Chapter I: The Colonial Context

Although my central focus is on the lives of middle class Bengali Muslim women who stayed back in West Bengal after partition or were born after the event, I write this chapter to historicise my subjects.

Such an exercise, that of setting a deeper context to one’s actual time-frame of research, is a common exercise among scholars of history. Works which deal with different aspects of socio-economic and political history of communal relations in colonial Bengal have also done so. I refer to them here to argue that in such publications, 1947 is often seen as a complete break, be it in Hindu-Muslim relations or in land-based patron-client hierarchy. History writing in the past decade also follows this assumption. Suranjan Das, for instance, deals with political discourses at different levels – elite/popular, religious/secular – that were relevant to riots. He also chooses to close off his study in 1947. Azra Asghar Ali deals with the emergence and growth of feminist consciousness among Indian Muslim women. Although there is a reference to the continuity of this consciousness among Pakistani women towards the end of the book, even here, 1947 is treated as an entire closure for the emergence of feminism among Indian Muslim women.

Even though Independence-with-Partition did constitute a very major point of departure for both the new nation states, I feel that to break off a historical flow into two sealed units obscures some important continuities. This is especially true for the history of women, whose life pattern and nature of experiences would be greatly affected by a cataclysmic event like partition, but would still not be entirely changed by it. Certain experiences of gender relations would remain fairly constant. Examining elements of change and continuity together offers a more rounded and complex picture.

The present chapter is arranged into two sections dealing with the history of Bengali Muslim women upto 1947.

4. Ibid., p. 263-4.
Apart from class divisions based on economic differences within both communities, Hindu and Muslim, Muslims in 19th century Bengal also differed from Hindus in their language use and cultural patterns. In the relative absence of any category corresponding exactly to the bhadralok among Bengali Muslims (which could offer a modern social leadership to the community) until the late 19th century, the religious leadership of the Wahabi-Feraizi sects dominated the lives of most Bengali Muslims.

Their socially conservative discourse tried to accommodate itself to a rapidly changing environment through the reinstitution of a strengthened patriarchal order along communally exclusivist lines. In an attempt to purge society of 'un-Islamic' practices, these reformers tried to alter various aspects in the lives of women. Their propaganda in favour of widow remarriage and against dowry may be cited as instances of cultural self-differentiation from Hindu custom.

Theoretically, Muslim women enjoyed a variety of rights as compared to others, especially Hindu women, until the Hindu Code Bill was passed in 1956. For instance, Muslim women had a definite share in the property of their deceased parents or husbands. There are also theoretical provisions for widow remarriage and remarriage after divorce. But in spite of what the religious reformers wanted to implement, there remained a gap between the scripturally sanctioned rights of women and their practical implementation. Neither scriptural instructions nor the reformist zeal could ensure widow remarriages. Even as late as 1931, 1 in 8 Muslim women

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6 The socio cultural attributes of the bhadralok category has been dealt with in J H Broomfield, Elite Conflict in a Plural Society, Berkeley, 1968 pp. 5-7 and Sumit Sarkar, The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal. 1903-08, New Delhi, 1973, p.30.

7 Peter Hardy, The Muslims of British India, Cambridge 1972, p.59; the section titled The Muslim Revivalist Reaction, pp. 50-60, ibid. Ch. II discusses the nature of these movements.

8 Barbara D. Metcalf discusses different aspects of this revivalism initiated by Shah Waliullah and his successors since the 18th century in Islamic Revival in British India, Decoland 1860-1900, Princeton. 1982, pp. 16-63.

9 'Such of you die and leave behind four months and ten days. And when they reach the term, there is no sin for you in what they may do with themselves in decency' (The Quran, 2: 234, with the help of Zayid. Mahmud Y. The Quran : An English Translation of the Meaning of the Quran. Bairut, 1980, hereafter The Quran only). This refers to the scriptural sanction for widow remarriages.
was a widow.\textsuperscript{10} In spite of the wahabi \textit{fatwas} against it, dowry continued to plague Muslim society. In March 1947, the \textit{Bengal Muslim Marriages Expenditure Regulation Act} was passed\textsuperscript{11} which authorized the provincial government to make rules ‘prescribing the scale of dowry’.\textsuperscript{12}

These facts establish that though the initiatives of the Wahabi- Feraizis continued to have a great appeal for the Muslim masses until the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century\textsuperscript{13}, they had no really positive impact on the lives of women. The entire range of women’s rights regarding marriage, divorce and inheritance depended on the sense of justice of their men. In the absence of any meaningful education, public identities or economic empowerment, the rights of decision making within the household implied a position of honourable subordination for women at best. Lives of Bengali Muslim women were cast into the universal mould of the daughter-wife-mother roles.\textsuperscript{14} Concepts like \textit{izzat} (honour), \textit{tamiz} (decency) and \textit{adab} (modesty) enforced a parasitic existence on women.

Women’s education was synonymous with religious education. The \textit{Quran} and the \textit{nasihatnamas} written in Arabic and Urdu had to be memorized and recited by women for acquiring religious merit, even if the meaning was not understood in most cases.\textsuperscript{15} Although there have been several attempts at translating the \textit{Quran} into Bengali\textsuperscript{16}, it is noteworthy that even today, reading a Bengali translation of the \textit{Quran} is not much encouraged among practising Muslims.\textsuperscript{17} This is perhaps because a translation is believed to dilute the pristine purity of the religion and there remain chances of interpolations and personal interpretations by the translator. Both are considered to be dangerous for institutional religions.

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Census of India, 1931, Vol. VI, No. 1, p.416.}  
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Calcutta Gazette, Parts IA-VI, Jan-June, 1947, Part IV-B, 6.3.1947, pp. 27-30.}  
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. item 4(2) c, p.30.  
\textsuperscript{13} Abul Mansur Ahmad. \textit{Amar Dekha Rajnitir Pancha Bachhar} Dacca, 1975, pp. 9-10.  
\textsuperscript{14} This has been elaborately dealt with by Sonia Nishat Amin. \textit{The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal 1876-1939}, Leiden 1996, pp. 36-78. In fact, if we compare it with the lives of North Indian Muslim women as described by Azra Asghar Ali, op. cit, pp. 229-46 on the one hand and the Bengali Hindu family pattern on the other, as described by Margaret M. Urquhart, \textit{Women of Bengal. Calcutta} 1925, certain common features emerge.  
\textsuperscript{15} A life restricted to the inner quarters under a joint family set up, along with purdah, absence of education, patriarchal monitoring over every important aspect of their lives are common features. The differences lie only in slight regional variations and ritualistic practices between communities.  
\textsuperscript{16} Mrs. M. Rahman. \textit{‘Amader Dabe’, Dhumketu, Aswin 2, 1329 B S.}  
\textsuperscript{17} The first initiative in this regard was undertaken by Jyotirindranath Sen (1879), followed by Girish Chandra Sen (1881, second revised and complete edition 1887), Abul Fazl (1914), etc.  
\textsuperscript{18} Conclusion drawn on the basis of interviews. 376 of the total 540 respondents (69.63%) agreed on this point.
Writing was positively discouraged for women. The anxiety that ‘if a girl knew how to write, she might write letters to forbidden persons’ which has been identified by Gail Minault among North Indian Muslims, was also shared in Bengal. As Samsun Nahar Mahmud (1908-64) pointed out, “It was not just as if their persons were in purdah, but for the fear that their handwriting might perchance be unveiled (‘be-purdah’) before the eyes of male outsiders (‘par-purush’), that reading and writing were totally forbidden to them.” It is remarkable that the patriarchal objection in this regard did not imply merely that what a woman wrote reflected her personal point of view and enabled the reader to have a glimpse of her ‘self’ through the narration. Her handwriting was perceived as an inseparable part of her person and to prevent it from being exposed to the public gaze, women were preferably kept uneducated.

