Chapter II

Between Community and the Nation: Muslim Women in the Context of the Reform Movements

And as for the myth that the women’s question died out after its spectacular flowering in the second half of the nineteenth-century, these writers offer evidence that women hung on to ideas of freedom and justice, and infused them with their aspirations, even as they responded to the call of the nation. (Tharu and Lalitha, vol. 1, 2006, p. 169)

European enlightenment forms the basis for all assumptions of liberal human values and thoughts that motivated the world ever since. Modernity with its constituents of liberal, democratic and secularist sensibility develops the binary of progressive and primitive at this point in European history. The liberal modern state evolved out of enlightenment demanded the retreat of religion to the private sphere. Transformation of societies to modern ones was not a simple one; it involved complex patterns of inclusions, exclusions, adjustments and accommodations (Asad 2008, p. 206; Chatterjee 2006a, pp. 3-13). The nation states that emerged out of colonial serfdom share a complex and critical association with modernity. At one level the progressive nationalist movements of these emerging nation states internalised European modernity as the vantage point to look into concepts of emancipation, liberation and progress. But the process of appropriating non-western communities was a continuous project of Eurocentric orientalist
discourses. The onus of addressing this appropriation was also upon the nationalist movements. This ‘double bind’ facilitated the formation of intricate patterns of conceptualizations whose implications affected upon the multiple layers of social hierarchies within the colonies in various intensities. The social reform movements of the nineteenth and the former half of twentieth-century in colonial India reflect the complexity of this phenomenon at varied levels. The question of addressing caste was one major concern of the reform movements all over India, but under the light of the enlightenment spirit of the modern, various other/related issues like education, women’s emancipation, and social reforms in terms of abolition of superstitious and inhuman practices were discussed. The reform movements, anchored on caste and religion, were later carried on to the mainstream nationalist discourses strategically. The assimilation of these discourses into nationalist histories reveals the absence of the Muslim reform movements, owing its origin to the complex historical platform from which Islam has been addressed to in India. Islam’s relation with Indian history in general and modernity’s appropriation of Islam to a primitive community facilitate this total evacuation of the history of the Muslim reform movements in the mainstream Indian history. My attempt in this chapter is a mapping of various impulses behind the Muslim reform movements, both as a formative space for the Indian Muslim identity in the emerging nation, and as the problematic point of reference to deal with the conflicts between the secular longings of the community and the aspiration to meet the larger interests of the community. I also intend to look into the involvement of women’s agency in the reform movements, marking it also as the point of time in history to locate the
emergence of an upper caste Hindu female identity as the image of the Indian woman, distancing the Dalit and minority women from the mainstream. While the reform calls for women’s empowerment, both as a response to the general awakening in all communities during this time and also as a direct outcome of the influence of colonial modernity, as ‘a formative horizon’ (Dube, 2007, p. 9), were common to all communities, the female identity emerged out of these movements were strictly Hindu. Being the spectres of the ‘primitive’ in the dawn of modernity, Muslim women’s productive engagement with the history of the time has been far too complex to be accommodated in the mainstream discourses on reform movements. Also, the referential point of women’s reforms served to engage with upper caste Hindu intentions of rephrasing the vocabulary of colonial modernity along the teleology of the Hindu tradition.

The trajectory of the nationalist history has been constructed along the lines of the liberal, secular notions through a meticulous camouflaging of the antinomies of the disparities and hierarchical distinctions between communities. In the emerging consciousness of the progressive, the Muslim identity has been construed in terms of the historical site of European enlightenment. Talal Asad describes the European project of the construction of the universal history by the othering of local histories: “The European Enlightenment constitutes the historical site from which Westerners typically approach non-Western traditions. That approach has tended to evaluate and measure traditions according to their distance from Enlightenment liberal models” (1993, p. 200). But this is also an intricate structure of priorities that cannot be reduced to the reductionist focus on Enlightenment ideals alone.
The definition and the re-definition initiated by the socio-religious movements formed the characteristic of the reform movements. Gwilym Beckerlegge observes that the reform movements were motivated by a wide range of causes varying from caste, class and other social disparities mobilised under the progressive ideals of modernity induced by colonial education and liberal ideas imported along with it. The refashioning of the colonial individual’s social world has definitely an impact upon the emergence of the progressive notions on the individual selves and freedom in general. At the same time a parallel discourse of the reform ideals were knit into the frame of the nationalist history. Or perhaps the history of the nationalist movements in India dwelt upon the reform ideals of progress and emancipation to conceal the dissipating forces of class, religion and caste at a wider context. This antinomy is specific to the context of colonial India in terms of the wide disparities between various histories located within the spatial and temporal frame of the sub continent. But it is strange to observe that the reform movements had their root in foregrounding the rights and resources of individual groups. The romantic notion of a unified secular nation state was never the agenda of the reform movements. Albeit the focus on caste and religious mobilizations, these reform movements ironically become the vantage point from which we formulate our notions of a secular past. Beckerlegge evaluates the scene of religious reform movements:

The period of British colonial rule in India has been described as ‘an age of definition and redefinition initiated by socio-religious reform movements that swept the subcontinent’ (Jones 1989, p. 1). Sensitivity over matters
relating to religious identity, and the ensuing competition between groups more sharply demarcated by religious difference, has been attributed to the increasing impact of Christian missionaries, the introduction by the British of a decennial census, and successive policies adopted by the British to encourage different religious groups to support British rule. The emergence of the Arya Samaj, Muslim anjumans, and Sikh sabhas exacerbated inter-religious and emergent political rivalries, even though intended in part to act as bulwarks against these same competitive forces. They were indicative . . . of the crisis that India might be thought of to have entered under British and Christian rule. As the campaign for independence intensified, so did pressures leading to a greater sense of separation between religious groups, by then also characterized, in many respects, by competing political agendas. (2008a, pp. 5-6)

Following this argument leads us to the conclusion that the reform movements originated from a sense of insecurity under the formidable presence of the British and the Christian missionary activities. At the same time, this may not be generalised as in the case of Dalit movements, or may be as the mobilisation of converted Dalits. The incorporation of these movements into nationalist discourses evokes skeptical interrogation into the conception of secularism and democracy in modern nation states at a wider context. Also, the British focus on shaping the colonial individual as subjects of modern nation states through operating mechanisms like census led to deeper impacts in the sub continent. The irrational bulldozing of differences to formulate the citizen, in a non-European context emanates rippling effect in the
entangled social structure. Apart from the geographical and historical contextual influences, there have been certain common platforms, from which these reform movements operated. At the same time, specific functionalities of corresponding geographical and other categorical demarcations had determined the trajectory of each movement. Apart from these common platforms specific cultural and historical realities had shaped to determine these movements, and even more interestingly, the mapping of these movements within the history of nationalist or progressive movements in India had also been determined by the socio cultural hierarchies enjoyed by different communities. Definitely the intersecting interests between communities regarding the reform movements had been shaped by ideals of European enlightenment. But the reform movements had also contributed to highlight the individual demands of each community for better bargain in the burgeoning democracy in terms of socio political power. Apparently it may appear to be contradicting in terms of the ideals of secularism and equality that modern nation states aspire to attain. Also, it may appear to challenge the general notion of modern secular democracies, pushing the religion to the margin. Talal Asad describes this withdrawal of religion to the private sphere:

Historians of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe have begun to recount how the constitution of the modern state required the forcible redefinition of religion as belief, and of religious belief, sentiment, and identity as personal matters that belong to the newly emerging space of private (as opposed to public) life. In the eyes of those who wanted a strong, centralized state, the disorders of the
Reformation proved that religious belief was the source of uncontrollable passions within the individual and of dangerous strife within the commonwealth. It could not for this reason provide an institutional basis for a common morality—still less a public language of rational criticism. (2008, p. 205)

While reform movements in India may have risen from the progressive, reformer’s modern outlook on religion and religious communities, the result of these reform movements were not a recession of the religion/caste into the background. Though the reform movements successfully camouflaged the hidden agenda of communal bargain, the foregrounding of caste and religious identities have been the direct outcome of the mobilisations during these reform movements.

Though feminism was not an imposition of the West upon the third world countries, it can definitely be said that the discussions related to modern progressive ideals in the colonies generally spread a condition favourable for discussions on the state of women. Nationalist struggles aimed at achieving political sovereignty, formulation of national identity and modernizing society in the colonies provided the background for movements towards women’s emancipation. Kumari Jayawardena in *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (1986) notices three facets in the resistance to colonial aggression. The first was a desire to carry out internal reforms in order to modernize societies to combat western imperialism, the second was a dismantling of pre-capitalist structures, especially the ruling dynasties and religious orthodoxies that hindered internal reforms, and finally the assertion of a national
identity based on which people could be mobilised against imperialism (1986, p. 3). She continues to say that these nationalist movements adopted paradoxical strategies of using western models in order to combat Western aggression, reinforcing cultural identity and strengthening the nation. In these countries the struggle of the local bourgeoisie developed on two fronts simultaneously. One was internally against the pre-capitalist structures and the second, externally against imperialism (1986, pp. 3-4). Jayawardena’s argument is in accordance with many historians pointing out the irony in the function of Western secular thought as a crucial factor in fashioning a consciousness and in devising mechanisms to escape the domination of the West.

