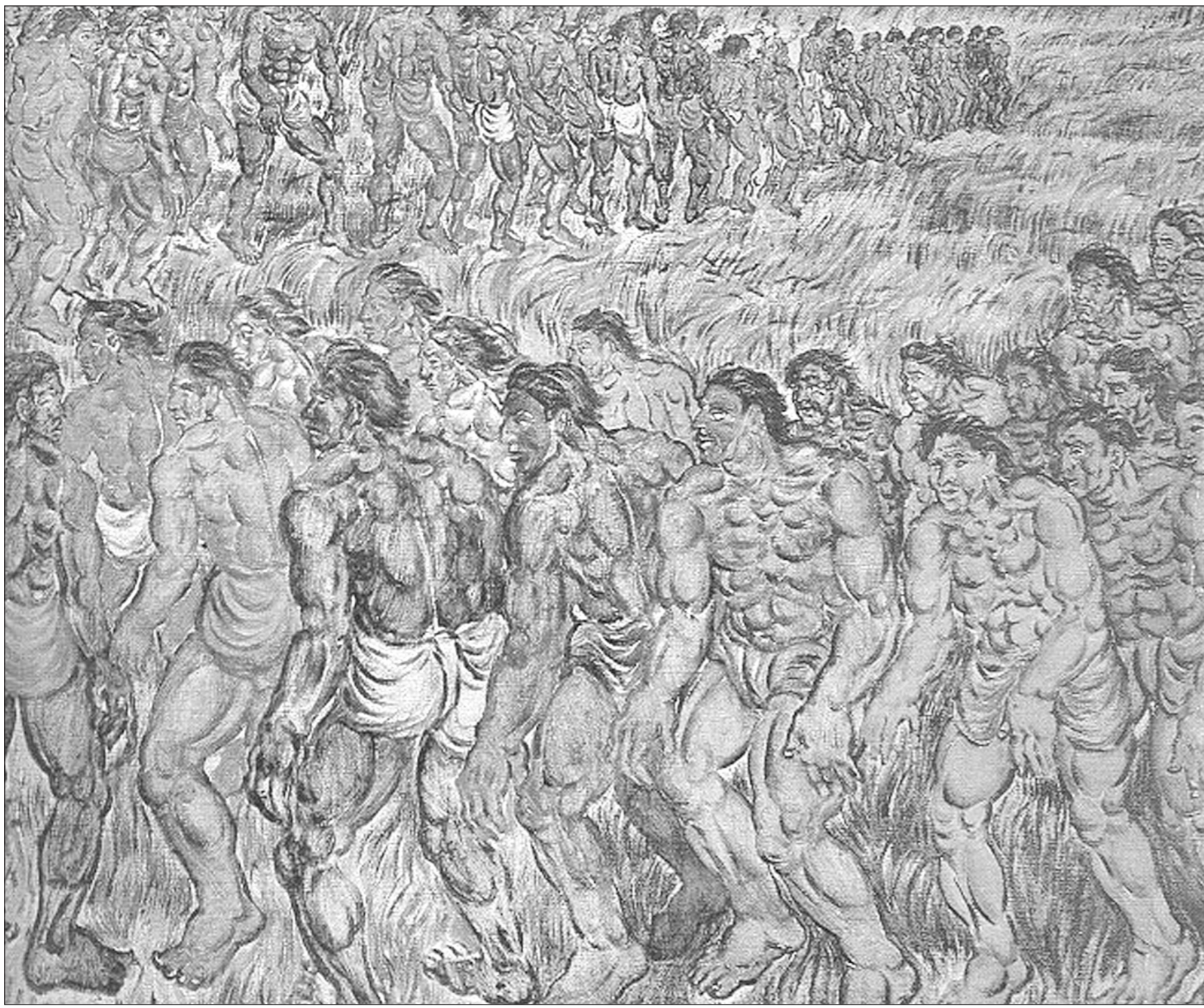


Communalism in Undivided Bengal

Shrouding class conflict with religion



Plassey, Permanent Settlement, Resumption Proceedings and the abolition of Persian as the Court Language was the sharp and rapid decline/disappearance of Muslim aristocracy, well-to-do peasants, artisans, professionals and scholars in Bengal and the equally fast ascendancy of the new classes of Hindu Zamindar-Bhadralok-Mahajan out of the Hindu middle and lower-middle classes. The Muslim situation was so bad in Bengal by the 1870s that British civil servant and writer William Hunter observed in his book, *Our Indian Mussulmans*, that fifty years back it was impossible to find a poor Muslim in Bengal and in 1870, due to lack of government patronage, it became impossible for them to remain rich.