In Bengali Hindu circles at that time identical fears reigned. Rashsundari Dasi (1809 – 1900) in her autobiography, *Amar Jiban* (the first version of the draft was finished in 1868 and published in 1875; she added a second part and a new version came out in 1897 when she was eighty eight years old) had also noted that education for women was believed to be a grossly immodest act and provided an issue of scandal. Rashsundari further recorded the details of the tremendous effort she made to learn the Bengali alphabet. The Bengali Hindu bias against women’s education, however, gradually waned from the second half of the 19th century. It is worth mentioning here that, even as Rashsundari wrote, the example of a few educated women in her own times inspired her to teach herself the alphabet. Such examples were far more rare among Bengali Muslim women. In an article, ‘Bamaganer Rachana’, written in the form of a long letter to the editor of the *Bamabodhini Patrika* in 1866, Srimati Bibi Taherannessa, a Muslim woman, wrote in chaste, Sanskritised Bengali about the usefulness of educating women and she referred extensively to ancient Hindu women of learning.

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21 Ibid. pp. 56-61
22 Although there were serious differences of opinion on how this could be imparted and what subjects were suitable for women, women’s education may be said to have been accepted by Bengali Hindus following the institutional foundation of the Bethune School in 1849.
Until the second half of the 19th century, seclusion was almost universal among Bengali middle and upper class women. Conscious initiatives to remove it were being taken in enlightened Hindu and Brahmo circles from the 1860s. However, the issue was not taken up by Muslims until much later. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-98) and Nawab Abdul Latif (1828-93) were two major reformers who vigorously sought to modernize the community during the second half of the 19th century. But neither of them had any programme for women on their agenda. Cautioning against the 'Anglicisation of Muslim girls', Syed Ahmed declared at the Mohammedan Educational Conference at Lahore in 1888 that the time was still not ripe for the foundation of schools for girls, though he was not against the idea of imparting to them a home based primary education.

The ambivalence in declaring the desirability of female education on the one hand, and restricting it to scriptural reading even without comprehension on the other, was not a personal limitation of Sir Syed; it was the contradiction of an age of transition in which entirely new and contentious discourses concerning women were introduced.

Abdul Latif had read a paper on the condition of education among Muslims in Bengal at a meeting of the Bengal Social Science Association on 30 January, 1868, in Calcutta. In the discussion which ensued, it came out that though Muslims were fully aware of the importance of the education of women, their women could not be allowed to go to schools and colleges like women of other communities, disregarding the purdah. The responsibility of social leadership of the Bengali Muslims initially rested in the hands of the ashraf group of non-Bengali Muslims of the Mohammedan Literary Society or the Central National Mohammedan Association, who ‘suffered from a communication gap with the majority of the population of Bengal’.

24 Ghulam Murshid (Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization, 1849-1905. Rajsahi 1983, pp. 70-74.) notes that Keshab Chandra Sen’s desire to take his wife to the house of Devendranath Tagore where he was to be appointed the acharya of the Brahmo Samaj in 1862 shocked the elite conservative circles.


28 Peter Hardy. op. cit. p. 108.
The memorandum submitted by the Association to Lord Ripon in 1882 did not mention anything regarding female education, but Syed Amir Ali’s (1849-1928) personal opinion on the condition of women and on the possible ways of improving them did portray an advance. He said, “If the Mussalmans of India desire to raise themselves, they should restore women to the pedestal they occupied in the early centuries of Islam”. Simultaneously seeking inspiration from past and present Muslim examples, as from contemporary Constantinople, ‘where women were able to move about freely and take part in the social economy’, he sought a redefinition of gender norms. It was under his Presidentship that the Mohammadan Educational Conference at its Calcutta session in 1899 took up the question of female education with real seriousness for the first time.

A few changes in the attitude towards women may be located from the end of the 19th century. Partly, this coincided with the Muslim revision of their obstructive attitude towards the British and towards English education around this time. Syed Ahmed’s arguments for the acceptance of British rule as legitimate and Maulvi Keramat Ali’s lecture in 1870 justifying British India as dar al-Islam map out this gradual change in perception. Increasingly, greater numbers of Muslims started taking an interest in English education from practical considerations. We can give an example to illustrate the point.

Initially more Muslim boys had enrolled in the Arabic Section than in the English in the Hooghly College that was founded on 1 August, 1836. Although this section of the college remained very popular, increasingly a larger number of Muslim boys started passing out from the English section of the college by the late 1860s. A number of them took up jobs in the police and the judiciary and as teachers after their graduation.

31 Ibid.
The modified attitude of Bengali Muslims in the second half of the 19th century was noted by Maulvi Abul Hussain, an ex-teacher of the Hare School and lecturer in Dacca University, on the basis of his own memories and the Croft Report of 1874. This Report, on the state of education in Bengal, had noted that well-to-do Muslim parents were sending their sons to English schools in greater numbers. In the Dacca Division alone, this number had risen from 856 to 13261 between 1872-74.

By 1886, Muslims held 12.9% of the executive and 3.1% of the judicial positions in the uncovenanted civil service. Although Peter Hardy regards this as 'doing relatively badly', initiatives for social reform came from this tiny emergent middle class. It was precisely during the late 19th century that a modern middle class among North Indian Muslims also came into being, sections of which sought to redefine gender norms. They tried to restructure the concept of feminine adab and make the idea of institutional education for women acceptable.

The character of Asghari in Nazir Ahmad (1830-1912)'s novel, Mirat al-arus (1869) encourages and also demonstrates this change. She possesses considerable intellectual ability and she starts a girls' school in her house, thus legitimizing the scope of institutional education. The desirable curriculum for such schools and their possible benefits for women is the subject of Ahmad's second novel, Banat an-nash (1872). Nazir Ahmad’s Asghari and Altaf Hussain Hali’s Zubaida Khatun in Majalis un-Nisa (1874) marked the emergence of the new Muslim woman. These were, according to C M Naim, the right kind of success stories that the Muslims of India 'needed to hear in the trying years after the failure of the Mutiny and the dissolution of all symbols of territorial power'.

If in Northern India a shift in the ideology of the feminine was experienced through imaginative literature, in Bengal, however, the changing ideology was more concretely visible. More than a dozen anjumans were formed during the last two

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35 Maulvi Abul Husein, MA BL, Bangali Musalmaner Sikasomasya, Dhaka, 1928.
38 Peter Hardy, op. cit., p. 123.
39 Gail Minault, op.cit., p. 172.
40 A fuller description of the different aspects of ethical conduct or adab has been provided in Barbara D. Metcalf (ed.) : Moral Conduct and Authority The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam, University of California Press, 1984.
decades of the 19th century in the different district towns of Bengal. While they were 'generally formed by rich peasants and their activities included the social and economic improvement of rural Muslims', middle class professionals joining the anjumans, like the Anjuman-e-Ahbab-e-Islamiya also known as the Dacca Musalman Suhrid Sammilani, regarded the spread of female education as one of their objectives.

Their efforts had definitely come as a welcome relief, but they could not make any serious impact on the general standard of education of Muslim girls. In his Report of 1907, W W Hornell mentioned that schools for Muslim girls in Bengal were very few and their standard very low. Even as late as 1924, only 1,37,800 Muslim women were literate on the entire subcontinent (including primary literacy in either Arabic, Persian or Urdu) of whom only 3940 were reported to have received some education.

The limited impact of the Anjumans on female education may be traced to the fact that it was very difficult for its members to openly defy age old conventions. One of the ardent leaders of the Dacca Anjuman, Abdul Aziz, sent his granddaughter Samsun Nahar to school. After she completed class VI at the age of nine, Nahar was withdrawn from school and was strictly kept at home because she had already 'grown

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42 Some of these anjumans with their area of operation and date of foundation are:
- The Islam Association, Chittagong, 1880
- Dacca Musalman Suhrid Sammilani, 1883.
- Hooghly District National Mohammadan Association, 1883.
- Mohammadan Association, Rajshahi, 1884.
- Anjuman-i-Islamiya, Noakhali, 1885.
- Mohammadan Association, Rangpur, 1887.
- Malda Mohammadan Association, 1890.
- Khulna District Mohammadan Association, 1890.
- Tippera District Muslim Anjuman, 1891.
- Anjuman-i-Islamiya, Jalpaiguri, 1892.
- Anjuman-i-Islamiya, Jalpaiguri, 1892.
- Anjuman-i-Himayati-i-Islam, Barisal, 1893.
- The Mohammadan Association, Dinajpur, 1894.
- Anjuman-i-Islamiya, Faridpur, 1895, etc.

It is noteworthy that the Anjumans developed in district towns where Muslims were more important.