Feminist movements in India can thus be placed in the larger context of resistance to imperialism and multiple modes of western domination operating within the society on the one hand and also to feudal, patriarchal and other hegemonic power structures operating within the native society. Awareness regarding the empowerment and emancipation of women were a major concern of national resistance movements. At the same time the issues dealt with in the feminist movements were limited to selected reforms, as feminist historians point out, as to that of equal right to property, right to vote, right to education, right to enter politics and professions etc. (Jayewardene, 1986, p. 9). There is also an argument that these issues had little to do with the day-to-day lives of women, nor did these reforms address the basic question of women’s subordination within family or society.
While feminist historians like Jayewardene tend to link the feminist uprising in India to nationalist movements against the imperial power and to social movements countering hegemonic forces of oppression within the traditional structures, they seldom look into the diverse forms of resistance to forces of oppression, both within and outside the system. Most often they generalise these movements to the caste oriented oppression within Hinduism and attribute reform movements from other communities, for instance, Islam as an extension of the struggle for liberation from caste which exists in these communities as a remnant of the pre-conversion past:

Various sections of Hindus converted to the new faith, some under force, but many voluntarily; the latter included those who converted because of the privileges and positions to which Muslims had access, those who wished to avoid the poll tax on non Muslims, and some members of the lower castes who wished to escape from their disadvantaged position in society. Despite some clashes, coexistence in the same society forced Islam to adopt some of the features of Hinduism and Hindu society, including caste and some forms of ritual worship. This cultural cross fertilization also made some difference to the status of Islamic women. Practices such as the wearing of veil were not very widespread among Indian Muslims although the institution of purdah or seclusion did apply, at least at the level of the higher groups: yet Muslim women became subject, just as much as Hindu women, to all the oppressions of a patriarchal, caste bound
society, and 19th century Islamic reformers fought against many of these practices side by side with Hindu reformers. (Jayawardena, 1986, p. 75)

This generalisation reveals the inability of the author to conceive Islamic societies. Jayawardena only sees Islam in India as an extension of Hinduism and the theological and empirical differences between these two communities have been violently erased in terms of syncretism. In a violent yoking of culturally and historically distinct communities, Jayawardena underplays the reform movements in subaltern communities, including the Muslims. That the Muslim reformers fought side by side the Hindu reformers is a statement that reduces the possible differences between what reform stands for the Hindu and the Muslim. By locating the histories of Islam and Hinduism in India to a common past, Jayawardena draws upon the methodology of modernity that identifies certain reformable elements in individual selves irrespective of caste, religion or creed. Apart from the general conducive atmosphere of colonial modernity and the motivating forces of nationalist movements, these reform movements draw upon the nuances and specificities of various religious and caste identities. Therefore, locating the feminist consciousness that evolved as an outcome of this political vibrancy becomes a complex process. As much they derive from the colonial modernity’s emphasis on individual freedom and emancipation centred on European enlightenment, the impact of these ideals on different communities differed drastically. The hierarchical position of caste, class and gender identities within the subcontinent had a role in shaping the responses of
each community to this call for reform. Along with being products of the exposure to the ideals of European modernity, these reform movements drew upon the necessity for a social restructuring in terms of the caste, class and gender hierarchies. In the case of women’s emancipation, the reformers were on certain common platform in terms of the call for education, legal rights, etc. But what would appear as an impact of colonial morality to a privileged class of upper caste Hindu women may turn out to be a call for basic rights in the case of socially and culturally underprivileged women. The constitution of nation’s heritage along the lines of Hindu upper caste, while serving to counter European modernity also excluded a majority of the mass not represented by this “tradition.”

Though there is an argument that the trajectory of feminist movements in India, or the burgeoning of feminist awareness in India, arises from the general frame of nationalist movements, the mapping of these movements or for that matter, the reform movements in general, cannot be contained within the nationalist framework. The subtle nuances of class and caste identities in India reframe Indian women’s subjectivities and therefore, priorities. Women Writing in India by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha is one of those pioneering works that demand a conceptualization of feminist agency in terms of Indian realities:

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51 I intend to point out the generalized platform from which the reform movements are being appropriated into the context of European modernity and an imposed colonial morality. See Arunima (2003) and Devika (2007) for feminist critiques of such generalisations.

52 In Kerala’s case this is specifically true. I would elaborate this while discussing the lower-caste resistances for the right to breast-covering, institutionalizing marital practices etc.
Euro-American feminist theory has tended to concentrate its efforts principally on exposing the *patriarchal* urgencies that underwrite representations of women and shape the conceptual and methodological apparatus of a discipline. Though they admit the need to take race and class, and occasionally even imperialism, into account, these theories usually treat patriarchy as an isolatable system responsible for the subordination of woman, to which, in the interests of a more complete analysis of the workings of power in a particular society, oppressions of race and class might be “added.” Even as an initial, consciousness raising gesture, such an approach seems curiously inadequate. Patriarchies are clearly formed through historical processes and structured by other dominant ideologies—of colonialism, of class, and of caste, which they in turn structure. Right through the nineteenth-century and well into the twentieth, for instance, tradition and the past—ancient India and, indeed women in ancient India—were major issues of debate, not only for historians and students of literature but also for artists, novelists, jurists, political philosophers, social reformers, imperial administrators and policy makers, and nationalist thinkers of all kinds. (vol. 1, 2006, pp. 41-42)

While detaching the Indian feminist discourse from the universal essentialist claim of Anglo-centric feminism, it also presents the logic of feminist consciousness in India as derived from a precolonial past. Tharu and Lalitha trace a tradition of ancient
representations, shaping debate on women in relation to their status in Indian society, role in the family and in the nation, education, freedom and sexuality, and consequently the debate over women’s subjectivity and women’s writing in the nineteenth and twentieth-century (vol. 1, 2006, p. 43). While accepting this argument as a pioneering debate in terms of conceptualizing an indigenous feminist agency, we have to address questions of caste and religion also as dominant ideologies formulating hegemonic discourses regarding woman’s subjectivity. The anti-colonial movements of the nineteenth and early-twentieth-century had the conscious agenda of constructing Indian woman’s identity along the contours of upper-caste Hindu woman.

The conscious attempt to build up a woman’s subjectivity within the frame of Hindu nationalism is discussed in Sangeetha Ray’s En-Gendering India (2000). She argues that the figure of the native woman as the upper-caste Hindu woman becomes the site through which Indian nationalism consolidated its identification with Hinduism. She finds a sectarian religious mobilization in the very inception of the nation that leads to an implosion of India’s secular self image in the early 1990s (2000, p. 7). Ray’s work is notable for pointing out that feminists cannot ignore the appeal of a communal sensibility of women engaged in reshaping the emergent public sphere of the new Hindu nation. She rightly points out that under the light of polarized social spheres after the Ayodhya episode in Indian history many feminists realized the need to evaluate their so far unmarked subjectivities as upper-caste, middleclass and Hindu women.
The history of the reform movements in India shows a flood of discussions on women’s questions, especially in Bengal. Partha Chatterjee observes this phenomenon:

The “women’s question” was a central issue in the most controversial debates over social reform in early and mid-nineteenth-century Bengal—the period of its so-called renaissance. Rammohan Roy’s historical fame is largely built around his campaign against the practice of the immolation of widows, Vidyasagar’s around his efforts to legalize widow remarriage and abolish Kulin polygamy; the Brahmo Samaj was split twice in the 1870s over questions of marriage laws and the “age of consent.” What has perplexed historians is the rather sudden disappearance of such issues from the agenda of public debate toward the close of the century. From then onward, questions regarding the position of women in society do not arouse the same degree of public passion and acrimony as they did only a few decades before. The overwhelming issues are now directly political ones—concerning the politics of nationalism. (2008b, p. 116)

In Chatterjee’s opinion this phenomenon of the disappearance of the issue of female emancipation from the public agenda of the nationalist agitation in the late-nineteenth-century is due to nationalism’s refusal to make women’s question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state. The lives of middle-class women, coming from the demographic section that constituted the nation in late colonial
India, had by then changed rapidly, in his opinion. Obviously, a wide category that falls outside this generalisation of the national population is left without legitimate histories in this process. The Muslims, Dalits and other subaltern groups who fall outside the essentialist notion of an Indian identity which has been constituted out of the emerging middleclass and through the privileging of a particular tradition as the national culture, felt “culturally excluded from the formation of the nation” (Chatterjee 2008b, p.133). Apparently, this policy of exclusion and privileging of certain classes has resulted in the exclusion of Dalit reform movements by and large and Muslim reform movements entirely from nationalist histories.

