



Research Paper

“MUSLIM REVIVALISM”: THE ROLE OF THE MUSLIM REFORMERS IN THE LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY BENGAL.

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ABSTRACT

In the late nineteenth century to develop Islamic consciousness among the Bengali Muslims and to purify Islam in Bengal, socio-religious reform movements like the Faraizi movement, Wahabi movement and the Tarikih-i-Muhammadiya were relaunched. As the Bengali Muslim rural population was virtually ignorant in matters of the Islamic social code and doctrines, these Islamic reform movements were introduced to initiate a profound transformation in the religious and political ideas of the Bengali Muslims in the latter half of nineteenth century. These movements were directed to remove the un-Islamic features from Islam as practised by the Bengali Muslims then. As these religious reform movements concentrated their activities mainly in rural Bengal, it mainly affected the interests of the rural Muslims and had very little influence over the urban Ashraf Muslims. These reform movements could not wipe out completely the un-Islamic forces and superstitious beliefs prevalent among the Muslims of Bengal and failed in realising their original aims. Majority of the Bengali Muslims remained faithful to the traditional system, with its peculiar mixture of Islamic dogma, local beliefs and practices. Thus, these Islamic revivalist movements could not keep up with time and these reforms movements which had acquired an anti-British character lost their tempo. By the end of the 19th century, these religious reform movements died a slow but natural death and government repression only quickened the process. The failure of the revivalist movements encouraged rethinking among a section of the educated Muslims as to their relationship with the British government. The emergence of these English educated urban Bengali Muslims represented a new historical context in the outlook of the Bengali Muslims, the shift from confrontation to collaboration with the Raj. For the Muslim community in Bengal, its transition from tradition to modernization was accompanied by the birth of an enlightened elite group. This section of the Muslim community tried to give a new lease of life to their community by their liberal and rational thoughts. This group of urban educated Muslim elites were not only concerned about their professional entities and social position, they also played a leading role in the 'modernization' process within their own community. i.e. the Muslim community of Bengal. Thus, the social, cultural and political regeneration of the Muslims during the late 19th and the early 20th century paved the way for social transformation which brought about a change in all spheres of lives of the Bengali Muslims. This "Islamic Revivalism" with modern and secular education could be regarded as the heralds of a new dawn. In this article I have attempted to look into the works of the Bengali Muslim reformers who brought significant changes in the lives of the Muslim Community of Colonial Bengal.

Key Words: Bengali Muslim Community, Colonial Bengal, Wahabi Movement, Muslim Revivalism, Muslim Reformers.

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Although the Bengali Muslims constituted about half of the total population in Bengal, the Muslims lagged behind the Hindus in all spheres of life like education, employment, formation of associations and political organisations. Owing to many factors such as the impact of the land system, de-industrialization, slow growth of nationalist consciousness and reluctance to acquire western education, all these contributed to the relative backwardness of the Muslim community in Bengal during the first half of the nineteenth century. The fear of Christian proselytization also prevented the Muslims to take English education.⁶³ In Bengal the earliest

beneficiaries of the Western Education were mostly the high caste Hindus, who recognized the material advantages that it offered and flocked to the new institutions eager to grasp the new opportunities opened up by the Colonial Rule. While to the Hindus, the British were “friends and benefactors,” to the Muslims, they were persons who robbed them of their “Sovereignty and wealth, power and prestige.” While the Hindus were crowding English schools and colleges, the Muslims sat apart, wrapped in the memory of their glorious past and were held back by their tradition and the conservatism of Islam. Their all-round backwardness implanted in their minds a sense of insecurity and made them afraid of being dominated by the minority Hindus. Though from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, they become conscious of and eager to rectify the wrongs, the Bengali Muslims realized that to survive and prosper as a community, a cultural awakening similar to that achieved by the Hindus, was necessary. They turned to Western education and with the shift in the thought process of the Muslims in Bengal, a kind of modernity began in the Muslim society which may be termed as “Muslim Revivalism”. Towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, the most important change that the Bengali society witnessed was the emergence of a new group of Muslim men from the middle-class intelligentsia. These Muslim reformers brought about important changes in the Muslim society and their presence was felt in the field of education, employment, culture as well as in politics. During the second half of the nineteenth century the deplorable condition of the Muslims alarmed a good section of the Muslim intelligentsia and this section of the educated Bengali Muslims tried to regenerate the community by advocating western education and co-operation with the British. They wanted to gain British support in order to attain the socio-economic success which was already attained by the Hindus through English education. In this article I have attempted to look into the works and practices of the Muslim reformers who tried to spread western education among the Muslims and tried to infuse new life into this moribund society.

