SECOND CHAPTER

19TH CENTURY BENGALI LITERATURE AND THE MUSLIM INVOLVEMENT

The English education was introduced in Bengal in early nineteenth century. In 1817 Hindu College was established and in 1835 knowledge of English was declared as a special qualification. The Hindus took the advantage of the situation and in no time assumed a privileged position. The Muslims opted for avoiding western education and that reluctance affected adversely, amongst other aspects, their cultural progress also.

There were two hurdles for Muslims to go for English education. One was their religious prejudice, which deserves to be treated in some details. It originated basically from the pride they felt for ruling India for centuries:

मुसलमानों के निकट इंग्रजी शिक्षा एवं इसके सम्बन्ध में अंग्रेजों के अधिकारों पर अधिक आकर्षण
एक ही भाषा व्यवस्था निकट देशवन्दी निकट प्रतिरोधित होता अत्यन्त आकर्षित। 1

The reluctance of Muslim to take up western education was initially backed by a Fatawa issued by Shah Abdul Aziz. Though the Fatawa was primarily targeted against the British domination, it was interpreted by some quarters as an indirect injunction against the English education. The fact is that though there was incitement against the British in the Fatawa, but Abdul Aziz was not opposed to the English education, rather he by another Fatawa declared the English education 'Jayej' or permissible. The fact is that the Muslim aristocracy of Bengal who called themselves 'Ashrafs' were guided by a false vanity of superiority of Islamic culture and it was the narrowness and insularity of this class that created an atmosphere which prevented ordinary Muslims from taking up western education. This attitude received further boost from the preaching of Farahazi and Wahabi movements.
In the nineteenth century Farahazi and Wahabi movements led by Muslim fundamentalists swept a vast region of Bengal. These two movements adversely affected the Muslim participation in the development of Bengali culture and literature. The Wahabi movement in India was initiated by Shah Waliullah Dehalvi. His son Shah Abdul Aziz openly declared in the early nineteenth century that by the British occupation India had become a ‘Darul Haror’ or country of infidels. Thus the course opens to a religious Muslim either to declare ‘Zihad’ or Crusade against the infidels or leave the country. Inspired by this thesis, Saiyad Ahmed Berilly, one of his disciples, initiated anti-British activities. The British Government took wide ranging precaution to deal with this movement. In Bengal, the movement had its entry when the zeal for English education amongst the Hindus was in its zenith. How an ordinary Muslim against the declaration of ‘Darul Haror’ could go for English education sponsored by the infidel state power? Thus all India Muslim leadership here stood in the way of the advancement of Bengali Muslims:

The ‘Puthi Sāhitya’ of the nineteenth century Bengal was the product of this Wahabi movement. It was a period when the Hindus were favoured and Muslim
neglected by the British and the situation made an adverse effect on Muslim mind to consider newly inspired Bengali literature as an exclusive domain of the Hindus. And as a form of cultural protest and under the influence of Wahabis, the rural Muslim masses created a religious literature quite different in use of vocabulary, structure and content from urban based chaste Bengali literature. That literature came to be known as ‘Puthi Sāhitya’.

During this period a kind of ‘Zihadi’ (rebel) literature was created by Bengali Muslims. Shah Ismail Shahid first composed a treatise in Persian entitled Siratul Mostakim explaining and elaborating the message of Sayed Ahmed Berilly. To some the book was the manifesto of the Wahabis, to others the Bible of Wahabis. The book was translated in Islamised Bengali which was a peculiar mixture of Bengali, Urdu, Persian and Arabic. The translation, propagated of followers of Sayed Ahmed became immensely popular in rural Bengal.