Following this line of thinking, we arrive at the conclusion that women’s reforms left the centre stage of nationalist movements after the initial mobilisation, at least in Bengal. Also, we have to consider the emergence of the Hindu ideal of womanhood serving as the face of Indian woman for the whole nation. Not only that the nationalist movement appropriated the reform movements limiting their spatial and temporal dimensions, in the emerging political sphere it also determined the role of women as per the upper-caste Hindu ideal. Kumkum Sangari relates this cultural semantic of women’s reforms in nineteenth-century Bengal:

. . . the reconceptualization of womanhood was embedded in the aspirations of the emergent but far from homogeneous middleclass which needed to restructure the family, to produce ideologies for the reproduction of households, to measure patriarchal practices against emerging forms of stratification, to align personal with general class
interests, to produce a common language about ‘culture’ as well as
contest the colonial state’s practised juridical rights over a newly
constituted public sphere . . . Women became the subjects and
vehicles through whom both retention and modernization of newly
defined patriarchal forms were to be achieved. (1999, p. 122)

While Sangari presents the transnational characteristic of the cultural formations
that emerged under the aegis of imperialism, Tanika Sarkar looks at the reform
movements as a shift away from an order of interdictions. But she also does not fail
to see the impetus of reform attempts to carve the ideal image of Hindu woman. She
refers to Keshub Chandra Sen, the noted Brahmo reformer who ‘set up Victoria
College to train good Hindu women.’ What is unique in Tanika Sarkar’s approach to
reform movements is that she sees this phase as the emergence of a sisterhood
between women, the harbouring of ‘a bhaginibhav.’ But she does not fail to see the
obverse side to this, that is, the new kind of home that emerged out of the reforms
was to be a rediscovery of the Happy Hindu homes of old times. She reads this as the
capability of “growing Hindu revivalism to inflect the agenda even of sections of
liberal reform and to appropriate reformist projects for community purposes”
(Sarkar 1999, p. 105).

Uma Chakravarti, in “Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi” (2009), evokes
questions regarding the image of the changed womanhood of the nineteenth-
century and the focus of these discourses, the high-caste Hindu women:
The process . . . has attempted to document the invention of a tradition during the nineteenth-century. During this phase what took place was the construction of a particular kind of past which was the context for the construction of a particular kind of womanhood. The past itself was a creation of the compulsions of the present and these elements determined which elements were highlighted and which receded from the conscious object of concern in historical and semi historical writings.(2009, p. 78)

Almost in line with the same argument, Lata Mani problematizes the context of discussions on tradition and modernity in the nineteenth-century locating them in the colonial framework. Her argument in “Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India” is that the conception of tradition in the nineteenth-century context was purely colonial. She revisits these sites of modernization and the legacy of colonial rule being interpreted as instrumental for our ideas about women’s rights and positive consequences on women’s lives. She presents how progressive and conservative ideological positions had been constituted in the specificities of the colonial context. Women thus became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated.53 Women provided the potential of building up discourses on social reforms. In spite of being represented as entangled with the fate of the emerging

53 Lata Mani brings in the parallel of debates on Shah Bano case as a reemergence of this phenomenon in the late twentieth-century context.
nation, women became “discursive constructions” as victims or heroines (2009, pp. 88-128).

The discussions on the status of women in reform movements portray a complex entanglement of various factors. First of all, the discourse on women as a symbol of tradition, which in turn appropriated the Hindu woman as the traditional Indian woman, alienated women from marginal and minority communities. The second anomaly was that of the discourses on women itself who were construed into the icons of Indian tradition as a part of the reform movements. These discourses purported women as part of an emancipation project triggered off by the western ideals of enlightenment and at the same time wanted to restrict the domain of these discourses to domestic virtues of women. The exclusion of a wide range of the population and the appropriation of women’s articulation into a schematic plot of rebuilding the ancient glory of Hindu tradition was also in coherence with the wider plot of assimilating the reform movements into the nationalist history. It resulted not only in bringing out stereotypical portrayal of Hindu women, but also in the portrayal of minorities as the demoniac other to the virtuous Hindu tradition.

Charu Gupta’s *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslims and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* discusses how prejudiced notions about Muslim debauchery and women’s sexuality became vehicles to eclipse the heterogeneity of a diverse society into a monolithic Hindu society:

In the paradigm which sees the outsider violating the Hindu household, Muslims began to replace Christian missionaries. Every
Hindu Sabha was asked to keep a detailed list of jobs that Muslims performed which brought them in contact with Hindu women. Implicit was here also the fear of Hindu women losing control of their sexuality and falling prey to Muslim desire. (2008, p. 278)

Gupta talks about the surveillance of Hindu men on the lives of Hindu women, instructing her how to move, whom to talk to, where to go, and what to do. She quotes from Stri Shiksha, an Arya Samajist tract on proper behaviour for Hindu women written by a prominent “pandit” of the UP Arya Pratinidhi Sabha:

(1) Never worship at a grave. (2) Do not worship tazias, Muslim gods and jesters. (3) Do not get amulets, charms or incantations done from Muslims. (4) Do not go to Muslim priests who read prayers in mosques. (5) At marriage and other times, do not do embroidery of the Muslim kind. (6) Do not get assessments and measurements done from Muslims. (7) Do not listen to the invocation of pirs. (8) Stop taking out money in the name of pirs . . . (11) Never sit alone on a Muslim’s vehicle (12) Never have your children taught by Muslims . . .

The writer continues the warning in terms of not buying fruits, vegetables and fancy articles from the Muslims. But the most crucial instruction is yet to come. There is an obvious preference of the British over the Muslim male, which goes directly against

the secular thesis of the reform movements being translated into the platform of nationalist history:

If a woman is lost . . . women often get lost at stations, fairs . . . Do not be afraid . . . Directly reach Sewa Samiti, Hindu Sabha or Arya Samaj.

Never go to a Khilafat person. Never trust a Muslim policeman. But definitely and without any fear take the help of an English white policeman or officer . . . You can take the help of a Hindu porter . . .

Stay firm on your Hindu dharma . . . Encourage, and let your husband and sons join, the Hindu Sabha, Arya Samaj and Shuddhi Sabha.55

Charu Gupta points out how the image of the Muslim becomes more menacing and far more dangerous than the British. The obvious preference of the British over the Indian Muslim problematizes the context of internalizing the reform movements into nationalist histories. The discussion of women’s issues in relation to the reform movements also assumes a precarious status here. First of all, the stereotyping of the Muslim as the other in terms of a Hindu cultural past thus shapes the image of the Hindu and the Muslim in the history of the nationalist movements.

Supplementing to this, there is also the emergence of the Hindu upper-caste woman as the face of Indian woman, substantiated by the load of a Sanskrit tradition. Discourse of the nation along the axis of gender, thus, justifies the wider implications of the status of women from other communities in the post-independent India.

Though colonial dialogues had a role to play in this formulation of what is construed in terms of the feminine in the nineteenth-century context and later absorbed into the foundation of Indian nationhood, it is rooted in the hierarchical preferences and exclusions of religious and caste identities embedded within the Indian political consciousness.

The reform movements thus facilitated in providing Indian women with a cultural past that linked them to a Sanskrit tradition. The image of this upper-caste Hindu woman was translated into the image of the emerging nation through various cultural machineries. In resolving the conflict between the urge for concretizing a nation as per the western models of modernity and resisting the western regime, Partha Chatterjee refers to the inner spiritual space of the nation which defined the Indian sentiments in nationalism (2008). This spiritual inner space connected the popular consciousness and “western modular influences.” Sekhar Bandhopadhyay looks at the nationalist iconography of Bharat Mata to mediate between these two spaces of imagining the nation. He refers to Christopher Pinney’s identifying the emergence of the nationalist iconography of Bharat Mata through the play staged by Jyotirindranath and Satyendranath Tagore, Kiran Chandra Banerjee, and Sisir Kumar Ghosh at the Hindu mela on 19 February 1873. Later in 1882 Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in his Bengali novel Ananda Math introduced the powerful image of the mother goddess into the discourse of nationalism. The image later fortified by him through “Bande Maataram” became the anthem of nationalism and subsequently the mother goddess was attributed with symbols of modern nationalism like the map and the flag (Bandhopadhyay, 2010, pp. xix-xx). This
mediation of Indian womanhood to locate her within the frame of the modern
nation state communicated the nation to the illiterate masses. Whether this image
of Bharat Mata was a cultural artefact of nationalism routed in the patriarchal
anxieties of a male dominated colonial society (Sarkar, 1987, p. 2011) or a natural
emanation from the centuries old Hindu tradition of regarding the earth as Goddess
(Bose, 1997, p. 54) the emergence of this image refashioned nationalist discourses
along predominantly Hindu lines. If we look into the emergence of women’s clothing
in India, from this point onwards sari becomes the national dress of women in India.
By reconstructing the discourses of nationalism centred on the image of upper-caste
Hindu women, women from the minority, Dalit and other subaltern communities,
who were different in terms of appearance, clothing and tradition were excluded
from this public sphere of emerging nationalism. It also produced an archive of a
cultural past for Indian women linked to the Vedic tradition, along patriarchal lines.
This establishment of Hindu women at the centre of nationalism as a vehicle of
tradition accounts for the disappearance of the priority given to women’s issues in
the beginning of the twentieth-century from the discourses of nationalism. Having
located the nation within the iconography of Hindu women, the nationalist
movement takes off to its resistance to colonial regime. Not only that the movement
resolves women’s issues in this manner, also there is this comfortable redefining of
nation within Indian tradition that comes as a relief from the anxieties over the
acceptance of the western model of the nation.

