion, there were only two mutually exclusive fateful choices. First, to foreground modernity and build a modernist nation-state out of Pakistan where religion could be asked to take its place in a designated second row - a choice predicated by a predisposition to imitate the colonial counter-self, to realize an idealized self-image modelled after 'Western Man.' The anguished presence of this
Other self, especially among the modern leaders and their bureaucratic cohorts was undeniable. The second was to remain embedded in the same religious discourse which provided the ideological raison d'être for the creation of Pakistan.

But in such a mode of politics, Pakistan, soon after its inception as an independent state, becomes emptied of its ideological meaning unless there is a constant reference to Hindu dominance, the dominance of newly created India, or to the internal liminalities. To choose the second was to engage in an unavoidable mimesis of the politics of the colonial days which legitimated the existence of Pakistan only with reference to its not-too-benign exteriority and being completely bereft of any internal meaning. Obviously, for Pakistan, both the choices were loaded with insurmountable crises of their own and each was haunted by the other.

To the astonishment of many, Jinnah chose the first option, indeed, the tougher one which marked a stunning cleavage between his pre-partition and post-partition politics. Trained in the West, having the lifestyle of the Westerners, Jinnah realized the predicament that Pakistan was envisaged with. M. J. Akbar writes: "At a press conference on 4 July 1947 a journalist asked him if Pakistan would be a religious state. Replied Jinnah, 'You are asking a question that is absurd. I do not know what a theocratic
state means. And on 11 August, the day he was elected President of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly and the flag of the new nation was adopted, he told the House, "we are starting the nation with no discrimination... we should keep that in front of us as our ideal, and you will find that in course of time Hindus will cease to be Hindus and Muslims will cease to be Muslims, not in the religious sense, because that is the personal faith of each individual, but in the political sense as the citizens of the nation."

Perhaps, no political leader in South Asia has been as bitterly criticized as Jinnah for this statement. The outright reaction of his perennial critics was that he was a hypocrite. On the other hand, the religious zealots, whose unrelenting support Jinnah always counted on, were also stunned by his turnaround. A 'turncoat' Jinnah was redundant for Pakistan the religious zealots dreamed of. It was clearly evidenced in the denial of Jinnah’s policy regarding the Muslim League. Jinnah wanted to remobilize the Muslim League as a party in a democratic state in abnegation of its claim to remain the only representative organization of the whole nation. Later, after Jinnah’s death, it was impossible for

the remaining modernists, at least, not to provide a lip service to the religious ideology. The potential cleavage between colonial and post-colonial history of Pakistan was thus hedged to the advantage of the religious zealots.

To comprehend this victory of the religious zealots in Pakistan, perhaps, we need to take a meticulous look into the discursive environment which shaped Jinnah as the leader of an ‘imagined nation.’ Jinnah, in spite of his different education and upbringing, came to take up the leadership of the Muslim League which was avowedly a communal organization first in the twenties when he was also an influential leader of Indian National Congress and boasted of his Indianness and then again later, more seriously in the mid thirties on the invitation from the Raja of Salempur. The later Jinnah, envisioning an empowering and distinctively carved out space for himself in communal politics, fitted himself into a pre-existing discursive environment that upheld religious identity. He acted as a protagonist in communal politics in complete contradiction to his own persona. Ayesha Jalal suggests that "Jinnah’s appeal to religion was always ambiguous; certainly it was not characteristic of his political style before 1937, and evidence suggests that his use of the communal factor was a political tactic, not an ideological commitment."4 Through the years until 1947, he

stayed successfully within that discursive ground and did his best to prove his allegiance to the communal discourses.

Once Pakistan was created, he realized his embeddedness in an inescapable discourse that was ultimately debilitating for Jinnah, the modern man, and even for Pakistan, as a modern nation-state. The agonistics between aspired modernity and the empowering colonial politics of communal identity, the only known mode of politics so far, began to surface.

Paradoxical in Jinnah's assertion was not only the preference for a modernist identity as opposed to the religious one which had long provided the rationale for creation of Pakistan, it was also in regard to the representation of religion-as-faith as opposed to religion-as-ideology. A modernist Jinnah realized that assigning 'Otherness' to the Hindus in post-colonial Pakistan would have very little political significance. With the disappearance of the Hindus as the 'Others,' politics was to slip into a new terrain where Pakistan was to get a world-wide visibility as an independent nation. In this changed reality as it was perceived immediately after decolonization, the locutionary strategy positing religion as the ideology was foreordained to be defeatist in its every stance toward the meta-discourse of modernity and therefore, debilitating, both internally for day-to-day management of the state, and externally in relation to other
Such a vision was understandably predicated by the fact that once India was partitioned, power couldn’t be resident only in the politics of memory. Therefore, now was the time to encounter positively the meta-discourse of modernity left behind by colonialism and constitute a self-image by which Pakistan could be recognized as a modern nation-state.

While the modernist faction in the Muslim League was in favor of an immediate change, the larger organization in general was not ready for such a change immediately after partition. Because, it really did not know of any politics other than that of religion-as-ideology. Besides, it was naturally thought that a pro-modernist stance from the Muslim League was doomed to suffer from lack of authenticity because of its locutionary disjuncture in politics. And after the death of Jinnah, the modernist faction had to give way to the religious zealots. Because, in absence of a charismatic leader, the Muslim League couldn’t endure one more crisis which was already fraught with numerous crises. Therefore, it continued a mimesis of colonial politics of religious difference out of desperation.

It is not unlikely that the emergence of post-partition India as a 'modernist and secular state' created a guilt-complex and a sense of defeatism in a modernist Jinnah, who then desperately tried to surmount his own acquired identity as a religious zealot.
Islamization of the State

In order to maintain the same idiom of politics as it was before the partition, the religious difference still had to be the determining code, and religious identity had to be continually reaffirmed. Therefore, there was a consistent effort on the part of the League to make the religious identity an inviolably defined juridical-political space in Pakistan.

It is interesting to notice the transition from the initial hesitation, evident in the effort to accommodate both the Islamic character of the state and a modernist stance, to a more rigid and ossified attitude for Islamization of Pakistan during the Muslim League rule. On March 7, 1949, Liaquat Ali Khan moved the 'Objective Resolution' in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan describing the aims and objects of the future constitution of Pakistan. The Resolution stated "in the name of Allah, the beneficent, the Merciful" that "sovereignty over the entire universe belongs to God Almighty alone and the authority which He has delegated to the State of Pakistan through its people for being exercised within the limit prescribed by Him is a sacred trust." It also stated that

---

6 It is immensely interesting to see in this discursive construction of God, He almost seems to be physically present in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan to delegate authority to the state.
"the principles of democracy, freedom, equality, tolerance and social justice, as enunciated by Islam (emphasis mine), shall be fully observed" and that "the Muslims shall be enabled to order their lives in the individual and collective sphere in accord with the teachings and requirements of Islam as set out in the Holy Quran and the Sunna."\(^7\)

Clearly, the tension with the precepts of modernity is not fully overcome, evident in the affirmation of 'the principles of democracy, freedom, equality' which however, had to be consistent with the enunciation of Islam. With all these, Pakistan still had to be a modernist state "So that the people of Pakistan may prosper and attain their rightful and honoured place amongst the nations of the World and make their full contribution towards international peace and progress and happiness of humanity."\(^8\) But in the face of an increasing opposition from East Bengal, the ruling elite became increasingly ossified about the Islamic character of the state which was then thought to be the only cementing substance between East and West Pakistan. When the Basic Principle Committee Report was adopted in October 1953, it postulated a much stricter adherence to the Islamic principles. No law could be enacted by the legislature which

---


\(^8\) Ibid.
was against the dicta of the Quran and Sunna. Instruction of the Quran was to be made compulsory in the schools. The Islamic zealots, in the continuing imbroglio of Pakistani politics, pushed their agenda through and had them incorporated in the 1956 Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan with further elaboration.