The second reason for academic backwardness of Muslims was their poverty. The British rule was held responsible for the poverty also. Two reasons were attributed to this count. One, the Hindus were placed in respectable official
positions by the British administration dispossessing the Muslims and the permanent settlement was introduced by the British to favour Hindus to become zamindars at the cost of Muslims zamindars. William Hunter in his *Indian Musalmans* mentioned these two factors as the reason for frustration of Muslims and their resultant apathy towards the British rule. However, it should be remembered that Hunter’s book, published in 1872, had been written to sow the seeds of divide and rule policy which subsequently became the hallmark of the British administrative policy in India. The publication came into light when Indian Muslims were somewhat reconciling themselves to the British rule and making reappraisal of their attitude towards English education. And also it was a period when the Bengali Hindus, reinforced by their newly acquired knowledge gathered through western education showing inclination for developing a national spirit. Thus to combat this new spirit, the divide and rule was regarded as a right kind of move for the British.

Poverty may be a partial reason for educational backwardness of Muslims but it was not the sole reason. Also it is not correct to hold that the Muslim society in general was poor and thrown out of official patronage enbloc without any valid reason. If we draw a background it would appear that the question of attitude and ideology also played a formidable role in creating obstacles for Muslims to be engaged in new education system. In 1757 Bengal was conquered by the British. In 1772 one Wasimuddin, with the help of the government established a school at Hugli where only Arabic and Persian was taught. In 1780, in response to the appeal of the Muslim gentry, Warren Hastings established a Madrassa in Calcutta. From this Madrassa, actually Bengali Muslims were initiated to urban-based education. The government not only established the Madrassa, but also a directive was issued to give preference in recruit to official services the students graduated from this Madrassa.
Many successful students of this Madrassa were provided with good government jobs. Upto 1817, till the language of court was replaced by English in lieu of Persian, a good many number of Muslims were holding important judicial positions. Also in the list of lawyers published in 1811, we find there were 14 Muslim lawyers out of a total of 16. Now they definitely were of good financial standing. Where did the successors of these professional go? Even in 1865 at least 50% of lawyers were Muslims. But after that there was a stiff decline. The reason was reluctance to adapt English education. There were exceptions and that exception is manifested when we see a number of Muslims were members of different management bodies of schools and colleges. As late as 1887, we find names of both Hindus and Muslims as members of Calcutta School Book Society.

Thus it can be said that majority of Muslims were disinclined to take up English education because of their religious conviction and apathy for the British system. May be they hoped that the British rule would be short-lived and thus could not think of the hard realities ahead. There are examples to affirm that even Muslim engaged in high official positions also secretly sympathised with anti-British religious outfits. The question of financial incapability did not arise in the case of these urban-based professionals.

The permanent settlement of 1793 and confiscation of ‘Lakheraj’ or rent-free land in 1828 caused some loss to a section of Muslim landholders. But a more serious jolt came in 1835. So long language of the court and offices was Persian but Lord Bentinck in accordance with the recommendation of Lord Macaulay introduced English as the language of the court and administration displacing Persian. This change brought about radical consequences in the social, economic and political arena. Though advantages and disadvantages of the permanent settlement was equal
for both Hindus and Muslims. Muslims suffered more because of their failure to adapt a new system. The confiscation of rent-free lands affected Muslims more because Muslims mainly enjoyed this benefit because of the Muslim rule. Replacement of Persian by English affected the professionals and service holders amongst the Muslims. Thus deprived of landed property as well as scope of employment in official services, a large section of wealthy Muslims were improvised. Rev. James Long observed that with the introduction of English in administrative matters effectively curtailed the social prestige of Muslim gentry well versed in Arabic and Persian. Though a few Muslims received respectable positions, most of the Muslims were recruited for subordinate positions like daptaris and peons. In 1871, Hunter depicted the state of Muslim society in his book *The Indian Musalmans*:

It may be mentioned that the change of language in judicial courts not only effected Muslims alone, but Hindus also suffered to a certain extent. Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay in his famous story *Ādarinī* has shown how a wealthy Hindu Muktear well versed in Persian had to leave his practice and became a pauper because of the introduction of English.