The response of the Muslim community to the call for modernity cannot be
traced along the lines of Hindu reform movements. Connecting the literate elites and
illiterate masses through the reconstructed models of a Vedic past (Hindu past) was not possible at one level. At the same time Muslim reform movements also had to counter the attack of emerging Hindu nationalism that had already delineated a hostile niche for “the Muslim” within its discursive space. The public sphere of Hindu nationalism was flooded with cultural artefacts that upheld the Hindu tradition and sketched the Muslim as the hostile outsider. In the history of Muslims in Indian nationalist movement the crucial juncture was the Muslim break away from the Congress. Whether this has been the result of an all India Muslim consciousness is a debatable point. The political history of Muslims in India cannot be formulated along the frame of a communal fundamentalist dialogue that resulted in the division of the country as it has been often looked at. The drifting away of Muslims from Indian National Congress and the demand for a separate nation could be the outcome of a consciously planted move towards a Hindu majoritarian nationalist history. The increased upper-caste Hindu influence on the Congress, especially from Bengal, was of course a disturbing reality that forced Muslim leaders like Syed Ahmed to think in terms of the Muslim demands. Mushirul Hasan refers to Syed Ahmed’s outburst at Lucknow in 1887:

He sharply criticized the application of the principles of representative and parliamentary government in so diverse, so divided, and so complex a society. He also raised the spectre of Bengali dominance. ‘If

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56 Mushirul Hasan, for instance, argues that isolated reactions cannot be generalized to represent Muslim interests throughout the country. See his article “The Muslim Break Away” (Hasan, 2010, pp. 159-72).
you accept’, he said at Lucknow and repeated elsewhere, ‘that the country should groan under the yoke of Bengali rule and its people lick the Bengali shoes, then, in the name of God, jump into the train, sit down, and be off to Madras.’ The congress demands, he thundered, would hurt the Muslims most. The enlarged councils would have no place for them: it would be dominated by ‘Babu-so-and-so-Mitter, Babu-so-and-so-Ghose and Babu-so-and-so-Chuckerbutty.’ (Hasan, 2010, 162)

Though Mushirul Hasan is skeptical about the outburst on various grounds, especially considering that Syed Ahmed Khan held Bengalis as an example of a society to be imitated and admired and was generally known for his balanced views on so many public issues, that Syed Ahmad Khan reflected the concerns of many Muslims involved in the nationalist movement is quite evident. Hasan tries to link the arguments of Syed Ahmed to his close association with Theodore Beck and the British policy of two nations in the subcontinent. Hasan also stresses that Syed Ahmad Khan’s anti-congress stance did not go down well with all his co-religionists. He refers to the parallel Islamic movements in India and also to the attempts of some of the Muslim scholars and reformers to go hand in hand with the nationalist movement and Indian National Congress. However, it cannot be ignored that Syed Khan reflected the inhibitions of many Indian Muslims. Also, the string of thought

57 Mushirul Hasan refers to the resistance of the disciples of Syed Khan to his call for the association with the British and moving away from Congress and the Hindus (Hasan, 2010, pp. 159-72).
process that culminated in the formation of Indian Muslim League, of course, comes from these anxieties. Basically the lack of trust in Indian National Congress to represent the voice of the Indian Muslim has been a shared anxiety among many of the scholars engaged in the study of Islam and Muslims in India. Apart from the fact that many Muslim leaders had been diehard followers of Gandhi and his nationalism, and that movements like the Khilafat represented the Muslim sentiments in the wider context of the nationalist movement, there is a clear cut divide in the attitude of the Muslim community in the nationalist movement.

Various Islamic organisations and movements had different responses to the British: the Indian nationalist movement and these organisations widely differed in their attitude towards the strategic alliances the community needed to take with respect to the relationship with the Hindus and Indian National Congress. Whether they had been motivated by secular longings for an independent India, or as many of the nationalist historians have recorded, had been inspired by sectarian and communal politics is not the focus of this argument. Instead, I would like to extend my concerns towards interrogating whether there was a possibility of such an idealistic vision of the nation representing the Hindus and Muslims equally. Having defined the contour of Muslim existence in India along the lines of hostility as per the Indian history of Muslims as followers of the invaders, by the beginning of the twentieth-century the Hindu public sphere had already ruled out the possibility of a unified nation. The Aligarh thesis, as Barbara Metcalf would name it, “that the Muslims of British India had been rulers; had now declined in comparison to non-Muslim Indians; but could, through English education and Islam, once again be
great,” (2007, p. 327) was not just the concern of Syed Ahmed and his followers. The same sentiments have been shared in Altaf Hussain Hali’s poem quoted in Ayesha Jalal’s, “Exploding Communalism: The Politics of Muslim Identity in South Asia:”

Farewell O Hindustan, O autumnless garden

We your homeless guests have stayed too long

Laden though we are today with complaints

The marks of your past favours are upon us still

You treated strangers like relations

We were guests but you made us hosts

... 

You gave us wealth, government and dominion

For which of your many kindnesses should we express gratitude

But such hospitality is ultimately unsustainable

All that you gave you kept in the end

... 

But the complaint is that what we brought with us

That too you took away and turned us into beggars

You have turned lions into lowly beings, O Hind

Those who were Afghan hunters came here to become the hunted ones
We had foreseen all these misfortunes

When we came here leaving our country and friends. (Jalal, 2010, p. 179)

These concerns commonly shared by many of the educated, modern, and to an extent, the elite community of the Muslims triggered off a drive within the community to embrace modern education and to refashion the community as per the call of modernity. But there was another group within the community that stood for Madrassa education and unadulterated religion, discarding the modernist’s call for English education and reforms. The strife between the Aligarh based modernists and Deobandi Ulama is one among such many divided Muslim political positions. The modernist position of Muslims in India itself was widely divided between affinities with the British against a pan-Islamic union to resist western imperialism. Therefore, it is not an easy task to map the reform movements in Islam during the colonial period.

The nineteenth-century Bengal was home to many reform movements mostly centred on the socio-economic lives of the rural Muslim. Unlike the Hindu reform movements that attempted to construct a past related to the Vedic tradition of Hinduism, the Muslims attempted to nostalgically recreate the lost glory of socio-economic plenitude. In this attempt the efforts were not to merge into the revived Hindu nationalism through syncretism, but the community was so threatened by the total erasure of identities occurred at the expense of this nation formation that the attempts were to assert differences. Rafiuddin Ahmed observes this phenomenon:
There was thus a revival of religiosity and a desire to re-discover a national past now believed to be entirely different from, if not antithetical to, that of Hindus. In fact a major significance of the somewhat superficial changes taking place in the Muslim society was their emphasis on whatever distinguished them from the Hindus . . . Such changes were not due solely to the campaigns of Islamization. Improvements in communication that brought the rural Muslims into close contact with their urban co-religionists, wider diffusion of education, Islamic as well as western, and finally, communal tensions resulting from a wide variety of social and political factors, all contributed to the increasing aloofness of the ordinary Muslims from their Hindu neighbours. (2007, pp. 106-107)

Thus it is clear that from the nineteenth-century onwards the history of Islam in India started drifting away from Hindu neighbours. But apart from the reasons pointed out here, there had also been the wide disparity between the Hindu and Muslim imaginings of the nation. In the light of modern education and the concept of modern nation state introduced by the British, it was easy for the Hindus to construct the nation and resist the British by locating the roots of this imagined nation within the centuries old Hindu tradition. But for the Muslims this was not an easy task to accomplish. At one point they had to deal with the loss of their past glory in the pre-British era. At the same time locating themselves within the newly developed frame of nation that maintained a conspicuous Hindu lineage was a difficult task. Again, responses to the call for modernity were problematized by the
divided opinion within the community regarding the differences in approaches to western education and modernity.

Along with Syed Ahamed Khan the Muslims of India should remember the name of Altaf Hussain Hali, the author of *Majalis un-Nissa* and *Chup ki Dad* as a modernist reformer. Gail Minault’s translations of these two works reveal Hali as a reformist asking for women’s education and improvement in the plight of women. Minault observes that Hali’s ideas on women’s reforms were much advanced compared to that of Syed Ahmed Khan as he maintained that a little education was enough for women. Hali on the other hand had even started schools for girls. In *Chup ki Dad* Hali writes:

That knowledge which, for men,

Holds the elixir of life,

Is considered, in your case,

As Deadly as a Knife

...  