The interpretation of the Islamic code of life and the role of the state in its implementation had to be in complete concordance with the given configuration of power. The authority of the people in power was to be consecrated as a divine bestowal and therefore, with a status of unquestionability. One emblematic example of such a discursive representation is this:

The first and foremost duty of the individual to the state is loyalty and allegiance to the state and respect for the laws of the state. God says in Quran: 'Obey God, His apostle and those who command authority over you.' The object in this verse is to make the individual realize that if he were not render obedience to the 'leaders of the community' who exercise authority on behalf of the state, it would lead to

---


disruption and chaos. The 'leaders of the community' in the Islamic sense would be the constitutionally elected Head of the State, the chosen representatives of the people, the jurists, judges, the state official, the military commanders etc. The rendering of obedience to the 'leaders of the community' implies the rendering of obedience to the state...The rendering of obedience to the state automatically implies the rendering of obedience to God and His Apostle.12

As the close ideological cohorts of the ruling elite, a considerable section of the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia produced a huge volume of writings strenuously trying to provide the rationale for a distinctive religious identity that would govern the state. In spite of a consistent effort to situate politics in the exclusive terrain of an imagined conflict with 'Hindu India' across the border, in dealing with the statecraft, the much larger question of Pakistan's standing as a modern state could not be deferred eternally. Meanwhile, the popularity of the ruling elite was dropping rapidly once the crisis came to the surface after the inception of Pakistan. But there was a section of Bengali Muslim intelligentsia who would go as far as to repudiate democracy as an acceptable principle in an Islamic state in a desperate attempt to steer the state out of its crisis of legitimacy. Abdul Maodud rejected the idea of western

democracy as completely incompatible with Islamic ideal.\textsuperscript{13}

At the pinnacle of renunciation of any modernist trace in the state which was to be thoroughly Islamized, there were people like Golam Mostafa, one of the most renowned Pakistan-minded Bengali poets, to say:

Islam does not support democracy by number. This democracy might be useful in a secular state. The fact that in Western democracy, every person is endowed with voting right has its own reason. There, the basic philosophy of the state is: "sovereignty belongs to the people"...But the philosophy of the state in Islam is completely different... Islam says: "sovereignty belongs to Allah. Therefore, it is illogical to follow the canons of a secular state while we want to build Pakistan as an Islamic state.\textsuperscript{14}

Obviously, the rationale behind this politics could not be very convincing to everyone. Therefore, the given configuration of power got into an ever-increasing crisis of legitimacy, and it became increasingly oppressive. In continuance of the same idiom of politics, of course, the League, since the very inception of Pakistan, had a problem


\textsuperscript{14} ‘Naya Jindegir Ahban,’ \textit{Mahena}. March, 1962. Reprinted in Khatun, Mahfuza. ed. \textit{Golam Mostafa Prabandha Sankalan}. Dhaka: Ahmad Publishing House. p.96. This article was written at a time when the country was under military rule. In fact, in the 24 years of union with East Bengal, Pakistan tried all different ways to surmount or side-track its crisis of legitimacy. In the process it only exposed its ever-unfolding crises in clinging to the religious identity.
with the effective deployment of the continually reproduced category of 'Hindu India' as the 'Other' in its discursive practices. The further removed was this once-internal exteriority from the collective memory the more politics plunged into a crisis of legitimacy in the construction of this dichotomy - the (internal) self and (external) Other. Kashmir provided the necessary apple of discord which initially forbade the waning of the memory of pre-partition politics and was indeed an affective source that legitimated the continual reliving of the past. But that was perhaps truer and more necessary in the then West Pakistan where internal 'liminalities' were hard to find after a near-complete disappearance of the religious minorities from that part of Pakistan following the partition.

But in East Bengal, Kashmir was too far to constitute a real incentive for the prevalent politics of this particular self-other dichotomy. Still, Kashmir in a roundabout way was made to represent a paranoia in terms of security of East Bengal. That was again to legitimate the continuing and dominant idioms of politics in East Bengal.¹⁵ Any discursive

¹⁵ What was 'dominant' immediately after the partition, didn’t remain dominant only after two years. Muslim League remained in power for quite sometime through deferment of elections and represented the dominant political discourse through its subservient media until 1954. But its dominance was gradually taken over by a radically different and reverse configuration of the self-other dichotomy, the discussion of which follows. In this particular context, I am referring to the Muslim League dominance - the dominance of the religious self-other, self-in-Pakistan--other-in-India dichotomies.
displacement of this enforced identity/difference was considered to be subversive of the given power relations. In the face of the proliferation of contending perceptions of identities in East Bengal, informed by ethnic distinction from the people of West Pakistan and a modernist inclination to secularism, the power elite became obsessive and ossified on their preferred code of identity/difference.

**Islamization of Culture and Literature**

A similar penchant, perhaps, more exuberant, was noticeable in the areas of literature and culture. Indeed, the propensity was there even before Pakistan was created. Two organizations, *Purba Pakistan Renaissance Society*, formed in 1942, and *Purba Pakistan Sahitya Sangsad*, formed in 1943, took an active role in this regard. Numerous articles were published especially in *Masik Mohammadi* which sensitized the Muslim literati about the quest for a separate Muslim literature. But before 1947, it was more like making a claim on an unknown territory still to be carved out in the name of Islamic literature. And because of the perceived contestation from the proponents of common Bengali literary heritage, it could not go beyond defining what Islamic literature and culture meant in Bengal.

Once Pakistan was created, in the euphoria of victory, the malevolence perceived before was now thought to have
disappeared, or at least, have become less threatening. Therefore, it was the time for the Muslim literati, in independent East Pakistan, to reconstruct a true and authentic Islamic tradition of literature and culture sifting through all its 'impurities' accumulated from 'Hindu' literature and cultural practices. Abul Kalam Shamsuddin said, "Foreign ideas, foreign allegories, metaphors and words cannot be reintroduced in Pakistan literature with a new garb." 16 Clearly, the allusion was to Bengali literature of West Bengal. Naobahar, in its editorial of the first issue, opined, "Bengali language has been split into two with the partition of Bengal. There will be no more continuity between the literature of this side of Pakistan and that of the other side." 17 Syed Sajjad Hossain favored extensive use of Arabic and Persian words in Bengali for propagation of Islamic culture. 18 In fact, most of these writers had already started using a Bengali language


conspicuously loaded with Arabic and Persian words. In 1951, Syed Ali Ahsan wrote in a controversial article:

For the sake of the stability of the new state, we shall look for new expression of life and ideals in our literature. In addition, it is also true that we shall be prepared to abandon Rabindranath if it is necessary for maintaining our cultural distinction and national solidarity.

In the same article, he opined that an Islamic tradition of literature should be gleaned from the rich repertoire of *punthis*, composed by the Muslim poets of the past. But of course, these needed to be thoroughly revised to rid them of their un-Islamic impurities. Syed Ali Ahsan edited two volumes of *Galpa Sangraha* (Collection of Bengali Short stories) which did not include any literary piece written by any non-Muslim. Similarly, in another collection of Bengali poems from East Bengal edited by him which covered a period between 14th century and 20th century, there was only one poem by a non-Muslim. The poem, curiously, was about the Islamic holy festival of Ied.

---

19 Within this given discursive environment, even progressive poets like Begum Sufia Kamal were compelled to use Arabic and Persian words in her poems. See 'Asiacche Sei Din.' Mahenao. 1356. 1st year. Issue 5. pp.18-19.


distinctive Islamic tradition, that has long been talked about in order to realize Pakistan, had, indeed, to be constructed now to provide legitimacy to Pakistan, its given emplotment of politics and to its given configuration of power. Obviously, this construction was extremely eclectic.

The Bengali Identity: A Counter-discursive Move

Amidst the pro-Islamic euphoria, any attempt on the part of the marginalized to break into the prevalent power grid had to advance contending discourses with counter-claims of legitimacy of alternative identities. These were soon to be found as much empowering against the religious identity as the latter was against Indian identity during the colonial period. And these discourses drew their primary legitimation from the very way history was twisted to legitimate religious identity once in the past. Legitimacy once granted to selective construction of identity also legitimated the agonistic iterations that claimed discursive ground for alternative perceptions of identities which were equally historicizable.