The Permanent Settlement not only brought about changes in the land system but also transformed the entire Bengali society with new values, new culture, turning *nouveaux riches* Zamindars and their beneficiaries into arrogant feudal lords, rapacious money-lenders and ruthless lawyers. These parasitical classes lived on the masses — Muslim, Namasudra, and other "low-caste" Hindus — and despite having modern secular education in English, nourished and promoted feudal and pre-capitalist values.

With few exceptions, the bulk of the Zamindar-Bhadralok classes on the one hand glorified the British benefactors and on the other promoted Hindu revival and anti-Muslim (actually anti-peasant) sentiment, using hate as the best weapon to subjugate the lowly Muslim *chasha* (peasant). Hatred and prejudice bred equal amount of hatred and prejudice among the defiled and ridiculed Muslim *chasha* (this is not that different from Newton's Third Law of Motion).

Dominant Hindus ridiculed Bengali Muslims as *Nerrey-Mlechha-Javana* (skinhead-unclean-foreigner) both in private and public discourse, including literary works by Ishwar Gupta and Bankim Chatterjee. Some Hindu Zamindars in Faridpur, 24-Parganas and Nadia even imposed a "beard tax" on Muslim peasants in the 1820s and 1830s. The upshot was a number of peasant insurrections in the garb of Islam, the Faraizi Movement under Shariatullah and Dudu Miyan in parts of Faridpur-Pabna-Barisal-Dhaka and the militant uprising by Titu Meer in Nadia-24-Pargana sub-regions of Bengal.

Since then Muslim and Hindu communalists/separatists did not look back. While Hindu Zamindar-Bhadralok-Mahajan continued to oppose all government or Muslim initiated attempts to uplift the conditions of the Muslim community in Bengal through the Bengal Tenancy Amendment Acts, education, and redress against the extortionist money-lending system with lame excuses, Muslim peasants, small middle classes and aristocrats resisted the Hindu opposition. During the first hundred-odd years of the British Raj, while Hindus in general remained loyal to the government, Muslim opposition was directed both against the British and their well-to-do Hindu beneficiaries. With the change of the tide, while sections of the erstwhile loyal Hindus joined the nationalist bandwagon, especially after the Partition of Bengal (1905-11), Muslims in Bengal as elsewhere in India, readily responded to British overtures to win over the Muslim community, which had already started in the 1870s due to the untiring efforts by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan in north India, and Karamat Ali Jaunpuri and Nawab Abdul Latif in Bengal.

The period between 1905 and 1947 witnessed the bitterest Hindu-Muslim antagonism and conflicts in Bengal. With direct British support (which was in line with their colonial divide-and-rule policy) and patronage, Bengali Muslims started collaborating with the British as they rightly visualized the advantages of their socio-political and economic uplift through collaboration with the British. Hindu aristocrats, professionals, intellectuals, clerks, teachers, shopkeepers, money-lenders in general were very unhappy with the British as they were no longer willing to play the second fiddle as their subjects. By then Muslims had experienced bitter Hindu chauvinism, both within and outside Bengal. Hindu revivalist Arya Samaj and Hindu opposition to Urdu in favour of Hindi (even by men like Lalajit Rai who could not read and write Hindi but could Urdu) had already alarmed non-communal Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, who once identified himself as a Hindu ("Muslim-Hindu" as he was born in India or Hind) and considered Hindu and Muslim as two eyes of India.

The anti-Partition (1905-11) Swadeshi Movement, which directly promoted Hindu revival and perpetuation of Muslim subjugation in Bengal by Hindu super-ordinates, further embittered the Hindu-Muslim relationship. The Hindu opposition to the Dhaka University proposal, by men like Ashutosh Mukherjee and Rabindranath Tagore, and their constantly vociferous opposition to any attempt to grant more rights to Bengal peasants through amendments of the Bengal Tenancy Act during 1923-38, the Free Rural Primary

Education Bill, the Money-lenders Bill in the 1930s and 1940s sharply polarized the two communities both within and outside the Bengal legislature. Fazlul Huq, Maulana Bhashani, HS Suhrawardy, Khwaja Nazimuddin, Abul Hashim, Nawab Salimullah, and Sir Abdur Rahim, among others, championed the Muslim/peasant cause and Hindu politicians, professionals, intellectuals and journalists openly promoted Zamindar-Bhadralok-Mahajan interests to the detriment of Muslims/peasants up to the Partition of 1947.