43 Pradip Kumar Datta, Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal, New Delhi, 1999, p.74.

44 Achievements of this Association have been discussed by:

45 W W Hornell, Progress of Education in Bengal, 1902-3 to 1906-7, Third Quinquennial Review, Cal 1907, p. 128.

46 The Zamindar, February 2, 1924.
up'. She was married off in 1925 at the age of 16 and, fortunately for her, she settled in Calcutta. The metropolitan environment of Calcutta which offered the couple a certain anonymity outside the control of a conservative family, gave her the scope for intellectual growth. She graduated from the Diocesan college in 1932, joined the Lady Brabourne College as a Professor of Bengali in 1939 and passed the MA examination in 1942. Just as Mahmud’s doctor husband supported her attempts at self improvement, Nurunnessa Khatun’s lawyer husband took her along with him during his tours. This gradually resulted in the waning of the strict purdah in which she grew up and consequently widened her vision. She became a reputed writer and was awarded a prestigious literary title of her times – Vidyavinodini.

The initiative taken by Muslim men to educate their sisters, wives and daughters began from the 1890s when Rokeya’s elder brother, Ibrahim Saber, educated in St. Xavier’s College, Calcutta, taught his sister by candlelight late at night. This was not possible in the daytime in the face of social criticism. Syed Sakhawat Hossein, her husband, supported her creativity openly. He introduced Rokeya to many foreign journals and magazines. He encouraged her to publish what she wrote and sent the manuscript of her novel Sultana’s Dream to Mr. Macpherson, Commissioner of Bhagalpur for his comments. Syed Sakhawat Hossein may thus be compared with his senior contemporary Durga Charan Gupta who educated his wife, Kailashbashini and encouraged her to write Hindu Mahilaganer Hinabastha in 1863.

It would, of course, be an oversimplification to imply that these examples enlightened all Muslim men and inspired them to take up the cause of women’s liberation in early 20th century Bengal. But the outstanding literary and professional achievements of these few women undoubtedly encouraged many more to assert themselves. For example, Mamluqul Fatema Khanam (1894-1957) decided to separate from her husband, when the latter left his medical profession to take up

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47 Samsun Nahar Mahmud, Nazrul Ke Jenon Dekhechee, Calcutta 1958, p. 35.
48 Details of her life have been recorded in:
49 Dedication Swapnadrishta, Acknowledgement, Janaki Bace, Nurunnessa Khatun Granthabali, Dhaka, 1970. Samsur Nahar and Nurunnessa have also been referred by Sonia Nishat Amin, The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939, Leiden, 1996.
50 Begum Rokeya was born in 1880 and married in 1896. So, she must have been educated by her brother between this time.
51 Rokeya acknowledged her indebtedness by referring to him as father, mother, Guru and Siksaka, Note of Dedication, Padmarag, Calcutta 1924.
52 'Bayujaney Panchas Mile', Mouzzin, Agrahayan 1339 BS.
Pirism (Sufi religious preaching) in 1920. She took up teaching as a career. This had no precedence in the history of Bengali Muslim women and could have been possible only in the contemporary context of social transition and incipient but real cultural transformation.

Such women initiated the task of setting up schools for girls. The first to do so was Nawab Faizunnensa Chaudhurani (1847-1903) who set up two girls' schools in Comilla in 1873. Begum Firdaus Mahal of the Murshidabad Nawab family also established a girls' school in 1897. Khujista Akhtar Bano (1878-1919), mother of H S Suhrawardy and the first Muslim woman in Bengal to sit for the Senior Cambridge Examination, also established two girls' schools- one in Midnapore, 1909 and the other in Calcutta, 1913. However, the two most remarkable institutions set up for the promotion of Muslim female education were the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School (hereafter SMGS, founded 1911) and the Lady Brabourne College (hereafter LBC, founded 1939) which I shall discuss in the following section.

Muslim women began to acquire graduate and post graduate degrees from the 1920s. Sultan Begum, daughter of Agha Muayyidul Islam (editor of Hablul Matin), won the distinction of being the youngest woman graduate in 1920, and topped the list of woman candidates. Neither Khujista Bano nor Sultan Begum, however, may be regarded as Bengali Muslims in the strictest sense of the term. They belonged to the Urdu speaking ashraf class and merely resided in Bengal. Realizing education as a means to employment, a few women were taking up the teaching profession though an exact statistics cannot be obtained. There are ample indications, however, to suggest that Rokeya's dream of economic independence for women had started to be realized before 1947. If Musammat Iddenessa and Latifunnessa were the only two

55 Sarfaraz Hussain Mirza, Muslim Women's Role in the Pakistan Movement. Lahore 1969, pp. 24-25.
57 Zomindar, May 12, 1922.
58 Khairunnessa Khatun (1880-1911) was one of the earliest, perhaps the first school teacher among Bengali Muslim women. She was the headmistress of the Hossainpur Girls' School in Sirajganj. Syed Abul Maksud, Pathikrit Naritabdi Khairunnessa Khatun, Dhaka, 1992.
59 In 'Stri-jatir Abanati'. Motichur, Vol. I, Calcutta, 1904, she had written : "Why shall we not earn? Don't we have hands, legs or intelligence? We will become everything from lady clerks to lady magistrates, lady barristers, lady judges. Fifty years later, a lady viceroy shall make queens of all women in the land".
Muslim women doctors in the official records till 1905, the number showed a slight increase in the third and fourth decades of the 20th century. Anwara Khatun (1919-2003) passed the MB Examination from Calcutta Medical College in 1940. Jamila Khatun passed the final licentiateship examination from the Campbell Medical School in May 1945. Among those who passed the Primary Licentiate Examination held in May 1945 were Nafisa Khatun Dewan and Zohra Khatun of the Campbell Medical School. Asiya Khatun and Azizunnessa passed the examination from the Dacca Medical School that year.

Journalistic activity among Bengali Muslims was initiated from the second half of the 19th century. Women began to write in journals that were published specifically for them from the late 19th century. Most of these were directed at social change - they discussed subjects which directly concerned women. But the ambivalences of the age of transition was often reflected in the nature of these articles. I shall give an example to illustrate the point.

Begum Rokeya’s article ‘Amader Abanati’, one of the best known Bengali articles on radical feminism till now, was published in the Nabamur, Bhadra 1311 BS in 1904. Rokeya herself deleted certain portions of this article when she incorporated it into her book, Motichur, Vol. I (1904) as ‘Stri-jatir Abanati’. The editor of Nabamur, Syed Emdad Ali, had invited the writings of women for the first time in the history of Muslim journals and magazines in 1903. In spite of this openness, he also published articles like ‘Abanatiprasange’ which proclaimed the natural inferiority of women. Issues like child marriage, widow remarriage, polygamy, divorce and dowry were raised in these papers more often out of the reformist impulse derived from scriptural religion rather than from a genuine concern for the rights of women. Arguments were based on religion rather than on reason and reformers were very careful not to antagonize the orthodoxy, perhaps as a conscious marketing strategy. In an article in

60 Sonia Nishat Amin, op. cit., p. 170-71.
63 Ibid., p.232-33.
64 Anisuzzaman’s Muslim Banglar Samayik Patra, 1831-1930, Dhaka, 1969, Mostafa Nurul Islam’s Samayik Patre Jivan O Janamat, 1901-1930, Dhaka 1977 are comprehensive works which cover the entire period of journalistic initiatives undertaken by Bengali Muslims.
65 Editorial Nabamur, Baisakh 1310 BS.
Kohinoor, another renowned magazine of those times, the retrogressive impact of Bengali Hindu culture was held responsible to explain the aversion of Bengali Muslims to widow remarriage, and the ulama were asked to eradicate such evils. The prevalence of child marriage was identified as one of the major causes of the degradation of Muslims in an article in Al-Exlam. Voices were also raised against polygamy and dowry, offering the same explanation for their existence. The deplorable plight of women, it was commented in the Pracharak, was due to a contempt for them which was contrary to strict Islamic principles. Hindu influence was used as an alibi to underline the purely Islamic basis of reforms.