In the political arena of East Bengal, the contention was straightaway inherited from the pre-partition politics. For the dominant group in post-partition East Bengal, the deployment of the self-other dichotomy along the religious
line was thought to be necessary for a number of other reasons too. To name a few, these were: severe factionalism within Bengal Provincial Muslim League, contention over the interpretation of the content and spirit of the Lahore Resolution of 1940 of the Muslim League as to whether really a single country was envisioned, reminiscence of the efforts of some Muslim League front-liners in collaboration with Forward Bloc for an independent united Bengal away from Pakistan during the last days of colonial rule, and presence of a large minority, in spite of a mass exodus after recurrent communal riots, who, for no reason on earth, could welcome the Pakistani state.

Given this wide array of allegedly perceived opposition from within, the importance of exteriority as a reference point for internal politics gradually waned in East Bengal. Or more precisely, exteriority attained a different connotation having its meaning only in relation to the internally attributed liminalities. The dominant Muslim League leadership in East Bengal was engaged in an unending and insuperable struggle for power with the Suhrawardy-Abul Hashim faction of Provincial Muslim League that once worked with Forward Bloc for united Bengal. Later in the post-partition period, after the formation of the Awami Muslim League in 1949, they, along with the local intelligentsia, came to scrutinize the Lahore Resolution for its content.
Understandably, the incentive behind this interrogation was an urge for a reconfiguration of power. Since politics in the subcontinent was predominantly a politics of identity which was still pursued in Pakistan, a quest for an effective counter-discourse of an alternative perception of identity would be the most logical way to attempt to subvert the given power-relations. It was not very difficult to retrieve one from the memory of the immediate past. Presumably, this was the ethnic-linguistic Bengali identity which in the midst of the extravagant pageant of communalism lost its voice in pre-partition politics.

For the people in East Bengal, it carried a new significance in the changed political situation. Also, the long colonial politics of more than a century created a discursive environment which nourished a tradition of the politics of opposition. What was oppositional was also popular. In addition to the imperative of the continuing politics of identity in post-partition, this other idiom almost necessitated the emergence of the contending Bengali identity. Besides, the whole literary discourse supporting the ideal of Pakistan, and partly the political discourse were indeed directing their energy against the potential enemy – the Bengali identity. This discursive environment was evidently conducive to the emergence of the counter-discourse of Bengali identity. The repertoire of history was opulent with many elements like the syncretistic penchant of
the punthi literature, the contemptuous indifference of the Urdu-speaking Sharif class who eventually formed the ruling elite in Pakistan, the Urdu-Bengali controversy in Muslim League, and an effort for united Bengal in the name of the common ethnic-linguistic identity. All this would make the necessary provision. The politics of Bengali identity in post-partition East Bengal had an instant take-off.

Indeed, the atmosphere was made propitious by the long presence of a parallel literary discourse. In spite of the sweeping effect of the surging communalist discourse, it always made its voice heard about the distinctive Bengali identity, especially in the recurring Urdu-Bengali controversy which had begun since late nineteenth century. In the post-partition period, even in the ubiquitous euphoria about Islamic Pakistani identity, a few feeble voices were always present. In the midst of boisterous cacophony about Islamic identity, Quazi Motahar Hossain opined that literature should not be confined in any narrow space. It must accommodate a syncretism of Hindu and Muslim cultures.²² Md. Abdul Hai, another renowned litterateur, expressed a similar attitude and rejected the idea of Islamizing Bengali language and literature through extensive incorporation of Urdu and Persian words and by replacing the

Bengali script with Arabic as was suggested by many enthusiasts around that time. The strongest articulation in support of the Bengaliness came from Dr. Md. Shahidullah. In the Presidential speech of the East Pakistan Literary Conference Shahidullah said on December 31, 1949:

As it is true that we are Hindus and Muslims, it is equally true that we are Bengalis. It is no ideology, it is the reality. Mother nature has inscribed such a permanent mark of Bengaliness on our physical features and our language that it cannot be cloaked behind mala-tilak-tiki or tupi-lungi-dari.

This was predictably met with a severe criticism from the fanatic pro-Pakistan press. Azad wrote in an editorial comment the following day, "it is difficult to contemplate that we shall encounter such iterations in the Pakistani environment after the partition of India and Bengal. Besides, it was no Hindu writer. Who would imagine that a person like Dr. Shahidullah would sing such a hymn of the 'mother nature'?" Sainik, the newspaper having connection

---


with Tamaddun Majlish\textsuperscript{26} was even more sarcastic in its attack against Shahidullah.\textsuperscript{27}

One subtle but remarkable thing prevalent in the discursive environment around this time shouldn’t go unnoticed. There was already a big controversy on the question of the state language of Pakistan and the students of East Bengal participated in a number of big demonstrations to which even a section of the Muslim League press was sympathetic. The reason behind this sympathy deserves a closer examination.

The East Pakistan Muslim League began to realize its peripherality in the given configuration of power in Pakistani politics immediately after the partition. It was not unlikely that some of them thought that the emergence of a counter-discourse from Bengal would put them in a much better bargaining position vis-a-vis the central leadership in the expected redistribution of power. Still, for their own credibility as the undaunted champions of Islamic identity, they could not step beyond their own predetermined discursive limit. Definitely, they could not instantly switch to the Bengali identity which actually belonged to

\textsuperscript{26} The expression literally means cultural organization. Majlish, in spite of its support to the language movement, was in general a proponent of Islamic culture in Pakistan, although initially with an inclination toward ‘Islamic socialism.’

the 'enemies' both inside and outside Pakistan. But the demand for recognizing Bengali language as the state language, at the beginning, could logically be thought to be within the accepted parameters of Pakistani politics - a legitimate aspiration of a major section of the Pakistani people who provided relentless support to the cause of Pakistan.

While the discursive environment was replete with multiple perceptions of identities as providing incentives to the language movement, the section of the East Pakistan Muslim League in question, indeed, the marginalized and the ambitious section, was inclined to look at it as a regional demand. The region was of course thought to be comfortably embedded in Pakistan. And a claim to the state language was in a way an affirmation of the legitimacy of the state. The celebrated identity was still the Islamic one, whether said or not. Bengaliness was understandably second to it in political significance. Therefore, while the central Muslim League and a fragment of the East Pakistan Muslim League, mostly dominated by the Urdu-speaking elite, tried to dismiss the demand, label it as the machinations of the internal liminal groups and hence as a subversion of the Pakistani state, a considerable section of East Pakistan Muslim League and the press was sympathetic to and even supportive of the language movement.
Understandably, this section of the Muslim League was not ignorant of the potential political implications loaded in the language movement. After all, Bengal had a long history of asserting a separate identity, of challenging the non-Bengali Muslim League leadership, of making an effort for an independent united Bengal in the name of a common Bengali identity. But in the congenial discursive environment of Pakistan, it was thought to be prudent to take a preemptive measure to accommodate and channelize the contending perception, now possibly re-emerging, into the accepted parameters of Pakistani politics.

This, perhaps, fits well into an understanding of why Shahidullah’s utterance, not the language movement, was so perturbing to the newspapers like Azad and Sainik. Shahidullah prioritized the Bengali identity over the religious identity and did it emphatically and unequivocally. This posited a counter-discourse loaded with enormous potential of counter-imagining of nation which could be allowed a discursive space only at the expense of the rationale of Pakistan.

But a series of events followed that made the denial of space to the counter-discourse of Bengali identity impossible. While the Provincial Muslim League was largely successful in jettisoning the opponents from the organization by restricting membership of the organization to those who were known for their loyalty to the Nazimuddin-
Akram Khan faction, the disenchanted group, largely comprising the followers of Hashim-Suhrawardy faction, formed a new organization named 'Pakistan Awami Muslim League' in 1949. Mowlana Bhashani, the left leaning Muslim League leader of Assam with considerable following among the Bengali peasants, was also with this organization. Later, under the influence of the radical members of the organization, the word 'Muslim' was dropped from the name of the organization to attract other secular forces in Bengal. Meanwhile, Fazlul Huq also reorganized his Krishak Praja Party under the name of Krishak Shramik Party. These organizations based solely in East Bengal found it politically empowering for themselves and constraining for the Muslim League which increasingly became defensive, to talk of regional grievances and win the hearts of the Bengali Muslims. As the politics so far was predominantly the politics of identity, a natural corollary of the political discourse of discrimination and regional grievances was an increasing politicization of the Bengali identity.