Lest, they said, with education,

The distinction not remain.

How improper it would be for you

To become just like a man! (Minault, 1986, pp. 12-13)
Considering the time in which he was writing Hali’s vision places him much ahead of his contemporaries in the community who voiced for reform. Also the issues he discusses here place his position adjacent to the Hindu reformists who concentrated on women’s question. But after Hali many in the community did not take up the question of women as it formed the centre of dialogues in Hindu reform movements.

Two anomalies are quite visible in this context. The first one is that of the issue related to the women’s question dealt with in the context of Hindu reform movements. The reformers often tried to correct social evils and stressed the necessity for widow remarriage and women’s right to property. But Muslim women were already accorded with these rights as per Shari’ah. Yet not even once had the discussions been stretched this far. The second discrepancy was in terms of the altogether silent stand of the Muslim reformers regarding the women issue, compared to the wide hue and cry of the Hindu reformers. The former can be attributed to the drifting apart of the two communities by the end of the nineteenth-century to different concrete realities in India, demanding distinctly separate voices. But the latter, the disappearance (or the kind of scanty appearance) of women from the Muslim dialogues on reform, needs to be probed to a greater extent. The question has a wider significance in connection with the evolution of a tradition located in the Hindu woman in terms of the Hindu imagination of the nation. There is a possibility of attributing the Muslim woman’s scanty appearance in the dialogues of Muslim reform movements to the inability of the community to revive a parallel figure in terms of the Muslim woman. While the evolving figure of Bharat Mata could connect the Hindu elite and the illiterate masses, the impossibility of such a task
made it necessary for the Muslims to invent icons for that kind of a communication. The issue was not just between Hindu and Muslim concepts of women and tradition. But it was also rooted in a different concretization of female identity within Islam and more than that in the distinctly different theological frameworks with which both the religions approached tradition.

In responding to the call for modernity the community was divided internally. Syed Ahmed Khan’s pro-British stand against his innate fear of yielding to the Hindus if the British were to leave was not the unilateral position of the community. The strongest opposition to him came from the Deoband Islamic Movement that treated Syed’s call to stay away from Congress as ‘sweet poison.’ Jamaluddin Afghani was a staunch opponent of Syed Ahmed Khan’s pro-British stand. He saw Syed misleading the minds of Indian Muslims, causing dissension among them and also separating Indian Muslims from the world Muslims, like the Ottomans. M. J. Akbar quotes Nikkie Keddie’s analysis of Afghani’s critique of Syed Khan from *An Islamic Response to Imperialism*:

> The attack was not, as is sometimes thought, on Ahmed Khan’s rationalism, reforms, and scant orthodoxy, all of which Afghani

58 The Islamic scholars Muhammad Qasim Nanautvi and Rashid Ahmad Gangohi founded a school for Islamic studies at Deoband. Though conservative in their attitude to religious syncretism and accretion of Hindu practices on the social life of Muslims, they urged a complete political unity in the common fight against the Christian British Government.

59 This was a response to Syed Ahmed Khan’s argument that the Caliph of the Ottoman Empire had no right to call a Jihad against the British because they treated the Muslims so well in India. Quoted in M. J. Akbar (2005, pp. 8-9).
shared. It was actually directed against Syed Ahmad Khan’s belief in co-operation with the British rather than in nationalist opposition, and against his willingness to borrow as much as possible from the British and openly abandon much of the Indian Muslim heritage, thus ridding the Indian Muslims of a source of nationalist, anti-imperialist pride. (2005, p. 9)

The political discourse initiated by Syed Khan did not find an immediate resonance. But the division of Bengal left Muslims in total confusion. Lord Curzon’s speech at Dhaka on his attempts to teach the “Bengali Baboo” a lesson had explicit communal ingredients. This British aided ‘empowerment of the Muslims’ was resented by the Bengali Hindu bhadralok and they treated it as a challenge to their traditional domination over the barbarous Muslim peasantry, and their implicit status as the true, natural, and “civilized” rulers of the province (Akbar, 2005, p. 10).

Under the aegis of multiple approaches to reform and what could be termed as new, the reform movements that shaped the ethos of both Hindu and Muslim communities need to be revisited from a different perspective. In Colonialism Modernity and Religious Identities, Beckerlegge problematizes the usage of the term ‘reform’ in narratives of the history of specific socio-religious movements: “The use of reform to characterize certain South Asian socio-religious movements has increasingly invited more explicit and nuanced relationship of the ‘reformist’ stance to the past, and so, to tradition, and contemporary needs and circumstances” (2008, p. 2). Amiya Sen, too shares a similar perspective in Hindu Revivalism in Bengal. Sen
brings out the irrationality in the use of terms such as reformer and revivalist, which are at the same time inadequate and theoretically problematic in understanding figures like Vivekananda. He states that someone like Vivekananda reflects an exceeding sense of *bhadralok* radicalism (1993, p. 341). If reform meant change the extent to which this change was aspired and the acceptable drift from the past were varied in different communities. The reforms were a response to the call for modernity as much as they arose from a necessity to formulate the religious and caste identities in the emerging nation state. Modernization was not just redefining the institutions and attitudes, but also recovering a past to relate to some and to separate from some others. Thus, the reform movements were separatist and mobilizing at the same time. It needs to be noted that while talking in terms of a unified sensibility to form the nation against the British there had also been demands to resist syncretism. Nineteenth-century Bengal saw the *bhadralok* assertion of Hindu identity asking their women to stay away from the Muslims altogether. Similarly, Muslim movements like Deoband urged the community to discard Hindu practices.

The social context that gave rise to the religious movements was the same as that which gave rise to nationalism in Metcalf’s opinion (2006, p. 185). At one point there was the need for change in a sense of decline. But there was also the increased possibility of mobilizations and communication provided by colonial modernity. Metcalf argues that while many Islamic movements conceived of themselves as apolitical, they, by their very existence, represent political positions. This once again accommodates certain contextual similarities from which the religious reform
movements originated and operated. In referring to the organisations like Tablighi Jama’at, Metcalf writes:

. . . they by their very existence represent political positions. They are often written into the ever present and conceptually ‘natural’ narrative of nationalism: a kind of cultural ‘pre-nationalism’ awaiting fulfilment as a Muslim nation or interest group. This is indeed how they often are viewed in contemporary India. Politically active or not, the Tablighi Jama’at in India has made Muslims into a more visible and culturally distinct ethnicity. At the least, moreover, a movement like the Tablighi Jama’at delegitimizes nationalist claims that the nation is a natural and inalienable part of identity . . . Tablighi’s implicit counter narrative to nationalism, above all its marked a—territorialism, has taken on new salience with the Muslim Diaspora in North America and Europe. Indeed many of the spatial imaginings of Muslims—of Karbala, of Cordoba, of Mecca and Medina, even of Istanbul – are important not because they suggest an extraterritorial identity as nationalism would require—but because they suggest an identity spatially located nowhere. With today’s trans-nationalism and movement, it is easier to see this pervasive impulse in twentieth-century thought as potentiality rather than failure. (2006, pp. 185-86)
Therefore, what can be defined as reform movements in the community can be located within the wider frame of reviving religion as well as responses to modernity. Both the movements had been moving in two different directions. Resolving this conflict was not an easy task for the Muslim community. Within Hinduism the reform movements could easily relate to the past by resorting to what is called tradition, without rejecting modernity and education. In spite of the utilitarian reading of the east, and India specifically as a place of superstitions and myths, waiting to be transformed by the coloniser, Hindu reformers were somehow able to resolve the tension between the mediation of ideals of western modernity into Indian platforms. But Islam’s construction within Indian history as the invader, and its image with respect to western modernity as the primitive other, make it impossible for such mediations. Moreover, confining to the ideals of European enlightenment was not an easy task for the Islamic reformists. The only possible opening available to them was either a total denial of the whole project of modernity clinging to traditional ways of learning, or to embrace modernity’s variables of progress and English education which may discard the Madrassa education and religious practices illogical. However, these are not mutually exclusive categories and there had always been exchange of interests and ideas between the two. Still the nationalist movement was not the resolving point for the debates in terms of reform movements in the Muslim community.

Though different in their approaches to modernity the Muslim reform movements responded to the British Empire from a pan-Islamic perspective, apart from a few pro British supporters. Francis Robinson in *Islam, South Asia and the*
West discusses this development of a pan-Islamic brotherhood between Muslims all over the world:

A feature of the Muslim world all through the twentieth-century has been that more and more Muslims have developed a pan-Islamic dimension to their consciousness; more and more have engaged imaginatively and emotionally with the fate of Muslims in faraway lands. In India this development was given particular intensity, in part, because the British Empire played such a considerable role in the conquest of Muslim peoples and the decline of Muslim power and, in part, because Indian Muslims themselves felt especially insecure.