In view of the above, there is no truth in the assertion that the anti-Muslim rhetoric of Bankim, Tagore and Sarat were in reaction to the communal stand of the Muslim League or MAJinnah. While Bankim glorified Hindutva in the 1880s, Tagore did so with subtlety during the first thirty years of the 20th century and Sarat Chatterjee advocated the expulsion of Muslims from India in 1926, long before Chaudhry Rahmat Ali coined the term "Pakistan" in 1934 and the Pakistan Resolution of March 1940.

It is absolutely incorrect to ascribe his anti-Muslim speech at a Hindu Mahasabha rally to the Hindu-Muslim rioting at Pabna in 1926. The Pabna rioting was short-lived and much smaller in scale than the Calcutta rioting, which preceded the former. Pakistan demand could not be a cause for rioting rather it was an unfortunate effect of Hindu chauvinism and Muslim communalism/separatism. And it may be mentioned that Jinnah was agreeable to the Cabinet Mission Proposal for an Indian confederation till Nehru's rejection of the proposal in July 1946. So, Pakistan was by no means inevitable. Pakistan became inevitable not because of the Punjab or UP Muslims' desire for a separate homeland. Pakistan became inevitable firstly because of Bengali Muslim peasants' desire to have better rights and opportunities. Another factor behind the creation of Pakistan was the Hindu elite's desire to partition Bengal after they realized that Bengali Muslims would perpetually rule the province by virtue of their number.

So, there is absolutely no point in fabricating or relying on stories about Suhrawardy's and Sheikh Mujib's instigating the Calcutta rioting of 1946-47 as there are credible evidences to the contrary. There are documentary evidences, including Suhrawardy's personal correspondence with Jinnah and Liaquat Ali in 1947 and 1948, which proves beyond any doubt that he tried his best to save both Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta as well as Noakhali (which was again a noisy tea-party in comparison to Great Calcutta Killing of 1946 and the Bihar Carnage of 1947).

What we see in Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi*, which portrays both Jinnah and Suhrawardy with nothing but tar and what we read and hear about the Noakhali rioting in most books mainly based on Congress and Mahasabha-owned newspaper reporting are grossly exaggerated accounts and fabrications. Noakhali carnage was a brutal reaction to the Great Calcutta Killing of August-September 1946. Mainly Bengali Muslim peasants and working classes took part in the killing, raping, and "forcible conversion" and marriage of Hindu women in and around Chhagalainya Thana. Around 350 Hindus, many of whom were money-lenders, got killed. Golam Sarwar, a local peasant leader was the main agent provocateur. He lost his son-in-law who was a jute mill worker in Calcutta, in the Calcutta rioting of 1946.

In sum, Muslim communalism and Hindu chauvinism in undivided Bengal were by-products of uneven growth and development of the two communities, who historically lived in peace and harmony throughout the Mughal period. The uneven growth and development of the Muslim and Hindus of Bengal was mainly due to the divisive policy of the British rulers and partially incidental on British policy of turning Bengali traders and entrepreneurs into Zamindars to get rid of competitors from Bengali capitalist classes for the benefit of British trade and industries. The British policy of disbanding the pre-existing army and police and replacing the Indian code with British law also had hit Muslims in Bengal (and elsewhere in India) as they were predominant in these professions under the Mughals. Muslim arrogance and incapability to learn English due to poverty also contributed to their backwardness. With the transfer of the capital from Murshidabad to Calcutta, thousands of Muslim families from the depopulated Murshidabad and Dhaka had to settle in rural areas as peasants and destitute.

The emergence of Calcutta as the new metropolis of Bengal (and India) on the one hand signaled the rise of the Hindu professionals and capitalist classes, mainly emanating from the beneficiaries of the Permanent Settlement; and on the other, it also indicated the ruralization and pauperization of the hitherto dominant Muslim classes. The antagonistic classes of Bengali Hindu "haves" and Muslim "have-nots" fought each other for around two hundred years, the former to perpetuate their stronghold on the

political economy and the latter to create a new niche in the body politic of Bengal (and India). They did not shy out from the prospect of replacing the Hindu beneficiaries of the Permanent Settlement and British rule either by reverting to the pre-British Muslim order or by establishing their "peasant utopia" or Pakistan.