This was steered ahead by the prevalent contention in the literary and cultural discourses. At this stage, there were a number of cultural and literary organizations which, from their varying ideological positions, began to interrogate the rationale of the religious identity. Most notable among them were 'Sanskriti Sangsad' based in Dhaka
University and 'Purba Pakistan Sahitya Sangsad.' These two organizations were also the rallying ground for the leftist writers allegedly having links with the clandestine leftist political organizations which were banned in Pakistan as the ideal of communism was completely repugnant to Islam.

While the liberal propensity was dominant in these groups advocating for the Bengali identity, the radicals were more in favor of looking at things from a class perspective. In spite of these internal differences in propensities, there was a discernible point of convergence in regard to interrogating the religious identity. But because of too many constraints imposed on left leaning political penchant in Pakistani politics, the combined harvest of the anti-religious politics was always to go to the proponents of Bengali identity. For example, a number of literary and cultural conventions were organized in the late 1940s and throughout the 50s in which, perhaps, the most active role was played by the leftist writers. But most often the people invited as chief guests or to preside over the sessions were the people of repute like Dr. Muhammad Shahidullah, Begum Sufia Kamal or Abdul Karim Sahitya Visharad, a recurring few from the proponents of the distinctiveness and richness of Bengali culture and literary

---

28 e.g., Purba Pakistan Sahitya Sammelan, Dhaka, December 31, 1948- January 1, 1949; Purba Pakistan Sanskritik Sammelan, Chittagong, March 16, 1951; Purba Pakistan Sahitya Sammelan, Comilla, August 22-24, 1952.
tradition. Their speeches were the ones that drew most attention of the press. The discursive ambience reproduced in these enunciations was one of a celebration of the ethnic-linguistic Bengali identity.

The radical writers, however, didn’t mind the liberals stealing the show. Because, in the constricting idioms of Pakistani politics, they, as the radical writers and politicians, didn’t have opportunity even to come to the surface. Only an environment of secularist politics, which the politics of Bengali identity was striving for, would be conducive to their future possibilities.

The Language Movement and After

Amidst this rapidly changing discursive environment, which was already marked by the defeat of the Muslim League in one by-election in 1949 in Tangail, the language movement grew in momentum. The century-old Bengali-Urdu controversy was resuscitated through a number of iterations and events. Most notable among them were: recommendation of the Education Conference held in Karachi on December 5, 1947, for adoption of Urdu as the national language; Dhirendranath Dutta’s motion in the Constituent Assembly of Pakistan for recognizing Bengali as the national language; Jinnah’s public statement in Dhaka, once at the Race Course and then in the Convocation of Dhaka University in late March in 1948
that Urdu should be the state language of Pakistan; the
instant protest of the Bengali students against this
statement and a number of demonstrations and agitation
against this official decree.

The ruling Muslim League elite, right from the rebuttal
of Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan to Dutta’s motion, had
all along labelled it as the designs of the Hindus, the
enemies of Pakistan. But the Bengalis, especially the most
conscious section of them, the students, were not to be
swayed by this Muslim League artifice.

The language movement reached the acme of its momentum
on February 21, 1952, when some people were killed on the
streets of Dhaka by police firing for violation of Section
144. This incident provided an unprecedented impetus to the
cause of Bengali identity. The Bengalis have since then
observed this date as the ‘Martyrs’ Day.’ To date, no other
day, not even the ‘Independence Day’ or the ‘Victory Day’ of
Bangladesh, after the inception of the country, is observed
amidst comparable grandeur. The mood immanent in the
observance of this day is one of both celebration and
mourning. There is at least one Shahid Minar in each small
town, if not even in some villages, commonly in the school
or college campuses in the memory of the language martyrs.
On February 21, thousands of people of all ages stream to
the Shahid Minar bare-footed in silent processions or

29 A structure in memory of the martyrs.
singing the famous Ekushe song which is perhaps more popular than even the national anthem of the country. A month-long book-fair is held in Dhaka. People come to this book-fair in thousands everyday mostly wearing kurta and pajama, the undeclared national dress of the Bengalis. Throughout the month, there are numerous performances by various cultural troupes and theater groups on the platform of the central Shahid Minar in Dhaka, and in all open spaces in the vicinity of Dhaka University. The intellectuals and cultural organizations organize meetings, seminars and symposia. The publishers wait until February to publish their new books. Literary Organizations publish journals commemorating February 21. All the national newspapers publish special supplement on the Martyrs’ day. Such is the importance of the day to the Bengalis. The politics of Bengali identity got an irreversible send-off in February 1952.

The mood immanent in the post-1952 political environment of East Pakistan was understandably conducive to a coalescence of the anti-Muslim League political forces whose locutionary anchor, though with varied sentimental and political attachment, was the 'interest of East Bengal.' The

---

30 The word means 21st. The Bengalis in Bangladesh are politically so much sensitized by this event that the word ekushe wouldn’t mean anything but 21st February to them.

31 Curiously, the Bengalis call it punjabi.
provincial elections in March 1954 brought an unbelievable land-slide victory to the United Front in East Bengal. The Muslim League secured only nine seats in a House of 309.\textsuperscript{32}

This was to be considered a unanimous Bengali mandate to the 21-point program of the United Front laid out in its election manifesto, mostly concentrating on regional demands.

But this euphoria was short-lived. Once in power, the United Front soon began to experience fragment along party lines. Besides, shortly after Fazlul Huq formed the ministry in East Bengal, he went to Calcutta where he allegedly spoke against the partition.\textsuperscript{33} Huq later denied this, but the central government was keen on believing this. Meanwhile, a labor disturbance in Adamjee Jute Mill at Narayangonj, which was allegedly instigated by the agents of the central government, provided another reason to the central government to finally dismiss the Huq ministry and eventually the entire Assembly and impose President’s rule in the province. Since then, through the central conspiracy of dishing out power to one or other group of the United Front, factionalism in Bengal politics was made to reach its pinnacle. Bengal politics was completely discredited in the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[] Rahaman, Fazlur. \textit{Culture Conflicts in East Pakistan 1947-1971.} Dhaka: Sejuty Prokashani. 1990. p.120.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
following four years before the military rule was imposed in the country.

Resurgence of Islamic Identity

Amidst this receding zest of the politics of Bengali identity and the waning power of the political forces upholding the Bengali identity, the Islamic forces found the discursive ground partly congenial to their re-emergence. The newspapers and journals like *Morning News*, *Azad* and *Masik Mohammadi* found a fresh lease on life in their renewed attack on the pro-Bengali political forces after the Kagmari convention of the Awami League in February, 1957. Understandably, the issues of the convention were to be taken up quite enthusiastically by the adversary press because of the impending schism in the Awami League. This schism was the result of a difference of opinion between Suhrawardy, then the Prime Minister of Pakistan and Mowlana Bhashani, the most popular left-leaning mass leader in East Pakistan on the question of Pakistan’s alignment with the pro-U.S. countries. Particularly, the pro-Muslim League press bitterly attacked Mowlana Bhashani who said in the convention that there might be a day when East Pakistan would bid good bye to West Pakistan. *Morning News* wrote in this regard:
...Is Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani free to go about in the country preaching the dismemberment of Pakistan and inciting people openly to sedition? This is not the first time however that Bhashani has threatened of "a stage which might come in the future, when people of East Pakistan will say 'assalam alaikum' to West Pakistan." The people of East Pakistan have of course, no intention of saying at any time any such thing. It is Bhashani and a powerful section of the Awami League which has made it its business to incite people to think in those terms. 34

Clearly, the newspapers like Morning News attempted to redeem the political discourse again to an inviolable juridical space which would determine the limit of political volubility. Abjuration of Pakistani identity is something that cannot be tolerated. And of course, Morning News, like a faithful pro-Muslim League newspaper, ends the editorial with the standardized allusion to India as the motivating source behind such an iteration:

At Kagmari no attempt was made to hide the source from which such inspiration comes. The arches named after Gandhi, Subhas Bose, Tagore, Lenin tell their own lurid tale. 35

In fact, since the inception of Pakistan, the sharpest critique of the rationale of Pakistan in any public statement had come from Bhashani in this convention. He said

35 Ibid.
that there was no positive ideal of the Muslim League behind the creation of Pakistan. Politics was then exclusively influenced by perceived malice. Understandably, this was met with the most acrimonious response from the Muslim League which was now reasserting itself in the midst of the political imbroglio and factionalism plaguing the United Front partners.