The credit for pioneering efforts in that direction, – cooperation with the government for the rapid upliftment of the community must go to Maulvi Abdul Lateef who was the spokesman of the Muslims of Bengal at this time. Syed Nawab Abdul Lateef Khan Bahadur (1828-1893), who belonged to a respectable family of Faridpur in East Bengal, was a fluent writer in English and an excellent speaker in Bengali, Urdu and Hindustani. In 1848 he began his career as a Lecturer in the Anglo-Arabic department of the Calcutta Madrassah but soon joined the administrative service. In 1849, he became the Deputy Magistrate and in 1863, Lord Elgin appointed him Fellow of the Calcutta University. Lord Lytton conferred on him the title of Khan Bahadur in 1877 and that of Nawab in 1880. He got the ‘Order of Companion’ of the Indian Empire from Lord Ripon. In 1884, he retired as a Presidency Magistrate. The first Bengali Muslim to become a member of the Bengali Legislative Council, he secured a high social position in the contemporary Muslim society by virtue of his learning, his service to the cause of the community and above all by his association with the government. Abdul Lateef tried to revive the Muslims by seeking co-operation with the British government for the rapid upliftment of his community.¹ He took up the mission of persuading his co-religionists in Bengal to learn English for the benefit and advancement of the community. In his paper entitled, ‘A Minute on Hooghly Madrassah’, written in December, 1861, he discussed the educational problems of the Muslims from different aspects and argued that, ‘If any language in India could lead to the advancement in the life of the learner, it is the English’.² However at the same time he gave emphasis on the learning of Arabic and Persian for the Muslims. In 1853, he recommended the teaching of elementary English along with Persian in the Anglo-Persian department of the Calcutta Madrassah. Even before Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (1817-1898) initiated his Aligarh Movement, Abdul Lateef devoted himself to the task of weaning the Bengali Muslims away from any stubborn anti-British stand and of fostering their friendly relationship with the government by seeking British support.³ Abdul Lateef realised the urgency of giving proper guidance to the Muslims who had fallen backward in every field of life to promote educational and material development among the Muslims by adopting two fold programmes. Firstly, the promotion of loyalty to the British rule and secondly the dissemination of English education among the Muslims.⁴ His earnest desire was to see the Muslims of Bengal as an English educated class in order to make progress at par with the Hindus.⁵ Abdul Lateef founded the ‘Mahomedan Literary Society’ at Calcutta in 1863 for the consolidation of the Muslim community and it predated the ‘Translation Society’ of Sir Syed Ahmed. The members of the society belonged to the upper middle-class Muslims who regarded Urdu as their vernacular and ignored Bengali. The foundation of this society signalled the emergence of an urban Muslim intelligentsia of English educated and professional people in Bengal and very soon it had more than five hundred members.⁶ From the forum of Mohammedan Literary Society, he continued to draw the attention of the government to the educational needs of the Bengali Muslims.

Abdul Lateef solicited the co-operation of Maulana Keramat Ali (1800-1873) of Jaunpore, the leader of the Taiyuni group. Having a pro-British attitude of Keramat Ali, expressed modern outlook and urged upon the Muslims to learn European languages for scientific developments. Keramat Ali helped the process of Islamization and a spirit of religio-social exclusiveness among the Muslims.⁷ Although Abdul Lateef’s earnest