These examples represent the reappearance of the doctrines preached by the Wahabi-Feraizi movements. Though by the late 19th century, these movements had become extinct, the issues identified by them for social reform remained relevant. The journalistic initiative was supplemented by the proliferation of Bengali tracts which also aimed at regulating the lives of women by an improvement of the Islamic social order of the conformist pattern. These tracts were written in ‘Musalmani Bangla’. Some of them had to be read from the back in the Arabic style and usually contained several advertisements of similar other tracts.

Maulvi Abdul Qader wrote to justify seclusion and to restrain women from entering the public sphere where they would be like ‘fish taken out of water’. It said that women ‘were to be protected because they are precious’. Purdah was defended on the ground that it ‘prevents prostitution, adultery and sexual diseases’.

Koraner Alo tried to establish the superiority of Islam as compared to Christianity and Hinduism. It went to the ridiculous extent of defending polygamy on

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68 'Narijatir Durgati', Al-Exlam, Bhadra 1324 BS (1917).
69 i) 'Musalmman Samajc Strijatir prati Bhishan Atyachar', Islam Pracharak, July-August 1903.
ii) 'Bahu-bibaha', Nabamit, Aagrayan 1312 BS (1905).
70 'Samaj Kalima'. Islam Pracharak. Jyayshah 1299 BS (1892).
71 Pracharak, Asadh 1306 BS. p.25.
72 Other aspects of this revivalist ideology as represented in the indigenous tracts have been discussed by P K Datta. op cit., pp. 65-72. 76.
73 The term Musalmani Bangla is used to indicate a form of local dialect prevalent among Bengali Muslims where that language is profusely interspersed with Persian, Arabic and Urdu word to give it a distinct Muslim identity. This issue has been dealt with in Rafiuddin Ahmed. The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906, A Quest for Identity. New Delhi, 1981, pp. 106-132. I have also raised this point in the contemporary context in Chapter IV.
74 Introduction, Islam O Purdah, Calcutta, 1929.
75 Ibid., p.8.
76 Ibid., p. 25.
77 Md. Azharuddin, Koraner Alo, revised and enlarged second edition 1936.
the ground that it prevents female infanticide and seeks to provide every woman with a protector in a population with an unequal sex ratio.\textsuperscript{78}

_\textit{Lalana Suhrid}\textsuperscript{79}, a book that the author claims to have written for his daughter, clearly states that the purpose for women’s education was ‘neither acquiring a university degree nor being able to deliver lectures at the Town Hall’.\textsuperscript{80} Education was only to help them to handle the household accounts and write an occasional letter to the husband. These tracts, authored entirely by men, enjoyed a wide readership and many ran into several editions.

Though Muslims had come to terms with the idea of the formal schooling for women by the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the ultimate purpose of this education and a suitable curriculum remained the two most contested areas in the entire discourse. The purpose of women’s education and the curriculum had to be justified by a conformity to a feminine ideology of domesticity and motherhood.

Such attempts at combining reform with gender subordination reflected a partially skilful compromise with patriarchy; a tactical means to justify the purpose of women’s education. To the latter group belong Fazilatunnessa and Begum Rokeya, who ostensibly agreed that the purpose of education was to create ‘obedient daughters, loving sisters, dutiful wives and instructive mothers’.\textsuperscript{81} Such comments were devised as a gradualist strategy to make the idea of women’s education acceptable to the orthodoxy which till the second decade of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, tried to propagate the idea that ‘women need not be educated because they are not going to earn’.\textsuperscript{82}

If creating model housewives was a purpose of female education, a greater and more glorified objective was the creation of model mothers. Since the advancement of the community (jati) and the country (desh) depended upon the ability of men, it was

\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., p. 55.
\textsuperscript{79} \textit{Doctor Aziz Ahammad. Lalana Suhrid}, 24 Pgs. 1924.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid. pp. 46-47.
\textsuperscript{81} Begum Rokeya, ‘Educational Ideals for the Modern Indian Girl’, \textit{The Mussalman}. March 5, 1931, originally read as a lecture in a meeting of the Bengal Women’s Educational Conference. February 19, 1931.
\textsuperscript{82} There are numerous references to this argument, as in
ii) Md. Ahad Ali, ‘Stri Siksa’, \textit{Sharirat Estam}. Yr. 5. No. 4, Baisakh 1337 BS (1930) p. 84, etc.
time and again reiterated that sons deserved to be brought up by educated mothers. Working under such pressures from a reaffirmed conservatism, women who aspired for higher education and career, had to contest the existing social order and justify themselves.

These women started writing in magazines which represented a more liberal genre. Their very decision to express themselves in simple and chaste Bengali was in itself a mark of self-assertion of their Bengali female identity. This came as a culture shock to the sharif ambience of most of the families in which they grew up.

Sufiya Kamal had once mentioned that, on her mother’s side, people belonging to the Shaistabad Nawab family dissociated themselves from her by 1933 because they considered her ‘writing in Bengali, speaking in Bengali, mixing with Bengalis, stepping out of the house for social work and that, too, without a burqa’ as detrimental to the izzat of the family.

From 1918, the magazine Saogat came to provide a creative socio-literary platform to women who were fighting against conservatism. It was the first Muslim edited magazine to bring out a special issue for women in 1929 which had thirty two women contributors in the volume. This created a sensation in contemporary literary circles. Almost all the women who were writing at this time expressed their resentment against oppressive social customs. Resisting the practice of ‘reading the Quran like a parrot’, the social hegemony of the pirs and the mollahs is also discernible in their writings. They did not merely confine themselves to literary activities, they started taking an interest in public activities.

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84 Details about how Saogat contributed to the cause of the awakening of Muslim women in Bengal have been discussed by its editor Md. Nasiruddin, Bangla Sahitye Saogat Jug. Dhaka 1985.
85 Saogat, like many other magazines before and after it, (I have also referred to Jagaran and Kafila in Ch. IV) was only edited by a Muslim. It was not a Muslim magazine, meant for Muslim readers alone.
86 The resentment against it has recurred several times in the writings of Muslim women like
i) Mrs. M Rahman ‘Amader Dabee’, Dhumketu. Aswin 2. 1329 BS.
Participation in social work was unknown to women of Muslim families until the second decade of the 20th century. Following the example of Sir Md. Shafi of the Punjab who had founded the Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam in 1908, Begum Rokeya founded its Calcutta chapter in 1916. A number of elite Muslim women from both Bengali and non Bengali backgrounds joined it. Chief among them were wives of civil servants, politicians belonging to both the Congress and the League, and prominent businessmen of Calcutta: Mrs. Ghaznavi, Lady Faruqi, Begum Momin, as well as those who had become personally acquainted with Begum Rokeya or with her school, like Professor Kulsum Jalil, Samsun Nahar and Sufiya Kamal. However, the greater part of the initiative for social work and organizational activities among Muslim women in Bengal was initially taken up by non-Bengali sharif women of the province.

Hasn Ara Haqam, the first woman Honorary Magistrate of Calcutta in 1928, for instance, organized meena bazars (small fairs where both buyers and sellers were women) to give purdansin Muslim women of Calcutta their first experience of public activities. The sixth annual meeting of the All India Muslim Women's Conference (founded by the Begum of Bhopal in 1914) was scheduled to be held in Calcutta between February 10-12, 1919. From a letter written by Rokeya to the editor of The Mussalman, we come to know that this 'ended in a fiasco' due to the 'regrettable interference of the central committee'. But the considerable stir that the 'two hundred plus women' delegates created among Muslim socialites of Calcutta must have served the purpose of bringing their women closer to the ideas of public activities.

The Calcutta branch of the All India Muslim Women’s Conference was finally established in 1927. The question of associating women directly with Muslim League activities was first raised at the Lucknow session in October 1937. At its Patna session in December 1938, Begum Habibullah moved a resolution which stated: “Muslim women should not only confine their activities to the hearth and house but should come out of their seclusion, acquaint themselves with problems and events of the modern world and marshall their energies to protect Muslim rights and interests.”

The Central Subcommittee had Begum Shahbuddin and Mrs Ispahani at the head of

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88 The Mussalman. February 21, 1919.
89 Ibid.
90 The Indian Annual Register, Volume 2. Calcutta, 1938, p. 349.
the Bengal Provincial Committee. It was expanded to include Hasna Ara Haqam in 1941. It was under her leadership that the AIMWL carried out relief work during the 1943 famine. She also founded an orphanage called Bait ul-Aftal at Calcutta with which many Muslim women associated themselves. Communal mobilization thus ironically opened up a few windows for a public identity for women.