A similar resurgence was visible in the cultural and literary arena. *Rownak Sahitya Gosthi* was formed in April 1958 by a pro-Pakistan literary constellation which included M. Barkatullah, Ibrahim Khan, Golam Mostafa and Abul Kalam Shamsuddin. In the very first meeting of the group on May 11, 1958, Golam Mostafa read an article titled 'Pak Bangla Bhasha' in which he observed that the influx of Sanskrit words in Bengali literature bearing the imprint of the Hindu culture was the outcome of a political conspiracy and Pak Bangla language had to be purged of these cultural traces.36 Perhaps, the same article was later published in the independence issue of *Najat*. Golam Mostafa urged in this article that Pak Bangla language needed to come close to Arabic, the language of the Muslim world. He gave examples of the growth of the languages like Persian in Iran, Al Jamia in Spain and Urdu in India which were created anew with the 'golden touch' of Arabic. The same was needed to happen to Bangla. And *Pak Bangla* language had to be modelled

after the Islamic linguistic style found in the Punthis.\textsuperscript{37} In the July meeting they proposed to compile a \textit{Pak Bangla} dictionary which would cleanse archaic Sanskrit words from Bengali language.\textsuperscript{38} In the August meeting of the group, the subject was to purge \textit{Pak Bangla} literature of the similes, metaphors and allegories having the marks of Sanskritic influence.\textsuperscript{39} The group was successful in convincing the Government to put a ban on the import of books, journals, and motion pictures from India, particularly from West Bengal.\textsuperscript{40} The impact of such efforts were quite visible in the internal literary practices. Hindu cultural traces imprinted in certain words were cleansed from Nazrul Islam's poems included in school text books. Two anthologies of modern Bengali prose and poetry published by the Bangla Academy were to include only the writings of the Muslims.

Another major event of the time was the East Pakistan Literary Convention organized by the pro-Islamic literati in Chittagong in 1958. The most remarkable aspect of the convention was Golam Mostafa's curious article on the origin of Bengali language. Mostafa traced it back not to the Indo-
European languages, but to the Semitic languages. Bengali, he argued, was the language of the original Dravidian people living in Bengal. These Dravidians, according to him, were the semitic people who spread from Babylonia, entered India through Beluchistan and eventually settled in the Punjab, Sind and Bangladesh. Mostafa found a conspiracy in the orientalist scholars like William Jones, Max Muller and Thomas Young who, in complicity with the Hindu pundits, have concocted the Aryan origin of Bengali.

Obvious in all these endeavors of the pro-Islamic groups was a strenuous effort to constitute a history, a repository of knowledge ready for redemption in its contention with the other political groups who emphasized the localness and distinctiveness of Bengali identity vis-a-vis the population of the other part of Pakistan. The discursive endeavor here was more constitutive than referential which, by severing the 'Hindu' and 'Sanskritic' connections of Bengali language, wanted to locate it in the continuum of Islamic tradition. Of course, in this attempt of counter-historicization, the enunciators transgressed the known temporal boundaries of human civilization and made an anachronous territorial claim on the pre-Islamic semitic

people as the source of Islamic tradition. Apparently, all this was geared toward finding a rationale for a reformed Pak Bangla language along the Islamic line and thus resuscitate the tradition lost 'to the conspiracy of the Hindus and the Westerners.' But the deeper and the more immediate implication of this constitution of knowledge was to constrain the space of politics permanently for the proponents of secular Bengali identity.

Circumstances were even more propitious to the pro-Islamic groups after the proclamation of military rule in October, 1958. Since then, a series of government actions and initiatives contributed to the spiralling of pro-Islamic fervor. The military regime rejuvenated the enthusiasm for one language and one tradition in Pakistan for the sake of its solidarity. In order to create a single language, the military regime again got into the sensitive issue of reforming Bengali language and proposed to introduce a Roman script for it. A 'Bureau of National Reconstruction' was formed by the Government. The Government also provided patronage to the formation of the Pakistan Writers' Guild. All these were aimed at neutralizing the discordant voices in the fields of literature and culture. Indeed, these organizations, through overt material patronage, were partly successful in winning away some writers from the secular group.
In spite of various efforts at reinstating the Islamic identity in dominance, the general sentiment in Bengal gradually went in favor of the prevalent pro-Bengali political and literary propensities and in fact these became more and more secure in the Bengali minds. In certain cases, even some pro-Islamic papers joined their rank. For example, Masik Mohammadi protested against the effort of the Education Commission to introduce Roman script in Bengali knowing the sensitivity of the people on this issue. In fact, the question of reforming Bengali language, its grammar and its script in order to Islamize it sufficiently was a recurrent phenomenon in East Pakistan politics. When it came up again in August 1968 after a controversial decision of the Dhaka University Academic Council, even Azad, the most loyal supporter of the pro-Islamic group couldn’t but oppose this recurring venture in the strongest possible language considering the loaded nature of the issue.

Another recurring point of contention was Rabindranath Tagore. A major section of the pro-Islamic group was inclined to banish Rabindranath from East Pakistan by all

---

means. Azad, the most garrulous pro-Islamic daily published from Dhaka, took the lead in this regard. Just before the hundredth birth anniversary of the great poet in 1961, Azad published numerous articles, letters and editorials to portray Rabindranath as a Hindu poet having all the marks of Hindu nationalism and therefore, to be disowned by East Pakistan. The pro-Bengali groups, of course, made a claim to the rich common heritage of Bengali literature of which Rabindranath was the resplendent crest. In spite of the fear of reprisal from the military regime, which was presumably against the celebration of the event, enthusiasm was high in observing the hundredth birth anniversary of the poet even in the remote areas of East Pakistan. Indeed, this controversy also took the Bengali sentiment one step ahead in galvanizing mass political support for the Bengali identity.

The Bengali sentiment once again came to the foreground of politics on the Rabindranath issue after the declaration of the central Minister for Information in the National Assembly on June 22, 1967 that Tagore songs would not be broadcast from Pakistan Radio since it was repugnant to the ideal and cultural values of Pakistan. This instantly got the Bengali Muslim literati again into a fierce debate. The secular Bengali intelligentsia strongly objected to this Government decision in a number of public statements. A counter-statement of the pro-Islamic intelligentsia of Dhaka
University soon followed. On this occasion, Azad wrote in a long editorial:

...In his deeper perception of life, Rabindranath is not only influenced by Rammohun, but also by Shankarachrya. This is why Rabindranath did not hesitate to celebrate Brahminism. He didn't have minimum curiosity about the majority of the people in Bengal. He never showed any interest in breaking away from the trend of literature that grew in rancor and indifference to the Muslims... The cultural existence of East Pakistan is in its formative stage. New ideals are now evolving. In the interest of the nation, all the obstacles to this development have to be removed. Compromise in this regard is not only a manifestation of weakness, it is dangerous... East Pakistan and Rabindranath's West Bengal are not only different, they have basic contradictions. To allow Rabindranath to be used as the bridge between the two will cut at the root of the existence of the state.45

And, the editorial of course did not forget to make the standardized expression of the pro-Islamic group that the 'Indian hands' were there behind this 'propaganda.'