It also needs to be mentioned that some resistance was there amongst the Hindus also as to take up English education. A good many number of wealthy Hindus opposed introduction of English education from a fundamentalist viewpoint. Fortunate amongst Hindus, there was also a powerful group who had a future vision
and members of this group, themselves being genius and intellectual stalwarts could persuade their fellow religionists as to the prospect of Western education. The thought propagation of English as their moral duty and to perform that duty Rammohan Roy declined to be a founder member of Hindu College:

Ultimately Rammohan’s futurist vision prevailed and society as a whole accepted the changing realities and came forward to sponsor English education and encourage younger generation to learn English and other allied subjects. The attitude and viewpoint of advanced section of Hindus can be best judged from depiction of Dewan Kartik Chandra Roy. Kartik Chandra was well versed in Persian language and literature and he had a special love for Persian poetry. His personal reflection on this issue is quite significant. Regarding introduction of English language, he wrote in his autobiography:

Hindus used to learn Persian for professional gains, now the changed situation demanded knowledge of English for the same purpose, so with out much fuss they opted for learning English. The decision was taken out of necessity and none
can blame them for this shift. But Muslims saw this attitude as a conspiracy hatched jointly by the British and Hindus. And in contemporary Muslim perception that joint conspiracy was motivated by a desire of curbing Muslim power and influence. They blamed British for allowing the Hindus to monopolise all benefits of the colonial rule.

Thus poverty of the Muslim society cannot be taken as a valid reason for their disinclination to adapt to the new system of education. The condition of Muslim middle class of the time was not worse than the Hindu middle class and most of the former classes were in a position to afford English education for their progenies. From false pride and superstition, the Muslim mind developed an apathy for both English and Bengali language. The father of Meer Musarraf was quite well do but he did not learn either English or Bengali. To him such learning was not in conformity with his religion. Moreover, Meer Musarraf informed us that the rural people of Muslim villages actually did not feel any necessity for taking up any kind of education. In this background, it can be said that:

Иногда виктория говорит, что замена статуи приведет к смерти мусульманских обществ. Правительство должно обратиться к мусульманским обществам в отношении проблем, несущихся с независимостью, и проблем, несущихся с независимостью, и

Of course the condition of rural Muslim masses was not congenial for pursuing English education but that was true to Hindu masses as well. The fact is that
advanced section of Muslims were opposed to English education and leaders of the community, they set the norms for the entire community and here the Muslims were in a disadvantageous position. Otherwise, as Ramtanu Lahiri used to run after palanquin of David Hare for learning English or as Vidyasagar used to learn his lessons under streetlights, so it was possible for ordinary Muslims to go for English education. But the social backing available for Hindus was completely absent in Muslim community.

Of course it is a fact that some Muslims of East Bengal were eager to learn English and they could not compete with their Hindu counterparts because of poverty. The Muslim inhabited areas of Eastern Bengal were economically backward and reasons for their failure in the face of Hindu challenge can be discerned from contemporary newspapers.

To infuse awareness amongst the Muslims, Khan Bahadur Abdul Latif established Mohamedan Literary Society in 1863. The society engaged itself in urging upon the government for taking measures for educational upliftment of Muslim as well as other measures for their well being. Abdul Latif's endeavour to spread English education amongst Muslims achieved considerable success and in recognition of that success, Viceroy Sir John Lowrence in 1867 awarded him a gold medal and presented a set of Encyclopaedia Britannica. The Secretary of Bengal government in a letter to him acknowledged his contribution for infusing a new spirit in the minds of the Muslims and credited his organisation as the source of inspiration of many other similar organisations those were instituted throughout the country following the example of the Mohamedan Literary Society. The patron of the society was the Lieutenant Governor Sir William Grey. Till that date Abdul Latif was not a Nawab: on May 29, 1880, following notification was published in India Gazette:
The 26th May 1880, No. 137, G.P.- His Excellency the Viceroy and governor General is pleased to confer upon Moulvie Abdool Luteef Khan Bahadur the title of 'Nawab' as a personal distinction. A.C. Lyee, Secretary to the Government of India.