In short, the events and process leading to the "Great Divide" or the greatest tragedy for Bengal after the disaster of Plassey to occur up to 1947 tell us how and why fear, hatred, ignorance, and prejudice, primarily produced and nourished by the majority and adopted by the minority community with the machinations of the vicious colonial rulers made the Partition inevitable and the hangover of the past bitterness so heady and long-lasting. The unequal "elite conflict" between the rich and powerful Hindu beneficiaries of the Permanent Settlement and the poor and weak Bengali Muslim victims of the Permanent Settlement is the main theme of the story of Hindu chauvinism and Muslim communalism in Bengal.

Since the budding Bengali Muslim elite with *jotedar/talukdar* [rich peasants] background was too weak to withstand the mighty *Zamindar-Bhadralok-Mahajan* triumvirate, they had to get the patronage of the Urdu-speaking elite or the ashraf, from within and outside Bengal. The *ashraf* also needed the *jotedar* support to reach the middle and lower peasants (Muslim and Namasudra), especially on the eve of the provincial elections of 1937, as by then the Government of India Act of 1935 had enfranchised many well-to-do peasants. North-west Indian *ashraf*, under the leadership of the charismatic Jinnah, in alliance with the Nawab of Dhaka and other *ashraf* leaders of Bengal forged ties with lower *ashraf* and Muslim *jotedar/talukdar* classes of East Bengal. The ulama or Muslim theologians played an important role in the *ashraf-jotedar* marriage (of convenience). Thus the Muslim Bihar *Ashraf-Ulama-Jotedar* triumvirate came into being to challenge the powerful Hindu *Zamindar-Bhadralok-Mahajan* triumvirate.

By then, due to the prevalent discriminatory and humiliating behaviour of "upper" caste Hindus towards them, the bulk of the Bengali peasants had first been communalized and then politicized under the influence of the *ulama*. Hindu opposition to cow slaughtering and treatment of Muslim peasants as "live stock" and untouchables (to paraphrase Nirad Chaudhury, *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, London 1951 and Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bachhar*, Dhaka 1970) thoroughly communalized the bulk of Bengali Muslims by the 1920s. Afterwards under the influence of the rustic mullah, Bengali Muslims learnt how to classify the Hindus as *kafir* [non-believer], *mushrik* [polytheist] and *malaun* [the cursed one or the Devil]. They also learnt how to hate everything Hindu, including their gods and goddesses. Even a dead Hindu was not spared. The mullah taught Bengali Muslims to wish eternal hell fire [*fi nare jahannam*] to all Hindu souls. This is still done in the region.

[Articles of interest: John H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*, UCP, Berkeley 1968;

Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, CUP, Cambridge 2002;

Suranjana Das, *Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947*, OUP, Oxford 1994;

Taj I. Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal, 1920-1947*, Westview Press, Boulder-San Francisco-Oxford, 1992.]

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Only by untangling the class-based origins of Hindu-Muslim tension, will it be possible for us to fully comprehend the nature of the conflict in Bengal that we have come to call "communalism" and move towards its resolution.

TAJ HASHMI

THIS piece aims at shedding light on the frequently misunderstood phenomenon called "communalism," inherently a South Asian expression connoting much more than its actual meaning implying something very ominous and nasty, in colonial Bengal. This perennial conflict mainly between the Hindu and Muslim communities, supposed to have originated because of the differences in the rituals, beliefs and practices of the two communities, not before but during the British colonial rule, has not died out in independent India and Bangladesh.

As laymen are baffled as to why Hindus and Muslims have been fighting or showing disrespect to each other's faith, rituals, norms, behaviour or anything associated with the "other," so are some social scientists, including historians. They associate the problem with religiosity, lack of secular and modern education, and intolerance of the people concerned bred by some religious texts (depending on who are explaining the enigmatic phenomenon called communal conflict), hatred, and antagonism.