Clearly, this representation of Rabindranath and the literary tradition that he allegedly drew from was highly selective. Conveniently, it is oblivious of the host of Rabindranath's writings, especially at the beginning of the century, which called for Hindu Muslim amity. Disavowal of Rabindranath was indeed one of the most important strategic

and discursive moves, perhaps, only second to the ploy to reform Bengali language which would provide the Islamic groups a significant leverage against the secular forces. Concurrently, writings of Qazi Nazrul Islam were also to be purged of their marks of Hindu tradition, though not to be altogether disavowed, for, after all, Nazrul Islam was a Muslim. All these attempts were strongly opposed. During the 1960s, the celebration of the Bengali identity was at its pinnacle. Cultural activists upholding the Bengali identity founded numerous cultural organizations for the propagation of the common Bengali culture and tradition. Days like Pahela Baishakh, the Bengali New Year’s Day was observed with new political significance. And of course, Ekushe February was there all along to remind the Bengalis of their Bangalitva.

Meanwhile, the political environment of the province was also gradually undergoing a significant change. A desired reconfiguration of power, found its articulate expression in the 6-point movement of the Awami League which was thoroughly informed by regional demands now explicitly based on the Bengali identity. This movement, along with numerous events on its carriage on the way finally led East Pakistan to be come an independent state - Bangladesh.

And of course, this was not the end of the trail. Since contentions over power would never end, since the politics dominant in the region is the politics of identity and since
the state, whatever may be its ultimate form, could not exhaust all the possibilities of identity formation, we were to see, newer identities being imagined in the pursuit of power. And the state was to continue to be challenged by these unending questions. If the history of the past in conjunction with the trends prevalent in the present has anything to prove, one can say, the present territorial contour awaits the effect of the next attempt at subversion. The next destination is however, still uncertain.
Section Four
Conclusion
CHAPTER EIGHT

Peering Through the Crevice

History has a big 'crevice,' a big dumping ground for things unknown and perhaps, some of which will never be known. These were subjectively construed as 'unimportant,' 'subversive,' 'threatening' or 'debilitating' at different critical moments. The known history makes a much better sense when it is contrasted against what it suppresses or marginalizes. Clearly, history, in its making, is intrinsically marked with contention(s). The outcome of the contention, indeed, what we finally know as history, is a selective construction of knowledge. History is thus a discourse. Therefore, to go beyond the apparent collation of facts for a deeper comprehension of the known history, we need to peer through this crevice.

In colonial and post-colonial settings, contentious histories are deeply implicated in the varied perceptions of nation-state. As Nicholas Dirks puts it, "History has not only been the outcome of political representation but also its necessary condition."1 To put it in the reverse order, selective construction of history has facilitated the birth of the post-colonial nation-state, and the nation-state, after its birth, has made every effort to reproduce the same

---


316
history to legitimate its own existence. But since power was sought in the selective construction of history, tradition and identity which was thought to be legitimate, alternative imaginings of history, tradition and identity, emanating from contention on power, could also make a claim to legitimacy. So was the case with the political construction of cultural identities in Bengal which is now partitioned in the name of agonistic identities.

The existence of this partition is significant not only in territorial sense, but also in terms of its regenerative role in the continued perception of spatial and psychological distance among the Bengalis across the border now compelled to imagine as ‘two communities’ along religious lines. In spite of West Bengal’s rejection of communalism in macro-politics, it continues to be known as Hindu Bengal with an indelible reference to the rationale of partition. And, in spite of East Bengal’s long and arduous excursus away from the rationale of partition since it happened, East Bengal is still Muslim Bengal as long as the partition is there. In West Bengal, the partition trauma, still alive in the popular memory, has caused a psychological closure. East Bengal is still popularly perceived as a malevolent exteriority, where the Hindus, an inextricable part of the ‘self’ constituted in the politics of partition, are subjected to endless tribulations. This is an agony which the Bengalis in West Bengal seek to overcome.
in an apathy to East Bengal. Immanent in this apparent indifference is a continuing contention which legitimates partition.

In East Bengal, partition has been particularly debilitating to secular politics as it has always been deployed politically as a rationale in itself for the continuity of the politics of religious identity. In spite of certain decisive victories of the secular construction of identity, the religious identity comes back again and again in East Bengal with renewed political significance with an inevitable reference to the partition, beyond which live the 'Others' ready to be redeemed always for a political self-definition. The partition constantly reminds the history of contention - contention among people politically constituted as two religious communities who in the evolving discursive environment were gradually convinced that they had 'essentially' separate cultural identities.

Understandably, this essentialization of identities took place in the domain of the political and such constitutions of cultural-religious identities were not ineluctable. And indeed, contentions are still there and they appear to be endless. In view of this, the object of this study was, keeping the partition as its central focus, to look into the itinerary of the perceptions of identities, the immanent contentions, subversions and deferments of other contending perceptions in some critical intersections.
of history, the process of essentializing identities through selective construction of history and tradition and how the imagining of identities moved from one stasis to another in keeping with the protean perception of power. And above all, it was the object of this study to look into the discursive environment in Bengal at certain critical junctures of history when certain perceptions of identities ascended to dominance.

**Essentialization of Identities**

It is clearly evident from this study that in the politics of Bengal, perception of identity was not contingent upon any fixed essence. It was always constituted in a way to steer politics to a desired telos. The same populace came to perceive themselves in terms of different identities at different times. Politics of the time made it happen, be that in the domain of the individual, the social, or the state. For instance, the practices that were perceived to belong to the domain of the individual or the social in the lives of the ‘Hindus’ until the first decade of the nineteenth century, soon came to be perceived as belonging to the domain of the state through the privileging of official discourse. And curiously, in spite of considerable resistance in the early days to this encroachment of the state, the perception of the whole
society about Hindutva gradually changed in keeping with the preferred construction of the official and orientalist discourses.

Unlike what was perceived before colonization, the revived Hinduism in Bengal in late nineteenth century came to be thoroughly constructed as a masculinist category, as a tailored response to colonialism. Even in the quest for an 'inner domain,' as Chatterjee puts it, modernity as perceived by the Westerners was the indelible reference point. The parameters of the self-perception changed. The people were the same. But identities came to be construed as different at different time in response to politics.

Similarly, the medieval Muslim authors of the punthis, though fully conscious of their contention with the socially dominant Hindus, were comfortably embedded in a syncretistic culture, shared the same cultural artifacts, and were convinced of their cultural indivisibility from the Hindus manifest in numerous common cultural practices. Of course, at that time, they thought that it was the essence of their identity. The same people, since the mid-nineteenth century, were persuaded to move away from syncretism to an essentialized perception of Islamic identity in the midst of a politically insurrected communalism. This, at the end of this chapter of the history, culminated in the partition of Bengal in 1947. Had the Islamic identity been really the essence, the Muslim League would have ruled over Pakistan.
happily ever after and there would not be any Bangladesh. The Muslim populace of Bengal who voted for the Muslim League in 1946 believing in their Islamic identity, were ready to drag the League down just within two years after the inception of Pakistan. Now the same people were more Bengalis than Muslims. Then again, if Bangalitva were the essence, there would not be any contending perception in post-liberation Bangladesh. In the terrain of politics, identities are thus always constituted. And essence is attributed to them through supportive discourses in order to provide them with legitimation.

Selective Construction of History and Tradition

The known way to go about attributing essence to an imagined identity is selective construction of history and tradition. This study reveals that each time an identity is born out of the perceived necessity of politics of the time, a historical discourse is brought into play almost simultaneously. In the debate on agonistic perceptions of sati as to whether it was a practice sanctioned by religion, in the first instance, the diversity of Indian tradition was dehistoricized. Scriptures came to be ordered in their hierarchy. And tradition came to be scrutinized for its authenticity in the name of the hierarchized scriptures. Both the social propensities - the one supporting the
abolition of sati and the one opposing it - were engaged in historicizing one or other tradition. Each identity, born in this contentious terrain, was buttressed by a selectively constructed tradition and a historicizing discourse.