The society and movement of Abdul Latif created some enthusiasm in the upper strata of the Muslim society. But the members of the society, coming from wealthy and upper middle classes were more concerned with self-interest and had no inclination to look after the interest of the greater portion of the society. They were not at all concerned with social problems and evils. They took English education just as a means to manage government jobs and their efforts were limited to appeals and petitions. Abdul Latif knew Bengali and could effortlessly converse in chaste Bengali. But in the works of his society, Bengali was not included— it was confined to Persian, Urdu and English. Members of the society looked down upon Bengali and never exchange their ideas in Bengali. The attitude of Nawab left a deep imprint in the minds of Bengali Muslims as to their approach towards study of Bengali and unfortunately that imprint was completely negative and detrimental to the cultural upliftment of Bengali Muslims.

In 1882, while presenting written statement before the Hunter Commission, Abdul Latif submitted that in the case of lower strata of Muslims, who originated from lower caste Bengali Hindus, Bengali language might be taught at the primary level. But that Bengali had to be blended with sufficient number of Persian and Arabic words. And medium of instruction for the middle class and upper class Muslims should be Urdu. This way Abdul Latif drew a dividing line between two classes of Muslim on the basis of their racial and linguistic affinities: those who
spoke Bengali belonged to the lower class, and those who spoke Urdu were immigrants and upper class.

The debate continued participated by different Muslim organisations and Muslim periodicals. Muslim litterateurs, journalists and educationists participated in the debate and put forward their viewpoint forcefully. Fortunately, majority of them rejected the idea that the Bengali language was the language of the Hindus and urged upon the people to accept it as their own mother tongue. They expressed openly the Bengali Muslims might be of Afghan, Arabic, Persian, Turkish or indigenous origin, but fact remains that they were Bengalees and Bengali was their mother tongue. Only dissenting voice was of Maulana Akram Khan who raised the question: What is the mother tongue of Bengali Muslims? Urdu or Bengali? This peculiar question was answered with authority.

At that time some people ridiculed the Bengali-supports in the columns of newspaper. Some others came with the opinion that the negligence to study Bengali was the root cause of the academic backwardness of the Bengali Muslims.A Muslim gentleman proclaimed fearlessly:

The vice of the majority was expressed in following words:
In spite of this majority opinion, the supporters of Urdu and Arabic did not abandon the fight. A section came out who wanted partial acceptance of Urdu, not to leave it altogether. An opinion in this regard pleaded for Arabic as well:

Not only that,

An outcome of this debate was the suggestion for writing Bengali in Arabic script.

In the midst of this debate, an offshoot emerged as to the spelling and vocabulary to be used. In spite of the tremendous excitement created by the debate it was conditioned by some confusions. Bengali as a mother tongue was to be there but allegiance to Urdu also could not be done away with. It was perceived that a student was not capable of learning too many languages, but accommodation of both Bengali and Urdu provided a serious problem and the solution sought for was brought with serious confusions and contradictions.

Moulana Akram Khan, Moulana Maniruzzaman Islamabadi, Syed Islam Hussain Shiraji, Sheikh Habibur Rahman Sahityaratna, Syed Emdad Ali, Abdul Kalam Samsuddin, Muhammad Wazed Ali-whoever participated in the debate could not get out of this tangle. To make a synthesis between an alien religion and native tongue and culture posed a serious problem which could not be resolved.
If the thesis of Abdul Latif that the Bengali-speakers among Muslims were indigenous and Urdu speakers came from abroad was confined within his close circles that would not have done much damage to the Muslim community. But that was not the case. The Nawab and his associates were aristocrats; foremost elites of the community and their recommendations carried weight in the official circles. Particularly Abdul Latif was the blue-eyed boy of the administration and the British administration treated him as the foremost leader of the Muslims. Thus in academic affairs also, his suggestions pertaining to Muslims community was given too much importance. The policies thus formulated with his suggestions were applied in the academic arena of Muslim education and it is doubtful how far beneficial this policy was to the targeted group of people. We feel Abdul Latif did much damage to the progress of Muslim education in Bengal.