Outside the League activities, we come across the names of a few Muslim women, like Najimunnessa Ahmed, Central Committee member of the Mahila Atmaraksa Samiti (hereafter MARS) of the communist party since 1943.

Whereas a larger number of Muslim women associated themselves with the League in Calcutta, the Communist Party provided a more radical platform to Muslim women in Burdwan. Communitarian politics, however, had a long history in Burdwan district. The Burdwan Muhammadan Association was founded in 1888 with the object of 'safeguarding and advancing the best interest of the community before the Government and by guiding the community into well-ordered channels of progress and development', among other things; but it had no agenda for women.

There were some very important Muslim leaders in the town in the first half of the 20th century. Apart from the Muhammadan Association, Muslims also played an important part in local politics through their membership the District Bar Association and the Merchants' Association. Both Abul Kasem and Syed Md. Yasin were active Congress members in the town.

Following the communal disturbances of 1926, Muslim men of the town founded the Youngmen's Muslim Association. It had a non-political socio-cultural objective and the membership was open to all communities. But unlike Calcutta, neither Hindu nor Muslim women played any role in social work or politics in Burdwan till the 1940s.

92 Resolutions of the All India Muslim League from March 1940 to April 1941, op cit. pp. 40-41.
94 My interview with octogenarian Syed Siraj Ali, who was himself a Congress Party activist and member of the Bar Association for more than three decades, 31.8.2003, Burdwan.
96 Chairman, Burdwan Municipality, 1913-18, 1924-27, 1928-32. Ibid.
Several interrelated explanations for this have been suggested by veteran political activists and leaders of the town when I interviewed them. The mufassil, they said, required some time to internalize the metropolitan example of sociopolitical activism. The restrictive suburban cultural atmosphere in Burdwan was an important factor. The most important reason was that only when women started attending college in the town from the forties were they empowered enough to make a conscious decision to join politics. They, in turn mobilized others. Jolekha Khatun, who herself joined politics in this way, followed the example of Shefali Roy (later, wife of Marxist leader and West Bengal Government Minister Binoy Choudhuri), her senior by three years in college, who became an ardent organizer of Leftist politics among women in the town. Along with this was the more conventional practice of leaders introducing their wives to political issues. While the League and the Congress in the town were still hesitant to let women enter politics, the Communist movement welcomed the participation of women. However, none of the respondents who joined the movement at such an early date in Burdwan mentioned any familial obstruction in this regard. Rabiya Begum (b. 1917), president of the Burdwan MARS and wife of the Marxist leader Syed Sahedullah, belongs to the first generation of politicised Muslim women in the town. She was politically active between 1942-59. Shortly after the first Provincial Conference of the MARS was held in May, 1943, in Calcutta, the Burdwan branch called a meeting in the Town Hall. “This meeting,” Rabiya writes, “was poorly attended because upper and middle class families of the town still considered it highly disgraceful for women to appear in public.”

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98 This topic was discussed at length with
   ii) Arindam Konar, son of Marxist leaders Harekrishna and Biva Konar, himself a top communist leader, 18.9.2002.
   iv) Rabiya Begum, President, Burdwan MARS, 1943-59, 31.8.03.

99 Bhavatosh Datta, who was in the Raj College in 1933, the only college in the town at that time, saw only one girl student during his times. He thinks even this was possible because she was the daughter of a Hindu Professor of the College and they were from East Bengal (Bhavatosh Datta, ‘Satabarsher Ardhapathe’, Burdwan Raj College Centenary Volume, 1981).

100 When Syed Jolekha Khatun joined the college for IA in 1943, there were already twelve girls in the college. The 4th year girls were the first batch of girl students in the college. Private Memoirs of Syeda Jolekha Khatun (hereafter Private Memoirs only).

101 Interview with Narayan Choudhury, 17.11.2002.

Rabiya told me that there were two major obstacles on her path. The first came from her community. In spite of support from her family, significantly large numbers of Muslims in the town were bitterly critical of her ventures and considered her actions to be outrageous violations of socio-cultural norms of feminine modesty. They tried to spread all sorts of rumours about her and about her other Muslim women comrades. “But luckily”, says Rabiya, “very little of their propaganda could affect us as initially most of the women came from respectable families and carried a sound reputation”. The more direct verbal attack came from the conservative male guardians (both Hindu and Muslim) of the families they visited for membership mobilization. Both indirect propaganda and direct insults to women activists came from the middle classes.

But the famine of 1943 convinced women of the necessity of social work. Increasingly large numbers of women joined the MARS in Burdwan during 1943-44. Within two years, the membership had risen to ‘more than 3,000’ , comprising women of all communities and social classes. The Samiti ran two relief kitchens in the town and also distributed grain. Communist women of the town devised innovative fund-raising programmes through an exhibition-cum-sale of handicrafts and embroidery work that its members had executed. All this resulted in interaction among women of different communities. Political ideology worked simultaneously as a unifying and liberating force – bringing women of different religions and classes into the public space for the first time in Burdwan. So, while a new, modern Muslim middle class provided some enabling possibilities for women, the actual extent of emancipation depended upon the different political trajectories operating within the Muslim middle class.

(II)

In the previous section I have dealt with the general nature of the ideological confrontation with the orthodoxy that the first generation of Bengali Muslim women stepping out of the zenana had to encounter. Here, I take up the history of a few institutions in Calcutta and Burdwan which played a significant role in the social development of Muslim women.

103 My interview with Rabiya Begum (b.1917) 31.8.03., Calcutta.
104 Ibid.
105 Rabiya Begum, Bardhaman Mahila Atmaraksa, etc. op.cit., p. 24.
The Sakhawat Memorial Girls’ School, (hereafter SMGS) founded by Begum Rokeya on March 11, 1911 at 13 Waliullah Lane with just eight girls provides an excellent example of the transition from the zenana system of education to formal schools and the obstacles that were created in its way.

Influential Muslim men of Calcutta took an active interest in the school. They were civil servants, lawyers, professionals, industrialists and businessmen like Justice Amin Ahmed, Justice Syed Sharfuddin, Nawab Syed Samsul Huda, G M Qasemi, Khan Tasadduk Ahmed and others. Such support initially eased her task. The first meeting of the school was held at the residence of barrister Abdul Rasul and Maulvi Syed Ahmed Ali was made the secretary. The initial impact of the school was so great that, within a month, The Mussalman stated, “Those who have little girls to educate may without any hesitation send them to it”. There was, in fact, little room for hesitation. Coming from a sharif background on her father’s side and widow of a civil servant with an equally respectable lineage, Rokeya’s compliance with the Islamic standards of living like purdah, combined with her reputation as a writer, made her eminently acceptable even to fairly orthodox men. The 19th century model of Nazir Ahmad’s fictitious Asghari could be visualized in the character of 20th century Rokeya.

The government was initially very cautious in its attitude towards the school and watched the public response to it before granting it a monthly sum of Rs. 71 from April 1912. But this was never “sufficient to make both ends meet in spite of the Education Department of the Government of Bengal being successively in charge of ‘popular’ Muslim ministers”, as the Mussalman noted nineteen years later.