So was the case in the late nineteenth century. To confront colonial masculinity in its own terms, the perceived Hindutva, found it politically necessary to efface all traces of femininity and androgyny, which constituted a rich trend of Indian tradition in the past, from its identity. Instead, all the elements of masculinity were arduously gleaned from the generously provisioning repository of tradition. As for historical discourse, if such elements were not quite available in the known and temporally tangible history of Bengal, they could be surely borrowed from Rajasthan. The Bengali Hindu literati borrowed them as much as they could in order to enunciate their masculinity. Obviously, such a self-perception, drawn from a celebration of Hindutva and its masculinist traits, was a collage of selected fragments of history and tradition. When politics needed it, just within twenty years of the celebration of Hindutva, the same literati, and in some cases, the same persons, were desperately searching through the history and tradition around the time of the first partitioning of Bengal for a common Bengali heritage embracing both the Muslims and the Hindus putting aside their Hindutva. The same Hindutva, after a tortuous excursus
again came back with a renewed significance in 1947 lugging in its own heritage. This time it was not only religion. The space now to be called 'West Bengal' also had to be constituted as a separate political entity distinguishable from the rest of Bengal and it had to be embedded in a history of its own.

Similar was the itinerary of the perception of tradition of the people who variedly called themselves the Muslims, the Bengali Muslims, the Bengalis or the Muslims-not-Bengalis at different junctures of history. The tradition was syncretistic and beliefs and practices were undifferentiated at the time when the Muslim authors wrote the *punthis*. During reformist movements of the nineteenth century, that syncretic tradition was sifted through to collect together only the Islamic elements to forge a pure religious identity. In late nineteenth century, when Amir Ali wrote *The History of Saracens*, he was not quite content with the strands of Islamic tradition from within. The urge for distinctiveness from the locals was so much that he put it in a continuum with the Islamic tradition of Saudi Arabia.

Contention was there among the Muslims too - between the locals and the expatriates until late nineteenth century. And each perception of identity was buttressed by a selectively construed tradition. But then again the perceived necessity of communalist politics since the
beginning of the twentieth century brought the two trends together. Deferring the internal differences until the partition, they were inclined to make a common claim to the heritage of Islamic tradition more in an effort to distance themselves from the Hindus. After partition, this common heritage began to fall apart in East Bengal on the question of language and other issues. Now, there were people to look for the common heritage in the selected strands of the history of Bengal, rather than from the history of Islam in Bengal. History now began from King Shashanka, the first Bengali king, rather than from Ikhtiar Uddin Mohammad Bakhtiar Khilji, the first Muslim ruler in Bengal. Conversely, some proponents of the contending perception of Islamic Identity were inclined even to invent a story passed in the name of history about the semitic origin of the people of Bengal and place it in the same continuum with Muslim world. The contention on the perception of identity doesn’t end. But each identity, in claiming a legitimate space in politics, brings in a historical discourse of its own.

Identity and the Relations of Power

The historicization of discourses which privilege one or other identity is deeply and inextricably implicated in the desired or prevalent configuration of power.
Contentions, deferments and subversions are all related to the question of power. In fact, locating the site of power helps us a lot in understanding the intrinsic strength or weakness of the prevalent locutionary practices. For example, at the surface level, it appears that the debate on sati or the remarriage of Hindu widow in early nineteenth century was a contention between the reformist and the conservative sections of the Bengali Hindus. But if we look at the underpinnings of the official discourse, drawn largely from the emerging orientalist interest, in ordering the nature of the debate, the whole perception of the contention on power changes. Apparently, the conservative group represented the prevalent, if not the dominant, discourse and the reformers posited a counter-discourse. Of course, a dimension of power could be envisioned in this contention in which the reformers could be looked at as the proponents of the empowerment of women. Such an attribution is however, far-fetched. In spite of the fact that woman is the chosen site of the debates, the debates are markedly characterized by the preponderance of the issue of contentiously perceived tradition, a concern of the prevalent patriarchy. Women figure in these debates only marginally. More important here is the agony to exonerate the patriarchy from the stigma of inhuman social practices, now known as 'inhuman' after a persuasive contact with Western rationality. One can stretch the argument also to
say that the patriarchy was much more interested in recirculating women in the prevalent patriarchal mode of power. This was not to be opposed by the conservative throng either. Therefore, the contention was not there. And no attempt was there to subvert the prevalent circuit of power in the society.

But if we peer through the surreptitious working of the official discourse in molding an environment for juridicization of the local practices, we suddenly discover a different, perhaps a more convincing, level of contention. Here the official discourse, emanating from the position of power, is dominant, and the conservatives posit a counter­diction to it. The reformist discourse appeared quite powerful at the beginning because of its affinity to Western rationality which by that time secured enough interest in Bengal and also because of the known official disposition in favor of reforms. But since it was extraneous to the main contention on power and was an extension of the official discourse, the reformist group gradually lost ground to the proponents of Hindutva.

In the given contention with the colonial rulers in the late nineteenth century, the revival of Hindutva was perceived to be the most effective means to subvert power as it could garner the necessary popular support. But this contention achieved a new dimension within twenty years when the religious credential of nationalism was found to be
debilitating as it estranged the larger section of the Bengali populace - the Muslims. Once again it was the re-imagining of power aimed at garnering larger popular support in anti-colonial politics that a secular identity was desperately sought.

In the other context, during the Faraizi and Muhammadiya Movements, the Bengali Muslims were persuaded that it was debilitating for the Muslim community to adhere to the 'Hindu cultural practices' which were surreptitiously assimilating them into the pre-existing belief system. The more the Islamic identity was found to be empowering in the context of the 'divide and rule' policy of the colonial rulers, the more was the tendency among the local Muslims to move away from the syncretistic culture. This power was realized in the creation of Pakistan.

But soon after the inception of Pakistan, the people of East Bengal began to see themselves at the margin of power. A contention emerged again. The same people, who were the desperate Muslims committed to doing anything for Pakistan during the colonial period, now came to represent themselves as the Bengalis. Because, this was thought to be an effective strategy to subvert the given power-relations in Pakistan. Once Pakistan was removed far off after 1971, it was again easy to envision an 'Other' in India and redeem the religious identity in order to make a claim to the state
power. Each identity, as we see, was deployed in the political arena with a contention on power.

Obviously, at every critical juncture of history, a new configuration of power was founded upon the deferment of other contending perceptions of identity. In the initial victory of reformism under overt colonial patronage, the contending perception emerging from conservative *Hindutva* was deferred. But this conservative *Hindutva* came back in the form of cultural nationalism later in the century. This was deferred again in the name of a secular Indian identity since the beginning of the twentieth century and awaited a retrieval in Bengal just before the partition. And whenever this Hindu identity was in dominance, it had its own tendency to suppress, marginalize or defer other configurations of identity. For example, when *Hindutva* was at the pinnacle of its celebration, the whole social and political discourse was fraught with a tendency to marginalize the Muslim identity.

Similarly, among the local Muslims, a syncretistic cultural identity was suppressed in favor of a more orthodox religious stance. The same thing happened to the assertion of 'Bengali Muslim' identity in the process of increasing communalization of Muslim politics when only 'Muslim' identity was advanced to the foreground of politics in deferral of all other perceptions prevalent in the community. But definitely, the victory of the 'Muslim'
identity in this process was not complete and decisive. The other contending perceptions of identity were soon redeemed from the repository of history in the post-partition period. The Bengali identity rose to dominance only in an effective evasion of the question of religion. This of course came back after the liberation of Bangladesh again.