(2008, p. 133)

Such an emotional binding with the world Muslims gave rise to the Khilafat movement in India, and the history of Khilafat movement in India is marked by political restructuring and strategic alliances. If colonial history is the point at which Hindu and Muslim began to be viewed as self apparent terms of exclusive religious activity, the Hindu and Muslim existence collectively bifurcates in time and space under the supervision of the mainstream history of the nationalist movement. Hindu and Muslim rather became “always already existing” categories in nationalist discourses often by the beginning of the twentieth-century. The reform movements had a major role to play in structuring this bifurcation, which was in turn structured later by the bifurcation. Multiple maps of the single territory thus define and design the communities here. This was not only applicable to Hindu and Muslim categories,
but also to various other polemical materialisations like that of the upper-caste Hindu and the Dalits.

Several strands of Muslim identity emerged during this period. Religious identity began to gain political dimension as the prime concern of the individual. The idea of the community, the umma, became a predominantly recurring theme in Muslim discourses. There were several movements and communities founded to share this sentiment in the early-twentieth-century, but none gains attention as that of the Khilafat Committee founded in 1919 to protect the temporal and spatial power of the Caliphs. While the alumni of Aligarh, Syed Ahmed’s followers, materialised Ahmed’s distancing from the Congress through the formation of the Muslim League in 1906, the idea was to acquaint the Muslim community with modern values and education at the same time, to voice the community’s bargain in terms of political power in the emerging nation. Nation was envisioned not in terms of a shared power domain with the Hindus, whose priorities they felt the congress was actually materialising. Thus the Aligarh movement was more or less patronized by the British initially.

But the pan-Islamic wave that emerged among Indian Muslims in response to the decline of the Caliphate in Turkey was overpowering the anti congress sentiments of the Muslim League and could almost channelize the Muslim priorities towards an anti British campaign. Taking advantage of the situation, Gandhi and Congress tried to assimilate the pulse of the movement into the nationalist movement and direct it towards an opposition of the British rule. After the Khilafat
movement, the Muslim League was forced to take joint decisions with the Congress as in matters like the non-co-operation movement.

While looking into the histories of various reform movements within the Muslim community we come across terms like ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘apolitical’ used to refer to these movements. But Metcalf in *Islamic Contestations* attempts an alternate history of these piety movements, which at the beginning of the twentieth-century attempted to define and locate Islam in India. She specifically looks into movements like *Tablighi Jama’at* which are otherwise looked at as traditional and apolitical:

This is an oblique perspective from which to raise issues related to nationalism in contrast to a focus on the Indian National Congress or the Muslim League, which were centrally involved in the nationalist movement.

But Tablighi Jama’at, in fact, participates in characteristics shared by both these movements as well as by other movements typically glossed as modern or social reform. Calling Tablighi Jama’at traditional, however, served its participants to confirm their authenticity, much as nationalism, however modern, must always seem timeless. And calling Tablighi Jama’at traditional or fundamentalist or reactionary—allows opponents to constitute themselves as modern and, indeed, nationalist-adherents of a nationalism that sees itself justified in implicitly excluding certain
categories of people from true citizenship, among them those relegated to the category of traditional or obscurantist. (2006, p. 175)

Thus, by precisely excluding certain movements from nationalist history, a monolithic construction of nationalism has been maintained throughout. If the failure of the Khilafat movement was the point at which Muslims of India reassessed the pan-Islamic dimension of Muslim identity to foreground an Indian or a socialist or even a communist one (Robinson, 2008, p. 135), the emergence of the figure of the “secular Muslim” should be specifically traced to this historical point. Ayesha Jalal points out how anyone sifting away from Congress and articulating the politics of Muslim interests began to be marked as “communalist” and not “nationalist” (2010, p. 190). The crumbling down of the liberal ideals of nationalism of the early Khilafat period saw the inadequacy of the vision of building up a liberal nation of free and equal citizens (Pandey, 2006, p. 232).

Thus, by defining all the movements within Islam as communal, or fundamentalist, nationalist history excludes a part of the population from the legitimacy to become the ideal citizens of the evolving secular state. The discourses of nationalism, while being inclusive in terms of the religious movements of nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Bengal to extend them to the patronizing umbrella of nationalism, marks off multiple movements within Indian Muslims as ‘religious.’ In doing so, they also build up a monolithic category of the Indian Muslim identity, camouflaging linguistic, theological, geographical and above all ideological differences.
There had been multiple movements within the Muslim community to deal with questions of identity, religion, progress and education in the beginning of the twentieth-century. One of the early discussions on women’s education was of course from Syed Khan who did not see it as important to educate the girls outside their homes. He was opposed to starting schools for girls and his emphasis was on educating Muslim boys at Aligarh. But Gail Minault argues that Sir Syed’s views on women’s education have been culturally formed on the basis of his personal experience. His mother Azizunnisa Begum had been educated at home, and showed that it was possible for a woman in purdah to be literate, pious, and an ethical force in her children’s lives. It can be taken that Sir Syed was not against educating girls but was only resisting their education at schools. He was also a supporter of purdah though he felt that the custom of purdah as it is practised in India had been carried to extremes. In “Hindustan ki Auraton ki Halat” he talks about the predicament of women. He says that in the great days of Islam women could be educated and could inherit property. The fall of Islamic civilization has curtailed the rights of women. Syed Khan’s position may appear contradictory in terms of his ideas on purdah and women’s education, but as Minault too finds, this was an artful argument for a reinterpreted tradition (Minault, 1999, pp. 18-30). The apparent contradiction was the community’s efforts to deal with modernity and its dialogue with modernity by reinterpreting tradition without compromising tradition.

As early as the 1850s questions related to women’s education had been debated in Islam, and two authors, Nazir Ahmad Dehlavi and Altaf Husain Hali came up with fictional characters of educated Muslim females. Nazir Ahmed’s novel *Mirat*
ul-Arus (The Bride’s Mirror) presents two sisters Akbari and Asghari.\textsuperscript{60} The elder one, Akbari, is uneducated and superstitious and, moreover, is poor in managing family relationships. The younger one Asghari is the ideal one, educated by her father at home, and though she observes purdah and is religious, is skilful in handling social relations. She as an ideal home maker leads her husband on to success. She is not superstitious like her sister who goes for spells and amulets, but remains faithful to God. Asghari also opens a school in her home to educate girls of the neighbourhood. The contrast between the two sisters is quite evident and is attributed to the education that Asghari achieved due to the judicious decision of their father. Even the father is named Durandesh Khan; ‘durandesh’ means ‘farsighted.’ The novel became an immediate success the moment it was published.

In 1874, Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali through his work Majalis un-Nissa, meaning Assemblies of women, discussed the question of Muslim women’s education. It is written as a series of fictional conversations among women of a prosperous urban household. The heroine, Zubaida Khatun is educated by her father at home, and reads Persian, Urdu and Arabic and is equally versatile in household duties. She rejects superstitious customs and marries without dowry as per Islamic tradition. She brings up her only child also as a resourceful person.

Both Majalis un-Nissa and Mirat ul-‘Arus convey the same message that women need to be educated in order to properly fulfil their household duties. A lot

\textsuperscript{60}The novel was first published in 1869, and many editions of the book have come out.
have been found depending on them like the well being of the whole family, children’s education in general and specifically their growing up as responsible individuals. Thus they are attributed a direct role in shaping the Muslim youth as per the demands of changing times, that is, the engagement with modernity. Both Asghari and Zubaida Khatun thus provide the ideal role models for the emerging Muslim community. Hali and Nazir Ahmad present these fictitious heroines for the generation to come to convert the fictitious models to real life characters.

Educated women were not totally absent from the community though few in numbers. Ideal role models like Azizunnissa Begum (mother of Sayyid Ahamed), educated in Urdu, Arabic and Persian, provided the right model for her son to claim later that a good mother is better than a thousand teachers. In Gail Minault’s *Secluded Scholars* there is also reference to Zakaullah’s mother, though illiterate, a pious and self disciplined woman. In difficult situations she sold her jewellery to purchase school books for her sons. The Begums of Bhopal, Sikandar Begum, Shah Jahan Begum and Sultan Jahan Begum were educated. Sultan Jahan Begum has written an autobiography, *Gohur-i-Iqbal (An Account of My Life)*, that describes her daily lessons in subjects like the Quran, Persian, English, the Pushto, arithmetic, handwriting, riding, and fencing. Gail Minault (1999, p. 58) claims that this was typically the education received by a gentleman. Since the dynasty did not have male heirs the Begums were administrators and proved to be quite efficient in their office as well. Gail Minault also refers to remarkable women of modest means. Abadi Banu Begum, otherwise known as Bi Amman, was the mother of Muhammed Ali. She was a self taught person and also followed the practice of selling her jewellery for
educating her sons. There is also another woman Ashrafunnisa of Bijnor district, who took great pains to learn on her own and later had to pursue a job in Victoria Girls School, Lahore, to bring up her children when her husband passed away. Gail Minault sees a decline in private education of girls during the turn of the nineteenth-century because of the changing systems. The decline of private patronages and the spread of English medium schools have been seen as the reason behind this. Therefore, the system of *ustanis* (women teachers of Arabic) was gradually disappearing from the society. Apart from the above mentioned reasons we can look at the point also as a moment of state intervention in education. With new schools appearing and the state generally promoting a notion of modern education, the home education system gradually disappeared. But the excessive scrutiny of such forms of educational system also had a role to play in their gradual decline.