This deficit budget was a perpetual cause of concern for Rokeya and she wrote to a relative in 1929: “I would have been more pleased if you had sent Rs. 4 or 5 to the school fund. A gentleman in faraway Rangoon is raising funds for the school. And you, being my own people, forget about the school”. Shortly before the death of Rokeya, the Mussalman had again expressed grave concern over the future of the

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109 The Mussalman, March 31. 1911.
110 Moshfeka Mahmud. Patrey Rokeya Parichiti, Dhaka 1965, p.44.
111 The Mussalman, March 7. 1931.
112 Moshfeka Mahmud. op.cit., p.11.
school ‘if the government or the community’ did not immediately come forward to help. 113

Despite the financial crisis, the student strength of the school steadily increased: from 8 in 1911, to 27 in 1912, to 30 in 1913 to 39 in 1914. 114 The school shifted to 13 European Asylum Lane in May 1913 and to 86/A Lower Circular Road in February 1915. Although it is true that the school premises grew bigger to accommodate larger numbers of girls, the change of address may also be partially explained as a retreat from an unsympathetic neighbourhood not accustomed to the idea of women’s education. 115 The speculation is also supported by a subtle hint to this effect when Rokeya told Samun Nahar: “I had previously believed that if I had not maintained good relations with a few influential men in Calcutta I would not be able to survive here with my school. But now even they have turned hostile”. 116 Nonetheless, her decision to remain within a predominantly Muslim area can be explained either by the easy accessibility of the school for the girls, or for reasons of security in a Muslim neighbourhood, or both. 117

Rokeya had compromised heavily with her personal convictions by observing strict purdah in her own life. Another instance of the transitional dichotomy, this was perhaps a pragmatic step to ensure the future of her school. Rokeya herself acknowledged this duality in a private conversation with Md Nasiruddin. 118 She also exhibited great wisdom in designing the curriculum of her school. Appreciating the necessity of ‘modern secular gender-neutral education which would prepare women for gainful employment,’ 119 Rokeya included all the general school subjects along with painting, music, sports and drama which were until then unthinkable for Muslim girls. But the fact that she also included subjects like nursing, cooking, sewing, knitting and religious training demonstrates that she did not set out to defy the orthodox guidelines of feminine adab. The inclusion of subjects like needlework and religion made her school more acceptable. Her entire initiative would have been rendered futile if guardians refused to send their daughters to school under pressure.

113 The Mussalman, January 21, 1932.
115 Inference drawn on the basis of an interview with Begum Maryam Ajj (b. 1936) on 7.8.04. She had heard this from her uncle, an eminent lawyer of Alipur Court and contemporary of Begum Rokeya who sent his daughter to SMGS.
117 Suggestion by Maryam Ajj, 7.8.04.
from the orthodoxy. We have to remember that among her students was nine year old Heera whose parents did not even allow eyeholes in her borka, seeing it as a violation of purdah. At the same time, it was a positive indication that even such families had started to send their daughters to school.

Rokeya had to make yet another compromise. In spite of her deep love for Bengali language and culture, she could not introduce Bengali into the curriculum even up to eleven years after the school was founded. She deeply lamented this. M.F. Khanam, the first Bengali Muslim teacher of the school, joined in 1927. In a letter to Abdul Fazl, Khanam wrote, “It is a pity that she (Rokeya) cannot arouse the Bengali Muslims from their slumber. Girls of the western region (non-Bengali Muslims from UP, Bihar, etc.) are learning with interest. But Bengalis are not even casting a glance at it. Only 2 of the 114 girls are Bengali.” It must also be remembered that there was no space for Bengali as a subject in the school curriculum until 1927. This was a compromise with the elitist Muslims of Calcutta, who considered association with Bengali in any form as demeaning to their status.

Transport posed another grave problem for the school. Rokeya is reported to have said that she had to annually ‘spend five thousand rupees for teachers, seven thousand rupees for conveyances and only two rupees for the library’. The fund allotment for conveyances shows that the major issue was neither procuring the vehicles nor maintaining them, but ensuring the level of the purdah. The details of the problem have been discussed by biographers of Rokeya. I want to emphasize the dilemma that Rokeya had to face because of this. The thickly curtained bus, looking like a moving Black Hole practically suffocated the girls inside and they fell ill. As a result, a few guardians threatened to stop sending their daughters to school. On the other hand, the orthodoxy threatened to create a public stir against such a be-purdah system which exposed the girls to the on-lookers in the streets when the curtains flew apart by chance.
In spite of all such constraints regarding purdah, curriculum, medium of instruction and finances, the SMGS continued to thrive. The first batch of five students from the SMGS sat for the matriculation examination in 1931. Thereafter, every year Muslim girls added to the total number of matriculate girls from Calcutta. Though the Government had taken over the administration of the school on December 19, 1935 [vide GO No. 4404 Edn (s)] and Miss Bharati Chakraborty was appointed its headmistress from January 2, 1936, the school did not admit non-Muslim girls till 1947. In 1945, nine girls matriculated from SMGS; in 1946, the number was eight. It is very difficult to determine the actual number of Bengali Muslim girls in the school but they definitely did contribute to the increasing number of Muslim girl matriculates in the city who also came from the Anjuman Girls’ School, Park Circus Muslim Girls’ School, the Victoria Institution, etc.

By the first half of the 20th century, with the gradual acceptance of the idea of formal education for girls, matriculation became the upper limit of academic achievement. Although most of the girls were married off soon after, the increasing number of matriculate girls among Muslims in Calcutta led to the demand of a separate purdah college from the 1930s.

A few Muslim girls attended the Loreto and the Diocesan Colleges. Fazilatunnessa (1905-76) was the first Muslim student of the Bethune College in 1923. Unlike Western Bengal, East Bengal did not provide a congenial atmosphere for the education of women. This is why Muslim parents who could afford to

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129 Calcutta Gazette. Extraordinary. July 1946. p. 27. Updesh Kour, as the name suggests, was the only non-Muslim girl in her batch.

130 4 out of the 37 Matriculate girls from Victoria Institution in 1945 were Muslim (The Bengal Educational Gazette. Vol. II. July 1945. p. 48). In 1946. 5 out of the 58 girls here were Muslim (Bengal Educational Gazette. Extraordinary. July 1946. p. 27.).

131 Since its inception in 1849, the Bethune School made it clear that ‘none but the daughters of respectable Hindus were admitted’ (circular dated December 24. 1856 under the signatures of Sir Cecil Beadon and Isvar Chandra Vidyasagar). The first non-Hindu girl in the college section of the Bethune, Miss Allen D’Abreau was admitted only in March 1880. Kalidas Nag (ed.) : Bethune College and School Centenary Volume. 1849-1949. Calcutta, p. 40.

132 This has been mentioned by Akhtar Imam, ‘Fazilatunnessa Ebong Bangladeshe Naric Ucchasiksa O Agragati’. Article in Farida Pradhan (ed.) Begum Rokeya O Nari Jagaran. Dhaka 1995, p.84. The fact that the conservative social order was uneasy with the idea of Fazilatunnessa’s decision to study in the Dhaka University and tried its best to prevent her has been recorded by Md. Nasiruddin, Fazilatunnessa MA. Bangla Sahite Sargat Jug. Dhaka 1985, p. 583.

Hamida Khanam (Jihara Bakuler Gandhi, Dhaka 2001, p.43) also records having heard from Dr. Asma Khatun that when Asma and Rebeya (later wife of the renowned writer Syed Mujtaba Ali and herself a School Inspectress) went to school in Rajsahi, neighbours in an attempt to prevent them wrote nasty words on the walls of their houses.
educate their girls, sent them to Calcutta. But even this number was not very significant until the foundation of the Lady Brabourne College (hereafter LBC) in 1939. In 1932, there were altogether 8 Muslim girls (1% of the total number of female students) in the four Arts Colleges for women in Bengal. The number had risen to 37 in 1936.\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{133}}

Hamida Khanam notes\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{134}} that when she went to study at the Bethune college in 1936, there were only 5 Muslim girls among the 75 boarders in the college hostel who came from Rajsahi, Bogura, Dinajpur and Pabna respectively. When she decided to go to Calcutta University for her post graduation in Philosophy, there was opposition from the extended family which included her uncle even though he was an Inspector of Schools.\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{135}}

There were altogether three Muslim girls doing post graduate courses in Calcutta University in 1939 but Khanam could perceive that ‘the situation in the Muslim society was changing very fast and girls were beginning to show greater signs of awareness’.\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{136}} In spite of being the ‘only Muslim boarder’ in the university hostel at Harrison Road, she did not face any inconvenience because of her religion.\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{137}} But Hamida’s pleasant experience was not universal. In fact, the unfortunate experience of a Muslim girl at the Victoria Institution hostel was cited by Mrs. Hasina Murshed, MLA, in the Legislative Assembly as the most pressing reason for \textit{purdah college}.\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{138}}

Mrs. Murshed said that the girl was denied the opportunity of saying her prayers and was forced to take \textit{forbidden} food. The exact nature of the food was not explained but, but we can understand that this was, perhaps, not pork because pork is equally forbidden for Hindus. The reference perhaps is to the particular manner in which the concerned bird or animal is killed with a prayer (\textit{Jabeh}) thus making it fit for consumption (\textit{halal}).