Contrary to the laymen understanding and lopsided analyses by scholars, journalists and politicians, had religiosity of the people or the alleged hateful teachings of the religious texts been responsible for communalism, then the pre-British (and pre-modern) Mughal period would have witnessed thousands of rioting and embittered Hindu-Muslim relationship. Interestingly, history records only a few sporadic Hindu-Muslim clashes during the Holi Festival in the early 18th century under the Mughals.

The expression "communalism" has been in use in the Subcontinent since the second-half of the 19th century. Jawaharlal Nehru, a non-communal, agnostic politician and the first prime minister of India, who would have been famous for his scholarship alone, feels that what is "nationalism" for the majority community becomes "communalism" when the minorities do similar things to protect and assert their rights.

Another great mind, socialist historian (Harvard professor) Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2001), in his seminal book, *Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis*, first published from Lahore in 1943 while this great Canadian scholar was a young lecturer at Lahore Foreman Christian College, aptly reiterates "the phenomenon called 'communalism' has developed into

something for which 'nationalism' now seems a better name." [Lahore 1969, p.187]

I am citing Nehru and Smith to highlight flaws of their unworthy successors in the realms of politics, pedagogy, scholarship and popular culture in regard to racial, linguistic and religious conflicts in South Asia. In Bangladesh, the situation is abysmally bizarre. Many Bangladeshis cannot differentiate between "communal" and revivalist puritan orthodox and political Islam. To them, from the Jamaat-i-Islami to Hindu, JMB to Harkatul Jihad, Janata Party to Shiva Sena and RSS are all "communal" parties, groups, and organizations.

It is unfortunate that Badruddin Umar's tireless effort to distinguish between chauvinism/nationalism and communalism since the 1960s, especially through his books, *Sampradayikata* and *Sangskritik Sampradayikata*, has gone down the drains. Hence the tendency with religiosity, lack of secular and modern education, and intolerance of the people concerned bred by some religious texts (depending on who are explaining the enigmatic phenomenon called communal conflict), hatred, and antagonism.

Contrary to the laymen understanding and lopsided analyses by scholars, journalists and politicians, had religiosity of the people or the alleged hateful teachings of the religious texts been responsible for communalism, then the pre-British (and pre-modern) Mughal period would have witnessed thousands of rioting and embittered Hindu-Muslim relationship. Interestingly, history records only a few sporadic Hindu-Muslim clashes during the Holi Festival in the early 18th century under the Mughals.

Now, it depends how one classifies Tagore or the Chatterjees (both Bankim and Sarat). If one considers them as members of the majority Hindu community of the Subcontinent, then they were "nationalists" albeit according to some, especially Bankim, of the pejorative "Hindu chauvinistic" type. The moment one classifies them as members of the "minority Hindu community of Bengal," then all three of them (despite their literary genius and kind words for Muslims, reflected in their literary writings) were nothing but communal hater-mongers and Hindu separatists. We must draw a line between

"Hindu-Muslim supremacist" and "Hindu-Muslim separatist" — the former being nationalist/chauvinist and the latter communal/separatist.

As WC Smith has elaborated, one does not have to be "religiously ardent, tepid or cold; orthodox, liberal or atheist; righteous or vicious" to be classified as "communal," both communalism of the minority and chauvinism of the majority communities are by-products of economic, religious and psychological factors [p.187]. The adherents of supremacist/exclusionist ideology and the separatist minorities are again subject to false consciousness, vainglory and narrow class/group interest.

The socio-economic base of communalism in undivided Bengal was different from that of northwestern India. Similarly the northwest was almost totally different from South India in this regard. While the Punjab, UP, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Bengal witnessed intense communal hatred, tension and occasional mass killing and rioting during the 1870s and 1950s, the coastal regions of the Subcontinent (excepting Calcutta and Chittagong) in Bombay and Madras Presidencies were almost totally immune to such barbarism. Does this mean the Hindus and Muslims of Bombay and Madras were/are less religious, having little sense of belonging to their respective communities? We know that is not the case. The reason behind Hindus and Muslims living in much more peace and harmony in the South than their co-religionists did/do in the North is their learning English and supporting and opposing the British Raj together.

On the other hand, in the North, especially in Bengal, the bulk of the Hindus supported the Raj for the first hundred-odd years while the bulk of the Muslims were fighting and non-cooperating with the British up to the 1870s and later they reversed their role. Henceforth the bulk of the Hindus joined the anti-British nationalist movement, opposing and non-cooperating with the Raj, while the vast majority of Muslims started collaborating with the British (imitating what their Hindu neighbours had done earlier), learning English for upward mobility under the influence of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1818-1898), Maulana Karamat Ali Jaunpuri (1800-1873), Nawab Abdul Latif (1828-1893) and their likes up to the Partition.