It is evident from this study that identities perceived at different intersections of the history which were deferred, marginalized or suppressed could be redeemed in politics at a different time when the environment of enunciation was congenial to such a redemption. But there were other perceptions too - some which are known - which have not been recovered from the crevice of history. For example, the open-ended syncretistic culture that was prevalent in Bengal for centuries have been losing its ground since nineteenth century. The Bengali identity now perceived in Bangladesh is not the same as it was construed in that syncretism. Similarly, the perception of Bengali identity which informed the demand for united Bengal has not yet recovered from deferment since partition. Of course, the contention on the perceptions of identity has not come to an end. Therefore, nobody knows whether the suppression of these other identities is decisive or not.
Identity and the Discursive Environment

The preponderance of the prevalent discursive environment in molding the perceptions of identities is another important aspect observed in this study of the politics of Bengal. The moment of enunciation of an identity is largely comprehensible in terms of the locutionary environment in which the enunciation is made. For example, the syncretistic identity manifest in the punthis was largely the outcome of the environment. The Muslim authors had to be intelligible in the given belief system, and in terms of the prevalent cultural practices. Thus the Hindu deities were represented as believable earthly characters by the Muslim authors in the same way as they were represented in the Mangal Kavyas. The syncretistic trend gradually disappeared in the changed discursive environment after the Faraizi and Muhammadiya movements and more particularly after the colonial patronage to the Muslims was conspicuous. Later, this religious identity had become increasingly communalized since late nineteenth century in its claim for a space in nationalist politics which was so far denied by Hindutva. Indeed, the literary and historical discourses of the time created a pervading anti-Muslim discursive environment which made it imperative for the Muslims to retreat to the communal identity in a defensive stance. Later, in the environment perpetuated by the 'divide and
rule’ policy of the colonial rulers, the pursuance of the communal identity, even in the deferment of internal tensions was found to be empowering.

In fact, the imperative of the discursive environment is also evidenced in the tactical translocation of Jinnah, a known agnostic turned into a communal leader. Jinnah found it empowering for himself to be embedded in the prevalent communalist discourse. He realized his predicament only after Pakistan was created. And so much was the sway of the environment that, even Jinnah, the most charismatic leader of Pakistan, failed to subvert it from inside in his attempt to re-dress Pakistan in a modernist garb.

Examples of the constitutive role of the locutionary environment can be drawn from the nature of the debates on practices like sati and remarriage of Hindu widow. The burgeoning Orientalist interest about India was primarily focused on the ancient scriptures. This was an antecedent to the official discourses focusing upon local practices. The authenticity of the practices were to be judged by whether or not the practices had scriptural sanctions. In the case of sati, the deliberations of the Nizamat Adalut (the Provincial Court) in interpreting the dicta of the hierarchized scriptures had an enormous influence on the subsequent debates on the practices. Influence was discernible in the intellectual transposition of Rammohun evident in the difference between Tuhfat-ul-Muwahiddin and
his first pamphlet on Sati written fifteen years apart. By the time he wrote the pamphlet, he was completely swayed by the official discursive inclination. Therefore, unlike in Tuhfat, he drew all his arguments from the scriptures in pamphlet. And his opponents did the same thing. In the mid-nineteenth century, Vidyasagar also searched through the scriptures and found a religious sanction for remarriage of Hindu widow from Parasar Sanhita. There could be many different ways of confronting the superstitious social practices. But the prevalent official discourse created an environment congenial to juridicization of local practices in which the whole reformist battle was fought out. Predictably, the reformist group was to win. It is interesting to note that both the local groups in the debates were engaged in a celebration of Indian tradition about which there was already a known orientalist interest. The reformers, though already exposed to Western rationalism and inspired by it, did not bring it to the foreground of the debate perceiving the constraint of such iteration in the environment of the celebration of Indian tradition.

In the late nineteenth century, the rediscovery of the ‘spiritual domain’ in the Indian tradition and history and its redemption were not autonomous or accidental either. The celebration of masculinity in the dominant colonial discourse created an imperative for surging cultural nationalism to pull the selected strands of tradition and
history to reorganize the spiritual domain which would be equally masculine, if not more. Definitely, this was not the only perceivable construction of the 'spiritual domain' that the repository of Indian history and tradition could provide. The configuration of the domain was selective, discernibly ordered by the masculinist and modernist trends in colonial discourse. In religion, masculinity was redeemed from the Gita. In literature, it was gleaned from James Todd's Annals of Rajasthan. In history, historians like Tarinicharan Chattopadhyay modelled Bharatbarser Itihas (History of India) after the received notion of Western historiography and even the writings of James Mill or Elphinestone on India. Tarinicharan's history was the function of the intertextuality which was in circulation around his time. From all these, it is evident that identities emerging at the critical junctures of history were in many ways the functions of the discursive environments prevalent at those times.

In the post-colonial societies like Bengal, where politics is primarily predicated on perceptions of identity, the contentions will never end. The histories of precolonial Bengal have too many fragments to give rise to too many imaginations of identities. Then there are potential perceptions of contending identities which have their provenance in the colonial history. If the legacy of anti-
colonial politics of identity continues, then many of these perceptions will be redeemed with claims to territory and/or power. Each claim is historicizable and is geared toward a desired stasis. But the moment a stasis is attained, it also begins to disappear. The partition of 1947 and the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971 were two such moments of stasis. The stasis attained in 1947 is already disrupted. And there are numerous contentions in post-liberation Bangladesh, some of which already have the tendency to move away from the present territorial confines. The post-colonial nation-states with a history of over-developed anti-colonial politics will continue to face this problem.
Bibliography

Official Documents and Unpublished Materials

The Bengal Legislative Assembly Proceedings. 1941. Vol. LX.

Census of India 1901 Vol. VI: I Calcutta, 1901.


Muslim League Session (1940) and the Lahore Resolution (Documents). Islamabad: National Institute of Historical and Cultural Research, 1990.


Punthi Manuscripts in Dhaka University Library

Ali, Kamar. Padabali. Manus. no. 301 (Sl. no. 265).

________. Radhar Sangbad. Manus. no. 476 (Sl. no. 30).
Aalol. Saifulmuluk-Badiuzzamal. Manus. no. 174 (Sl. no. 514).

Chand, Shaikh. Hara-Gouri Sangbad. Manus. no. 559 (Sl. no. 556).

Fayjullah, Shaikh. Goraksha Vijay. Manus. no. 424 (Sl. no. 107).

Hakim, Abdul. Nur Nama. Manus. no. 299. (Sl. no. 231).

Khan, Sabirid. Rasul-Vijay. Manus. no. 377 (Sl. no. 434).

Saghir, Shah Muhammad. Isup-Zalikha. Manuscript no. 125. (Sl. no. 12).

Sultan, Saiyid. Nabi-Bangsha. Manus. Nos. 390 (Sl. no. 217); 616 (Sl. no. 218); 207 (Sl. no. 219); 574 (Sl. no. 220); 90 (Sl. no. 221); 656 (Sl. no. 222).

----------. Shab-i-Miraj. Manus. nos. 297 (Sl. no. 487) & 433 (Sl. no. 490).

Zafar. Shahid-e-Karbala. Manus. no. 615 (Sl. no. 459).

Zainuddin. Rasul-Vijay. Manus. no. 594 (Sl. no. 423).

Newspapers, Periodicals and Journals

Aajkal;
Ahmadi;
Al-Eslam;
Amrita Bazar Patrika;
Ananda Bazar Patrika;
Aryadarshan;
Asiatic Researches;
Azad;
Bangadarshan;
Banganur;
Bartaman;
Basana;
Bhorer Kagoj;
Bichitra;
Comparative Studies in Society and History;
Cultural Critique;
Desh;
Dilruba;
Ganabani;
Indian Historical Review;  
Islam Pracharak;  
Kohinoor;  
Mahenao;  
Masik Mohammadi;  
Millat;  
Moazzin;  
Morning News;  
Moslem Chronicle;  
Nabanur;  
Nabyabharat;  
Naobahar;  
New Left Review;  
Nur-al-Iman;  
Prabasi;  
Probashi;  
Public Culture;  
Rowshan Hedayet;  
Sangbad;  
Sonar Bangla;  
Star of India;  
Statesman.

Other Sources


339


Jalal, Ayesha. The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League and the Demand for Pakistan. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985


Roy, A. Genocide of Hindus and Buddhists in East Pakistan, Bangladesh. Delhi: Kranti Prakashan, not dated.


Sharma, Ramsharan. 'Problem of Transition from Ancient to Medieval Indian History.' Indian Historical Review. March, 1974.


Wadud, Kazi Abdul. ‘The Mussalmans in Bengal,’ in *Studies in the Bengal Renaissance*. Calcutta: Jadavpur University, 1977