desire was to see the Muslims of Bengal as an English educated class, there were certain limitations to his ideas. Lateef's ideas failed to develop liberal outlook in the thoughts of the Muslims. He felt that the Muslims of Bengal should accept English education in order that they would have a share in the administration but made no attempt to spread liberal ideas of the West. The English education that was imparted in the Madrassa-Maktab education could not free itself from the impact of religious ideas. He represented the views of negligible section in the Muslim community although he claimed to be the spokesman of the Muslim community.⁸ The impact of the thoughts of Abdul Lateef was found visible in the ideas of Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928) who was a Shia Muslim and he hailed from Hooghly. In 1890, he became a judge of the Calcutta High Court and later in his life he married an English lady and settled in England.⁹ Perhaps more than Lateef, Justice Ameer Ali took interest in the spread of English education among the Muslims of Bengal. He firmly believed that without the spread of English education among the Bengali Muslims, it would be difficult for them to compete successfully with other communities.¹⁰ Ameer Ali an enormously erudite, sophisticated lawyer and writer was one of the few Western educated Muslim intellectuals who sought to show that science, rational thinking and modern political ideas were not only compatible with Islam but were manifested in the fundamental teachings of the Prophet. In his celebrated work “The Spirit of Islam” which was written in English and first published in 1921 in London, he presented the great Prophet of Islam as an exemplary man, an ideal leader and the founder of the democratic order in society.¹¹ Ameer Ali was of the opinion that Muslims should interpret Islam in the light of modern situation and needs and get political training on parallel lines with that of their Hindu compatriots. He emphasised on the need for reform in Muslim law and he firmly believed that without the spread of English education among the Muslims, it would be difficult for them to compete successfully with other communities.

Muslim ‘backwardness’ and absence of any means to represent to the government faithfully and honestly the views of the Muslims to the Government, prompted Ameer Ali to establish the Central National Mohammedan Association in 1877.¹² On behalf of the Central National Mohammedan Association, he sent a memorial to the British Government. The British Government of India acted on this memorial and granted certain concessions for the promotion of primary education among the Muslims. Ameer opposed Oriental study such as Madrassah education and he wanted that the Muslims should be given English education and that it should be made a compulsory subject in High School and Colleges.¹³ Ameer Ali was in favour of abolishing madrassahs at Hooghly, Dacca, Chittagong and Rajsahi and opening of an undergraduate college in Calcutta, exclusively for Muslim students.¹⁴ The government responded by providing the Muslim students with facilities to get admission to Calcutta Colleges at lower fees.¹⁵ From the beginning Ameer Ali and his Association faced opposition from Lateef for their denouncement of madrassah education. Lateef pointed out that Ameer Ali, did not represent the Muslim community in Bengal and that the Muslims of Bengal were in no way profited by Ameer Ali as he had no direct contact with the common people and their problems. Lateef also pointed out that CNMA worked for the welfare of the selected few and not for the common people.¹⁶ However it was Ameer Ali's Association and its forty eight branches which soon became more widespread in influence than Lateef's Mahomedan Literary society.¹⁷ The British Government by seeking its views on questions pertaining to the Muslim interests, acknowledged its representative character.¹⁸ By reviving the historical and cultural traditions of the Muslims in the past Ameer Ali made a notable contribution to the “Muslim Revivalism” in the sub-continent. He also wanted to bring about a change in the intellectual and political life of Muslims. The political movement of Ameer Ali and his significant work for the cultural revival and intellectual awakening of the Muslims gave him a unique position in the Muslim community of Bengal.

A follower of Syed Ameer Ali, Ameer Hussain who was a Deputy Magistrate Collector, and a member of the Legislative council also tried to revive the Muslims by advocating English education and large-scale participation of Muslims in the Government Services.¹⁹ Ameer Hussain was a British loyalist and believed in the development of Muslim community in co-operation with British. In 1880, Ameer Hussain became the secretary of the Central National Mohammedan Association (CNMA) and its activities. To encourage English education among the Muslims, Ameer Hussain proposed to the British Government to abolish the Hooghly Madrassa and to curtail expenditure on Madrassa education. He wrote to the British Government to establish a college attached to the Calcutta Madrassah. He argued that Presidency College although, a government institution and where Mahomedan students were at liberty to join it, but as it was situated very far away from the Mahomedan quarters, none but only the rich Mahomedan students could afford the daily conveyance. So, he proposed that a Mahomedan English College should be established for teaching up to B.A degree in the Muhammedan quarter of Calcutta for the benefit of the Muslims students.²⁰ His advocacy of English education for the Muslims was appreciated by the Hindu press.²¹ Another Muslim elite, Dilwar Hossain Ahmed Meerza (1840-1913), sought to regenerate the Muslims through reforms. He was a resident of the Hooghly district and was the first Muslim graduate from Calcutta University (1861). He worked as a Deputy Magistrate and he urged the Muslims to adopt English education and reforms. He like other westernized Muslim leaders worked for the regeneration of