Those who trace the roots of Hindu-Muslim communalism to the invasions and plundering by Sultan

Mahmud, and about 600 years of Muslim rule in India are influenced by the historiography, which not only portrays Babar as the "demolisher" of a temple at Ayodhya and Awrangzeb as the "anti-Hindu bigot" but also depicts the British Raj as the epitome of benevolence, tolerance, and justice. Besides the selective use of history by both Hindus and Muslims, the crux of the problem lay with the unequal socio-economic and political developments of the two communities, which mainly contributed to the growth of mutual mistrust, hatred, prejudice, and rivalries in every sphere of life in colonial northern India, including Bengal.

A cursory look at the history of undivided Bengal during the British rule reveals that the rulers' adopting the classical divide-and-rule policy was the only factor behind the growth, development and culmination of communal antagonism between the Hindu and Muslim communities in the province, like elsewhere in northern India. We may highlight the following landmarks in British Indian history, which were responsible for the creation and widening of the cleavages between the two communities:

The Permanent Settlement of 1793: The Mother of All Evils in Bengal

No other British colonial act brought so much of suffering, pain, humiliation, on the Bengali psyche and wreaked such havoc on Bengal's agriculture, industries, social structure, almost by permanently destroying its economy and proverbial prosperity that Bengal had witnessed during the Mughal period than did this monstrous Permanent Settlement of land revenue. This grossly unjust land settlement with revenue collecting officials, known as Zamindars, turned them into landlords in the British sense of the expression, whose liability to the government (90% of the revenue collected in an estate) was fixed permanently.

The monstrosity of the absurd land system ("a caricature of British land system," to paraphrase Karl Marx) was that while the Zamindar's liability to the government was fixed permanently for generations, the tenant's liability (the rent obligation) to the Zamindar remained flexible, turning him almost into a slave of his Zamindar. On top of the rent, the Zamindar could extract illegal duties or taxes from his tenants whenever he needed extra cash to buy an elephant, to celebrate a wedding,

child birth, or to perform certain rituals or for self-gratification, sheer greed, or caprice.

Incidentally, the bulk of the Zamindars in Bengal since the viceroyalty (Nawabi) of Murshid Quli Khan were Hindus. And by one stroke of the pen, they turned into landlords or proprietors of land, which hitherto had belonged to the Mughal Emperor. The bulk of the peasantry in Bengal, mostly so in the eastern region, were Muslims. Consequently any exaction by the greedy and ruthless Zamindars (who could imprison and torture their tenants with impunity up to the mid-19th century) could be easily perceived as "Hindu" exactions and excesses on "Muslims." The fast transfer of trading and industrial capital to Zamindari enterprise by Bengali and non-Bengali merchants and entrepreneurs installed rapacious traders, moneylenders, and speculators as Zamindars. They were much more ruthless than the traditional Zamindars of the Nawab.

While Bengali peasants and weavers (mostly Muslim) were on the verge of total ruin due to the Zamindar exactions and British traders' dumping of duty-free British textiles in the local market, a *nouveaux riche* class of English-educated upstarts were fast replacing the powerless Muslim aristocracy, military officers, judges, and jurists who had become redundant not long after the disaster of Plassey in 1757. By the 1850s, most of the Muslim aristocrats who had been enjoying revenue-free land grants (*La Kharaj Waqf* endowments) to run schools, shrines and mosques since the Mughal period lost their lands as they failed to produce documents (lost or destroyed) in favour of their claims, as required by the arbitrary and unfair Resumption Proceedings (1820s-1850s) of the Company Raj.

Local Hindu traders and Zamindars, who had the cash and government patronage, bought off these acquired estates to the chagrin and anger of the wretched Muslim aristocrats and their Muslim clients. Meanwhile, in 1837, the British rulers had replaced Persian with English as the Court (or official) Language. Impoverished Muslims of Bengal could neither afford nor were willing to learn English, which their Hindu neighbours, beneficiaries of the Permanent Settlement, learnt for upward mobility. Consequently the cleavage between the two communities got further widened and the relationship between them further embittered.

What followed the disastrous