\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{133}} \textit{Report of the Moslem Education Advisory Committee, Calcutta} 1936, p. 108.
\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{134}} Hamida Khanam \textit{op. cit.}, p. 51.
\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{135}} ibid., p. 59.
\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{136}} Ibid., p. 61.
\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{137}} Ibid., p. 64.
\textsuperscript{\textcopyright{138}} \textit{Assembly Proceedings, Bengal}, March 17, 1938, Vol. II, No. 1 p. 208.
My presumption is further strengthened by Maulana Fozlur Rahman Nizami’s address during the inauguration of the Lady Brabourne College (hereafter LBC) where he mentioned the inconvenience of Muslim girls in the hostels where ‘there was no arrangements... for food to be prepared in a proper Islamic manner’. Mrs. Murshid further stated that the number of Muslim girls was ‘comparatively too small to enable them to hold their own against others in non-denominational institutions’ and A K Fazlul Haq alleged that some of the institutions like Bethune did not allow non-Hindu students.

The debate went on during 1937-38. Those opposed to the opening a college exclusively for Muslim girls did also have a forceful logic in their statements. Mira Dutta Gupta, for instance, thought that the idea was ‘unnecessary and retrograde’ because ‘the idea of purdah was absolutely inconsistent with the idea of higher education’. Had it not been for the provincial government of the Krishak Praja Party-Muslim League in power, it would have been very difficult for the LBC to come into being. Here again, as in the case of the SMGS, a site in the Muslim-majority area of Park Circus was chosen for the college.

The college started with nine disciplines and 36 students (35 Muslims and one Hindu) in the First Year Arts. Atia Haq, a student from the first batch recalls that a large number of girls passing out from the SMGS joined the college at that time. The majority of the boarders at the college hostel came from the East Bengal districts for the reasons I have mentioned above.

The LBC thus, from its inception, served as an intellectual refuge for Bengali Muslim girls. Initially, there were nine teachers in the college of whom four were Muslim. The break up is interesting in the sense that out of these four, the two women, Samsun Nahar Mahmud and Miss Fatima Begum, belonged to the Bengali and the non-Bengali Muslim communities respectively. As qualified women were not available to teach Persian and Arabic, two retired Maulanas, Reza Ali Washat and Abdul Khaleque were recruited. We have no records of any protest against the
appointment of these two men, perhaps because of their wide professional reputation and because of their advanced age. Professor Washat's daughter, Ayesha Rashid, was also a student of the college. She later joined the LBC as a lecturer in 1944.

It was soon decided that up to forty percent of non-Muslim girls would be admitted from 1940. It was perhaps not feasible to run an entire college with just a few Muslim girls. Most Muslim girls from a non-Bengali background joined the Arabic, Persian and Urdu Departments. The examples must have inspired other Muslim girls to take up higher education.

Bengali Muslim girls generally tended to study other subjects like Bengali, English, Philosophy, History, etc. Atia Banu and Gulchemon Ara, who passed their MA (Philosophy) from Calcutta University in 1945 were Brabourne College alumnae. The smooth functioning of the college was disrupted at least twice - once during the Second World War and then during the Calcutta Riots of 1946. It was, nevertheless, able to attract the largest number of college going Muslim girls in Bengal.

If the 1920s were the decade when Muslims accepted the idea of their girls going to school, and the thirties constituted the decade when they started going to college in larger numbers which necessitated the foundation of LBC; then by the 1940s the standard of education was progressively raised up to the post graduate level. The idea that educationally qualified women would take up employment was gradually winning fairly wide acceptance.

In Burdwan, however, higher education for Muslim girls did not gain currency until the thirties, and girls started going to college only from the early forties. The idea of post graduation was a distant dream before 1947. Burdwan town did not have any educational institution exclusively for Muslim girls, although there were quite a few important Muslim families in the town.

During the pre-1947 days, these were the families of rich landlords who had huge landed estates in the countryside but who preferred to live in the town because of the greater availability of civic amenities, shopping centres, doctors and lawyers. Sometimes they themselves belonged to the professional class of lawyers, teachers,

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140 In 1943, the first batch of Arabic (Hons.) students appeared for their BA Final Examination in which 3 girls secured first class- Qazi Jahanara Khatun (1st class 1st) , Halima Khatun and Latifa Khatun. They post graduated from the Calcutta University in 1945 with Jahanara winning the University Gold Medal (The Bengal Educational Gazette, Vol. II, No. 5, November 1945. University of Calcutta Notification 4.10.45. p. 424).

147 Ibid. p. 427.
doctors, etc., apart from possessing landed property. Women in such families were educated privately by *mem sahibs* who were mostly native Christians, Anglo-Indians or, in just a few instances, Europeans. European women were mostly missionaries but there was little fear of proselytization. They were very respectful towards the Muslim families they visited and their proselytization efforts were mostly directed at the lower classes.¹⁴⁸

At least three of the 158 women I interviewed in the town who came from different families said their mothers had received a rudimentary education from ‘mem’ teachers at home. Such privately educated girls always sent their daughters to school later in life.¹⁴⁹ The basic training that these *memsahibs* imparted included the 3 Rs (in English or Bengali) and hygiene, along with embroidery, crochet work and occasionally a few English songs to make the girls ‘accomplished’.¹⁵⁰ The oldest girls’ school in the town, the Burdwan Raj Balika Vidyalaya (now known as Maharani Adhirani Girls’ High School), was a free primary school established by Maharaja Mahtab Chand in 1853. The school was located in the Payrakhana Lane of Mayur Mahal area, one of the Muslim dominated areas in the town. But one of the oldest surviving students of this school, Tripti Chakravarti, who studied there between 1941-44, could not remember any Muslim girl who studied with her or any Muslim teacher who taught her in the school.¹⁵¹ The school, unfortunately, does not preserve very old admission registers.

The oldest school for Muslim girls in the town, as suggested by its name was the Parapukur Balika Maktab, established by Umratan Bibi, daughter of a local landlord in 1920.¹⁵² The juxtaposition of the two Bengali and Urdu words, Balika and Maktab, is a clue to the nature of the school which sought to legitimize its Bengali identity in an Islamic institutional form. Umratan’s daughter Jolekha writes, “A number of Muslim girls from far and near in the town used to come to my mother to study the Koran. She taught them the Koran and gave them a *Varna-parichay* (the

¹⁴⁸ *Private Memoirs.* Confirmed in the interviews of: Bajmeara Begum b. 1940, 28.7.03 Masuda Begum b. 1948, 24.6.03.

¹⁴⁹ My interviews with
  Jahanara Begum (b.1939) - 19.2.03.
  Bajmeara Begum (b.1940) - 28.7.03
  Masuda Begum (b.1948) - 24.6.03

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ My interview with Tripti Chakravarty (b. 1933) - 21.2.03, Burdwan.

¹⁵² *Private Memoirs* and *Managing Committee Records of the School.* (now known as Parapukur Girls’ Primary School) 1954.
fret Bengali Primer written by Vidyasagar) each, which also she taught them to read. The school was running for quite some time when my grandfather completed the formalities and the Balika Maktab came to be recognized in 1920.”

Umratan herself was educated at home by memsahibs, she took the ME (Middle English) Examination as a private candidate and later completed the Guru Training Course. She was thus the first Muslim woman in the town who was professionally employed and drew a government salary. Although it was recorded as a Balika Maktab, boys and girls of both communities soon started attending it, changing its status to a primary school.

The most significant role in the education of Muslim girls in the pre-47 period in Burdwan was played by the Burdwan Municipal Girls’ School (hereafter BMGS, established 1936). This school was a continuation of the Mission Girls’ High School founded in 1930 by the Church of England Zenana Mission, London. The Mission School had to be closed down due to shortage of students and funds on 18 May, 1936.

Meanwhile, the Congress led Burdwan Municipality had repeatedly expressed its desire of founding a girls’ school since 1924. In a meeting convened on 16 March, 1936 it was resolved that “it is desirable to run a High School for girls in the town. There are four primary schools for girls at present. If the Education Department kindly consents, a High School from class V onwards should be opened.”