Almost all the Muslim reform movements addressed the question of women’s education. Within Deobandi Ulama, women’s education was discussed in terms of improving the piety of the community for which the responsibility again fell on women as home makers. Also they found educating women as a necessity in order to counter the adulteration of the religion via folk customs and practices. Muslim middle class men mostly championed women’s education so as to get ideal companionship for themselves and also to bring up their children properly. Maulana Thanavi’s *Bihishti Zevar* was a work published in 1905 with guidance on household management, ritual observance, lives of prophets and great women in Islam.
In the wake of modernity both Hindus and Muslims had to address newly emerging issues and had to invent a communication system that would enable a dialogue to mediate between religion and progress. But these were not treated as mutually exclusive categories. While the Hindu reformers addressed the conflict of compromising between the enlightenment of colonial modernity and loyalty to Indian tradition by reinventing the tradition in terms of a nostalgic past, for the Muslims this was not an easy task. Gail Minault here draws parallels between Muslim and Hindu reform movements:

For Muslims as for Hindu reformers, social and religious change did not mean aping the West, but rather arguing for a revitalization of tradition. This involved a hypothetical return to an idealized golden age, whether the age of the Vedas, or—in this case—the Islam of the prophet Muhammad. This was not new, for Muslim reformers in previous centuries had argued similarly, albeit in different political contexts. For a Muslim in favour of social, religious, or educational change, it helped to have the prophet on your side. (1999, p. 60)

Though I agree with Gail Minault that there has been a similar move on the part of the Muslims and the Hindus in responses to modernity, the different platforms from which both the communities respond to modernity need to be addressed in a more elaborate manner. While bringing about parallels between the Muslim and Hindu nostalgia about the past, Minault fails to see the variables that Islam had to address at the dawn of modernity, which were entirely different from that of the Hindus. The
Hindu reformers not only focused on projecting a Hindu nationality as an answer to Western imperialism, but also insisted on projecting the Muslim as an outsider in this newly emerging nationalist focus. The primary task before Muslims was to address the question of an indigenous Islam which would rather help them to assert their claims to be a major share holder in the emerging nation. But the question of addressing the foreign intruder was quite difficult with multiple perspectives regarding modernity within the community. Syed Ahmed Khan’s pro-British stand and the rising pan-Islamic wave against western imperialism had to be addressed in the same community. While women were the sites through which the Hindu reform movements related Hindu tradition and modernity, it was not that easy for the Muslims. Though the Muslim reformers talked in terms of women’s education and looked at them as the key to a successful generation, being mothers and wives, women were not the link between the spiritual existence of a nation and modernity in the Muslim imagination. Therefore, Muslim society had to continuously engage with the question of women’s education and reforms and it does not suddenly disappear from the public sphere as it has happened with the Hindu reform movements. By constructing a tradition based on the figure of the Hindu upper caste woman as the symbol of chastity and virtue, and by extending the image of this woman as the face of the national woman, the Hindu public sphere also demarcates women of other communities to the margin. Therefore, the Muslim woman, in the peripheries of this freshly constituted hierarchical domain of nation and tradition do not have the potential to represent the nation-formation process within the Muslim community. She is weak, othered and a spectre. Therefore, modernization remains
an unfinished business within the Muslim community in general and Muslim women in particular. The debates regarding the question of women are therefore carried on further unlike the Hindu community. The designs and depths of the debates on women’s education are also determined by various factors like the community’s constantly oscillating response to the British, its insecurities with respect to the rising hostility within the nationalist movements and divided perspectives within the community in terms of a pan-Islamic ideology versus indigenous roots. The purdah clubs organised in 1900s had been engaging with such complex issues, but not in the line of the orientalist assumptions. The 1905 Muslim Ladies Conference in Aligarh was intended to look into these aspects. Muslim Educational Conference met every year to deal with the question of education. Since the legal rights of Muslim women appeared to be eroded by customary practices, a call for reviving the Shariah was welcomed by both women and men of the community (Lateef, 1990, p. 10).

Varied responses to purdah came from the community, even among women. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain,\(^{61}\) the best known feminist of the reform movement, had a severely critical attitude towards purdah. The brilliant feminist utopia, *Sultana’s Dream*, published in 1905, marks Rokeya’s predominant position among Indian women reformers. In their introduction to *Sultana’s Dream* in *Women Writing in India*, Tharu and Lalitha refer to Roushan Jahan, who has translated some of the

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\(^{61}\) Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) is one of the best known feminists of the reform movement. Born in Pairaband, (a village in the present Bangladesh) Calcutta was the centre of her political enterprises. She had opened schools for Muslim girls and had written exhaustively on Muslim women. While most of her essays were written in Bengali, the feminist utopia, *Sultana’s Dream* was written in English and translated to Bengali by the author herself.
works of Rokeya to English and compared her essays to Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Tharu and Lalitha point out that while it is unlikely that she had read Wollstonecraft, Rokeya was working on the essay, “Narir Adhikar” (The Rights of Women) in 1932, shortly before her death (vol. 2, 2006, p. 341). Rokeya writes about the tragic and ridiculous aspects of strict purdah observance in *The Secluded Ones*, a collection of forty seven anecdotes. The incidents narrated below, as Report Eight in the collection, reveal Hossain’s pungent sarcasm toward the absurd observance of purdah:

Once, a house caught fire. The mistress of the house had the presence of mind to collect her jewellery in a hand bag and hurry out of the bedroom. But at the door, she found, the courtyard full of strangers fighting the fire. She could not come out in front of them. So she went back to her bedroom with the bag and hid under her bed. She burned to death but did not come out. Long live purdah! (de Souza 2004, p. 240)

Report Eighteen talks about a doctor’s response to purdah:

A doctor from Lahore has thus described his experience of purdah—whenever he went to visit a patient in a purdah house, he would find two maid servants holding a thick blanket in front of the bed. He would put his hand below the blanket and extend it to the other side of the blanket. The patient would then put her wrist in his hand to enable him to take her pulse. (A certain non-purdah lady asked me
once, “If there was no woman doctor available, how would you let a male doctor examine your tongue? You could not possibly make a hole in the blanket and protrude your tongue through that hole?” I am presenting [this] question to my sisters with one of my own in the hope of finding an answer. How would they let doctors examine their eyes, teeth, and ears?)

The doctor told me:] ‘A certain Begum was down with pneumonia. I said, ‘the condition of the lungs will have to be examined. I could examine it from the back.’ The nawab [head of the family] ordered, ‘Ask the maid to put the stethoscope wherever necessary.’ Of course, it is common knowledge that the stethoscope has to be shifted in various positions before any diagnosis is possible. Yet I had to comply with the nawab’s commands. The maid took the end of the stethoscope inside the blanket and put it in place. After a few minutes I was getting really worried at not hearing any sound. For once, I decided to be audacious and lifted the corner of the blanket nearest me. To my consternation and disgust, I found the stethoscope resting on the Begum’s waist. I was so irritated that I left the room immediately. The nawab Sahib had the gall to ask me what I made of the case! What the hell------, did he expect me to be omniscient?’ (de Souza 2004, pp. 242-43)
To discuss the community’s engagement with modernity let us also look into some more passages from different contexts and perspectives, structuring the lives of Muslim women. The first is from the work The Harim and the Purdah: Studies of Oriental Women written by Elizabeth Cooper\(^6\) in 1915. The book is marked by orientalist assumptions on purdah and Muslim women in general. It refers to her journey to the east and her experience with the women of the east. She describes visiting a Muslim family in Hyderabad:

> We went from the house of our young hostess, loaded down with pan and fruit, to the home of a colonel in the Nizam’s bodyguard. His wife is “purdah,” but his daughter is allowed to be seen in public. In the drawing room was a man tuning the piano, and Mme. Naidu said to the daughter, “Your mother cannot come here. There is a man.” The daughter replied: “Oh, it is all right, he is blind.” The mother had travelled extensively in Europe, Egypt, and Turkey. While abroad, she went about freely as any European, only becoming the secluded Indian wife while in her country. (1983, p. 168)

Chapter eleven of the same book, “Mohammedanism within the Zenana” opens thus:

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\(^6\)Elizabeth Cooper the author of The Harim and the Purdah, attempts a study of the oriental women in the work. First published in 1915, the book talks about the author’s journey to Egypt, India, Burma and Japan and her encounter with the women of these places. The book definitely mystifies the oriental woman, at the same time portrays her as a less liberated and informed individual in comparison with the women of the west.
We are often told that Mohammedan women are not religious, that they leave all devotional exercises for their lords and masters, who are accountable to Allah for their salvation, and to whom they must look for permission to enter the abode of the blessed. It is a fact that the women followers of the Arabian prophet are not seen in the mosques, because no Mohammedan woman appears in a public place where she may come in contact with the other sex. Mohammed discouraged the worship of women in public by saying, “the presence of women in the mosques inspires men with feelings other than those purely devotional.” (1983, p. 170)

The third passage I intend to include in this dialogue is from Ameerali Syed’s “The Status of Women in Islam,” a chapter from his work *The Spirit of Islam* published in 1922:

We shall do no more here than glance at the provisions of the Moslem code relating to women. As long as she is unmarried she remains under the parental roof, and until she attains her maturity she is, to some extent, under the control of the father or his representative. As soon, however, as she is of age, the law vests in her all the rights which belong to her as an independent human being.