With regard to Madrassa education Abdul Latif was conventional and thoroughly conservative. He contributed immensely to the expansion of conventional Madrassas in Bengal at the cost of western learning. Fund donated by Hazi Muhammad Mohasin was initially spent for spread of English education through Hoogly college, but in compliance of his suggestion this fund was diverted for propagation of Arabic and Persian and to facilitate this objective new Madrassas were established with this fund at Dhaka, Chattagram and Rajshahi. A number of scholarships for Madrassa students were also instituted utilising Mohashin Fund. That proves the attitude of Abdul Latif was not congenial for spread of English education, otherwise he would not have suggested diversion of a huge amount of Rs 50,000.00 from this fund for expansion of conservative and useless Madrassa education.
The liberation and radicalism that took root amongst the leading elites of the Bengali Hindu society was totally absent in Nawab Abdul Latif. He represented a decadent school of thought that did not want to move with time. Hence though he was aware of the need of acceptance of English education for the Bengali Muslims, he did not press it amongst them. Rather he stressed more on Madrassa education. Thus English education received just marginal importance amongst Muslim and Madrassa education reigned over them. Needless to say, if we analyse the educational policy formulated by Abdul Latif and unlike for Bengali Muslim not only kept them backward but also contributed to the most of the unresolved cultural awkwardness from which the Bengali society still suffers.

The Hindus of Bengal were socially more stratified than Muslims but they did not have any linguistic difference. But amongst the Muslims, the upper strata could not come out of their fascination for Urdu, whereas the lower strata had to fall upon Bengali. This Urdu-speaking class called themselves 'Ashraff' and branded the lower strata 'Atraf' or degraded. They started propagating:

সন্তি গড়িয়া, সত্য জাদিয়া, বাঙালি জাতীয় বন্ধু দিয়া তাহারা বাঙালির জনসাধারণকে মুখার্থে চেষ্টা করিতেছিলেন যে, বাঙালি মুসলমানদের জন্য বাঙালি না তো মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত মুক্ত 

This attitude was completely uncongenial for normal development for the Bengali society as well as detrimental to the interest of the Bengali Muslims in general. The Urdu as a vehicle of progress was alright for U.P. but it was not so for Bengal. The situation created a perpetual cleavage in Bengali society and the Muslim community was deprived from their rightful role in development of Bengali literature.
This deplorable dichotomy continued as late as 1971, and only the creation of Bangladesh could bring an end to tangle.

In 1947, Pakistan government declared Urdu as the only official language for whole of Pakistan and the then East Pakistan was furious with this decision. For the first time common Bengali Muslim stood united for recognition of the right of their mother tongue and the historical language movement of 1952 started in East Pakistan.

The cloud ultimately melted:

When Bengali literature reached its maturity, the Muslims were yet to reach the field. Only in 1860, Khondakar Samsuddin Siddiqui’s *Uchit Šraban* was published, and by then already half a century of Bengali prose writing was passed away. Samsuddin also had two collections of poems, *Bhāblābhi* (1853), and *Suratjān* to his credit. There were two other Muslim prose writer of this early period, Golam Hussain and Sheikh Azimuddin. They wrote some sketches and farcical drama.

Musarraf Hussain’s *Ratnabatī* was published in 1869, nine years after the publication of Shamsuddin’s *Uchit Šraban*. Musarraf’s book was first novel written by a Muslim in Bengali. Sukumar Sen mentions of *Dhukhīnī Kanḍā* written by Muslim Christian Sujat Ali. But that book is not available. Thus in nineteenth century Bengali literature, participation of Muslims is simply marginal because of the aforesaid circumstances.
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