Following Miss Neville’s Report on behalf of the Mission School, a number of respectable citizens of the town including distinguished landed magnates, businessmen and professionals, met at the Town Hall on 29 April, 1936 at the invitation of the Burdwan Municipality to discuss the issue. Thanking the Mission authorities for their initiative, they requested the Director of Public Instruction to sanction a monthly sum of Rs. 275 for the new school. This meeting was also

153 Such juxtapositions of Sanskrit-Bengali and Persian-Urdu words to create a distinct Bengali Muslim ambience was not unknown in the early 20th century. Another example of this was Nabanur, a Bengali monthly magazine edited by Syed Emdad Ali from Calcutta since 1903, where Bengali Naba and Urdu Nur were joined to mean New Light.
154 Private Memoirs. The Guru Training Course was a certificate course entitled its holder to become a qualified Guru (teacher).
155 Conclusion derived from a copy of the letter written by Laksmikanta Mitra to the AIR, Calcutta, Pratibhiki Section on 13.1.93 where he referred to Umratan as Guruma, his teacher.
156 Mentioned in the Report of Miss K Neville, Secretary, Mission Girls’ School 28.4.1936.
157 Report of the Municipality meeting dated 16.3.36.
158 Resolutions of the Meeting of Citizens held at the Town Hall, 29.4.36.
attended by three distinguished Muslims in the town - Maulvi Syed Ghulam Mohiuddin, Maulvi Md. Hussain and Maulvi Syed Abdul Allam.

When the BMGS finally started on 26 August, 1936, Syed Abdul Allam (1892–1963) was one of the eleven members of the Managing Committee of the School. He was also the Secretary of the Managing Committee of the school during 1938-42 and during 1945-63. He came from one of the big landed families of the district and was a well known figure in the town. It is understandable why or how a person of his background became the Secretary of the District Haj Committee or the Waqf Committee. The popularity and respect he enjoyed in the town led him to become a Municipal commissioner and Magistrate. But his interest in the education of women is remarkable; no Muslim man in the town before him had shown such initiative in the institutionalization of female education.

At first I thought that he wanted to give his own daughter a modern education. But his interest in the school did not end after his daughter passed out of it. He remained the secretary of this school until his death in 1963. This has led me to conclude that the education of his daughter was not the cause but the effect of his deep seated interest in modern secular education.

The mix of religiosity and advanced reformism in Allam was perhaps a conscious response to the educational improvements which were taking place in the community outside the town, in Calcutta for instance. The fact that his daughter Zarina Begum passed the matriculation examination from this school in 1939, graduated from the Brabourne College and did her MA in History from the University of Calcutta in 1945, further establishes his genuine interest in the cause of higher education for Muslim women.

The BMGS started with 33 students in different classes in 1936. Five students of this school matriculated in 1938. Among them was Jamil Akhtar who passed the examination with distinction in compulsory and additional Sanskrit. It is remarkable that Sanskrit was not seen as a ‘Hindu’ language here. A Muslim girl, apparently with the permission from her guardians, opted for it and was allowed by the school authorities to persist in it.

However, as an instance in the next chapter will show, this phenomenon need not have been universally true. In 1939, three of the seven girls who took the

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160 Data collected from Examination Registers of the School.
examination, including Zarina, were Muslim. In 1940, there were two Muslims among the six girls who matriculated from this school; in 1941 there was none among the five students; in 1942 there were again two Muslim girls among eleven students who passed out from this school.\textsuperscript{161} Syeda Jolekha Khatun whose private memoirs I have extensively used in this work, was the only Muslim girl in her batch of nine students in 1943. She passed the examination with distinction in hygiene. The records of 1944 were not available.

In 1945, there were three Muslim girls out of ten matriculates from BMGS.\textsuperscript{162} One of them was Kaniz Fatima Khurshid, who got a two-year scholarship from June 1945 along with a fees exemption in the college where she was likely to be admitted for the Intermediate Course.\textsuperscript{163} In 1946, there were two Muslims girls in a batch of eleven.\textsuperscript{164}

Although the number of Muslim girls passing out of BMGS was never very remarkable, its contribution to Muslim women’s education has been extremely significant. It ensured a steady flow of Bengali Muslim matriculate girls. On the one hand, it served to inspire others and on the other, the matriculate girls now logically aspired for intermediate and graduation degrees initiating the trend of higher education among girls in the town.

Some of the BMGS alumnae like Moslema and Akbari, were daughters of judges who left the town after their fathers were transferred. Some girls were married off soon after matriculation; only a few like Zarina went out of Burdwan to pursue higher studies.\textsuperscript{165} There was also a significant number of Muslim girls among the first generation of the alumnae of BMGS who stayed back in Burdwan - as housewives and teachers. Although some Muslim alumnae of the school whom I interviewed said that they had occasionally experienced communal discrimination in the remarks/behaviour of their friends (which I shall discuss in chapter IV), there are also some who have maintained life long friendships with Hindu girls which started at school. The school was deliberately non-communal in its approach\textsuperscript{166} bringing the

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{162} Ibid., also confirmed from The Bengal Educational Gazette, Vol. II, July 1945, p. 173.
\textsuperscript{163} Ibid., p. 393.
\textsuperscript{164} The Calcutta Gazette, Extraordinary, July 1946, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{165} Private Memoirs. Confirmed from interviews with other alumnae of the school.
\textsuperscript{166} Both the other schools in the town, the Maharani Adhirani School and the Harisabha Hindu Girls’ School (estd. 1934) had the weekly Siva Puja and the annual Sivaratri festival celebrated as a part of the compulsory school activities. Interview with Tripta Chakravarty, 21.2.03 and her article ‘Amar Smritite Maharani School’ in the school’s souvenir published on the occasion of 150 years, 2003, p. 11;
girls of the two communities closer. Unlike other girls’ schools in the town, no denominational worship was conducted on its premises, which would have isolated one group of students from others.

The matriculate girls had to join the only college in the town, the Burdwan Raj College which was co-educational. As both Hindu and Muslim girls in the town started attending college from the same time, Muslim girls did not face any particular difficulty or social criticism.\textsuperscript{167} When Jolekha Khatun started going to college in 1943, there were altogether twelve girls in the college. But as all of them would not be present together because the times for the different classes were different and regularity was not strictly adhered to, girls had to hide themselves in the common room. Teachers escorted them to the classroom and back after class. This was not so much because of purdah but to prevent them from being harassed by boys.

Gender was a greater divide than religion at that moment. Today at the age of seventy six, Jolekha believes that the boys who annoyed them were not motivated by any specific motive: what they did was only an expression of their excessive enthusiasm as first generation co-education learners. They teased her rickshawpuller and sometimes broke parts of the rickshaw on which she went to college. “Today I understand this, but in those times they made our lives very difficult”,\textsuperscript{168} she wrote. Girls still would not speak to boys and vice-versa.

In conclusion, we may say that in Calcutta, the SMGS and the LBC made significant contribution to the cause of Muslim female education in the pre-1947 period and successfully made the ideas of higher education\textsuperscript{169} and employment gradually acceptable to a conservative community. The first batch of girls from Burdwan matriculated in the same year as the LBC was set up for the higher education of Muslim girls (1939). The girls in the Burdwan Raj College were initially at a disadvantage for their numerical inferiority in what was until then regarded as a boys’ college; but there are no reports of discrimination on grounds of religion in the Raj College; even at a time when the entire socio-political situation of Bengal was communally charged.

\textsuperscript{167} Private Memoirs.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{169} Two Brabourne College alumnae, Latifa Khatun and Atia Banu were awarded research scholarship of Rs. 75 per month each with effect from July 1, 1946 for pursuing their Ph.D in Arabic and Philosophy respectively, in the University of Calcutta. The Calcutta Gazette, Extraordinary, July 1946. Education Directorate, Bengal, Notification, Calcutta, 4\textsuperscript{th} July, 1946, p. 118.

also, Gayatri Pandit’s untitled article in Silver Jubilee Commemoration Souvenir of Maharajadhikraj Uday Chand Women’s College, 1980, p. 23.
But this process of gradual advancement among Muslim women received a massive setback with Partition, a political event which sought to restructure the cultural history of Bengal.