63 Ameerali Syed (1849-1928) was a major reformer and wrote exclusively in English. *The Spirit of Islam* is treated as a great work framed within the Calcutta modernist period, a parallel movement to the Aligarh movement.
She is entitled share in the inheritance of her parents along with her brothers, and though the proportion is different, the distinction is founded on the relative position of brother and sister. A woman who is *sui juris* can under no circumstances be married without her own express consent, ‘not even by the sultan.’ On her marriage she does not lose her individuality. She does not cease to be a separate member of society.

An ante-nuptial settlement by the husband in favour of the wife is a necessary condition, and on his failure to make a settlement the law presumes one in accordance with the social position of the wife. A Moslem marriage is a civil act, needing no priest, requiring no ceremonial. The contract of marriage gives the man no power over the woman’s person, beyond what the law defines and none whatever upon her goods and property. Her rights as a mother do not depend for their recognition upon the idiosyncrasies of individual judges. Her earnings acquired by her own exertions, cannot be wasted by a prodigal husband, nor can she be ill-treated with impunity by one who is brutal. She acts, if *sui juris*, in all matters which relate to herself and her property in her own individual right, without the intervention of husband or father. She can sue her debtors in the open courts, without the necessity of joining a next friend, or under cover of her husband’s name. She continues to exercise, after she has passed from her father’s house into her husband’s home, all the rights
which the law gives to men. All the privileges which belong to her as a woman and a wife are secured to her, not by the courtesies which ‘come and go,’ but by the actual text in the book of law. Taken as a whole, her status is not more unfavourable than that of many European women, whilst in many respects she occupies a decidedly better position. Her comparatively backward condition is the result of a want of culture among the community generally, rather than of any special feature in the laws of the fathers. (de Souza, 2004, pp. 253-54)

There is also Sultan Jahan Begum’s defence of Purdah, which appeared in her *Al Hijab or The Necessity of Purdah* published in 1922. Begum was initially critical of purdah but she later felt that Indian women should not go after the model of Western women:

The laws and restrictions laid down by Islam, for Muslim women, in connection with Purdah, and the modern desire to break with the Purdah system in the minds of some men, compel us to investigate, with utmost care and attention, the causes and effects of this movement; so that the supporters, as well as the opposers of the system, may know which party is in the right, so far as the results are concerned. Really speaking the opposition to Purdah does not spring from any desire to secure the much talked of educational and moral

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64 Sultan Jehan Beegum (1858-1930) was the great granddaughter of the first of Bhopal Begums, Qudsiya Begum.
advantages of the community. The real cause lies in the desire to
imitate European manners and customs. Man naturally loves to
imitate in every way those whom he finds in a higher and more
exalted position that himself. (de Souza 2004, p. 236)

The four perspectives discussed here are diverse discourses with labyrinthine
trajectories that relate to Muslim women’s agency in the context of modernity. The
colonial narrative to which she becomes a subject treats her as an object to the
orientalist assumptions of the European woman. At the same time there is the
patronizing tone of a cultural superiority in the voice of the narrator, presenting the
woman of the east as a representative of the mysterious and superstitious East. Not
only that the narrative justifies the civilizing mission of the west, it also adds on to
the western imagination of Islam as a primitive community. Katherine Bullock’s
discussion on the colonial narratives on veil presents the European colonisation of
the East, as the point in history where veil attains a new dimension. Her thesis is that
the debates on veil in the colonial era originated from the encounter between the
European metaphysics of modernity with a non European metaphysics. She places
the origin of the western critique of veil upon the modern experience of the world,
primarily based on the act of looking. The veil denying this privilege of the gaze to
the European male and at the same time providing the eastern woman the right to
gaze without being seen disrupt the hierarchical authority of the colonizer (Bullock,
2002, pp. 5-15). Stretching the argument further we can observe such uneasiness in
Cooper’s discussion of the Mohemmadan women of Hyderabad. Therefore, one of
the concerns of the reformists’ engagement with Muslim woman’s reality in the
beginning of the twentieth-century was to address the orientalist narratives on Muslim women. Since the critique build upon the Muslim woman was not merely an orientalist assumption on the mysterious East but rooted further in the West’s conception of Islam as a primitive culture, the defence was not an easy task. The responses from the community in terms of reforms were complex and often ambiguous. The responses to modernity were thus coloured by multiple concerns, which targeted at shaping the community’s vision of progress and modern education, but limited by the multiple dimensions of the project. Possible mediations between tradition and modernity have been attempted, resulting in different levels of responses, structuring the community’s dialogue with modernity.

Rokeya Hossain’s pungent satire of blind adherence to purdah cannot be looked at as a critique of tradition from a secular perspective. Not only *Secluded Ones*, but *Sultana’s Dream* is also her response to modernity in terms of emerging feminist awareness. It is also interesting to note that Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s much acclaimed feminist utopia, *Herland* was published many years after *Sultana’s Dream*. Rokeya Hossain’s reports on purdah are not the extended western vision of Islam as anti-modern, but rather an attempt to deal with modernity as an insider. Questions of being an aspiring subject of the secular nation and to be a representative of the community are at conflict here. The very location of Rokeya Hossain as a reformer, representing the community, building up schools for Muslim girls and voicing concerns over the predicament of Muslim women, marks her critique different from those of the critical outsiders. Saba Mahmood’s concern over the blind consolidation of pro-religion as anti-secular position holds relevant here
Whether Rokeya Hossain’s attempts to engage with modernity and religion have been the self critique of a religionist— the product of a non-secular critical reason— is a possible interpretation to look at. To look into Hossain’s narrative as a symbolic representation of the community’s aspiration for modernity, rejecting tradition would be a monolithic assumption. The complexity of Muslim responses, evolving both from the necessity to claim the nation state and to locate themselves within the religious community is integral to the spirit of Muslim reform movements.

Sultan Jehan Begum’s response to purdah is a way of addressing Elizabeth Cooper’s categorical denial of agency for the Muslim woman. But as she sees the danger in internalizing western models and hierarchies of preferences, she does not fail to point out the origin of the debates on Purdah to a signification that stands outside the concern of the reform movements, a blind admiration of the western model of progress. Again the debate on Purdah specifically and Muslim woman in general is located within the hierarchical positioning of Islam vis-à-vis the modern nation-state.

Ameerali Syed’s the “Status of Women in Islam” is a response to the critique that Islam in general is oppressive to women. As a participant of the reform process and also as a patron of women in Islam, Ameerali finds it important to respond to the critique. While arguing that Islam gives women many privileges, establishing a superior status for Muslim women, he finds the oppressive tools embedded in culture specific practices of Islam, as it happens in India. Therefore Ameerali’s
project is to revert to the pure Islamic values, the very unadulterated form. But he finds it his responsibility to justify Islam before a modern crowd, so that its claim to occupy a space in the project of modernity may not be denied. Ameerali’s attempt is to re-think Islam in terms of making it compatible with modernity.

The question of belonging becomes a crucial aspect in a country’s transformation to a secular state. It is the same as when countries are divided along ethnic or religious lines. The division pronounces difference, but a yoking in secular terms claims to erase difference. But in terms of identity and belongingness the results are the same as that of a division. While the secular project of nationalism comprehended national identity as a fixed denominator, shaping it along unequal paradigms of citizenship, women’s response to nation building was determined also by their location in religious communities and the hierarchical position of the community vis-à-vis political authority in the emerging nation-state. In that sense itinerary of the Muslim reform movements and women’s movements demand other ways of conceptualization. It has a totally different trajectory from the Hindu reform movements, and therefore its accommodation in nationalist history also becomes problematic. In fact the absence of Muslim reform movements and women’s movements from the narratives of nationalist history presents the fissures in our imaginings of the secular nation. These are not alternate discourses on modernity but anomalies in the failed project of secularism and the modern dictum of equality it espouses. Reading histories of women’s movements during colonial era is also the mapping of complex designs with which different communities engaged with
modernity. This also disrupts assumptions on the categorical construction of women, Muslim, Hindu etc. as identities, which remain the same always and everywhere.