Bengali Muslims by propagating modern education.²² Khan Bahadur Abdul Jabbar, an associate of Abdul Lateef, who was a Deputy Magistrate and a member of the Bengal Legislative Council also worked for the regeneration of the Bengali Muslims by propagating modern education.²³

From the second half of the nineteenth there was a socio-cultural transformation in the Bengali Muslim community initiated by a group of educated Muslim elites like Abdul Rauf, Khan Bahadur Abdul Lateef, Syed Ameer Ali and Syed Ameer Hossain. These four prominent educated Muslim leaders directed their attention to the strengthening of the position of the Muslims in Bengal, mainly through educational reforms, within the framework of British administration.²⁴ Abdul Rauf's Anjuman-i-Islami, Calcutta, (1855), Nawab Amir Ali's National Muhammadan Association (1856), Abdul Lateef's Muhammadan Literary Society of Calcutta (1863) and Syed Ameer Ali's Central National Muhammadan Association of Calcutta (1876) played a vital role in moulding the Muslim mind in Bengal and its neighbouring areas.²⁵ These Muslim reformers of Bengal particularly Abdul Lateef and Ameer Ali did not confine their activities in Bengal only. They even established links with the Muslims of other parts of the country. So the movement for the uplift of the Muslim community, though purely confined to the upper and middle classes, was widened to a vast area.²⁶ Both of them encouraged the Bengali Muslim elite to find organizations in the mofussils. The Muslim gentry of Dacca established the Dacca Muhammadan Friends Association in 1883. The branches of Central National Muhammadan Association were established at various places in Midnapore and in Hooghly. In 1884, the Central National Muhammadan Association of Syed Ameer Ali had more than 700 members, which signalled the emergence of an educated Muslim middle classes in the late nineteenth century. After the death of Abdul Lateef in 1893, Ameer Ali's Central National Muhammadan Association took the leading part in placing before the British Government the difficulties of the Muslims.²⁷ Although these organisations were strictly non-political bodies and were primarily focused in social and educational matters, still these elite lobbies were consulted regularly by the British government on matters affecting the Muslim Community.

The Muslim Community in Bengal soon discovered the benefits they stood to gain from the special concessions and facilities offered by the government and rushed to form anjumans and associations all over the country to further push their claims. The results of government efforts to popularize education at the mass level began to have its effect before long. There were signs of a growing demand for modern education among the Muslim Community in Bengal. By the mid-nineteenth century, the attitude of the Muslim middle class in Bengal gradually changed and their desire for English education increased mainly due to the British government's policy. The thoughts and ideas of Nawab Abdul Lateef, Syed Ameer Ali, Syed Ameer Hossain and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan- the leading Muslim intellectuals of the age, had, no doubt, great impact on the Bengali Muslim community. However these eminent urban Muslim intelligentsias, who gave leadership to the movement for the spread of English education among the Bengali Muslims, had a narrow social outlook and they did not rise above their traditional thoughts and ideas. These eminent educationalists like Syed Ameer Ali, Syed Ameer Hussain and Syed Ahmed Khan were of non- Bengali origin and so they did not encourage Bengali as a medium of education. Syed Ameer Ali and Ameer Hussain were Urdu speaking Muslims and they had no connection with the greater Muslim Society of Bengal. Their contempt for Bengali, their insistence on Arabic and Persian as languages for the Bengali Muslims was because of their deep-seated traditional immigrant- like arrogance and alienation. Syed Amir Ali was more interested in the revival of the past glory of Islam than that of the socio-economic condition of the Bengali Muslims. The only Bengali Muslim elite leader Nawab Abdul Lateef who was also a traditionalist, championed the cause of Madrassah education. Syed Ameer Ali advocated two separate types of education- a mixture of western and Islamic education for the Ashrafs and Madrassah education for the Atraf Muslims. Their organisations were city based and they carried on their activities either in English or in Urdu, which had hardly any impact on the rural Bengali Muslims. These Bengali Muslim intelligentsias failed to develop new ideas among the Muslims and to make the modern education more effective for them. They remained separated from the main stream of national and cultural regeneration and remained aloof from any agitational movement. They had contempt for Bengali and were interested on imposing Arabic and Persian as languages for the Bengali Muslims. Notwithstanding these limitations, they still may be regarded as the pioneers of Muslim modernisation and these Muslim intellectuals of Bengal adopted liberal trends which were favourable for the development of Bengali Muslim Community.

END NOTES

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