A History of Musli

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Did you know that Australia had the multicultural character even during the colonial and 'White Australia' periods? Australia's need of labour and the emigrant's desire of a better life resulted in the emergence of various nationalities into this country since 1788. While various religious groups such as the Christians, Jews, Buddhists and Hindus have settled in this country. Muslim contact with the continent of Australia took place before European settlement, as early as the 17th century when the Macassarese people from Indonesia came to the north coast on fishing expeditions. A Muslim presence can also be found during the convict period when a few Muslim convicts and settlers arrived in Australia in the early 1800s. The presence of two Bangalis at Ballart, Victoria during the Eureka uprising (miners' rebellion) of 1854 reveals that they were present in Australia at an earlier period.

The first official Muslim settlement, however, took place in the 1860s with the arrival of the Afghan camel drivers. The camel drivers are regarded as the founders of Islam in Australia since they built the first mosque at Marree, South Australia in 1882. The Marree mosque was built with mud and is no longer standing. The major mosques built by the Afghans (along with some Indians including the Bangalis) are in Adelaide, South Australia (1890), Broken Hill, New South Wales (1891) Perth, Western Australia (1905) and Brisbane, Queensland (1907).

Building mosques in Australia was an expensive venture for these people as they earned a pittance, around £3 a month. They had to raise funds from within the local Muslim communities to buy land and the construct mosques, although sometimes they had to seek financial support from outside as well. They appealed to the Muslim princes, nobles, and merchants, and other people residing outside the Commonwealth of Australia who would be interested in making a contribution. For the establishment of the Perth mosque, some local Hindu and Sikh Indians also helped their Muslim friends and made monetary contributions. Thus there was sense of camaraderie among people of different faiths.

Socially, the Afghans with some Indians including the Bangalis, Punjabis, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs lived a segregated life, away from white settlements in rough makeshift camel camps and later on what became known as 'Ghantowns' where the chief characteristic was segregation from the 'white' community. However, some Afghan and Indian merchants lived in the cities (Kabir 2004). The presence of a translated copy of the Holy Quran in Bangla at the Broken Hills museum also confirms that the Bangali Muslims lived in the Ghantowns.

Archival evidence also reveal that along with some Indians (Hindus and Sikhs), some Bangali Muslims worked as drapers, hawkers or bush grubbers. For example, in 1896 a Bangali Indian, Abdul Aziz, came to Western Australia at the age of 17 from Chitrasali, Hooghly, India and worked as a draper. He took leave of absence from Australia in 1901, 1908, and again in 1934 to visit India. In this context, it is important to explain the Immigration Restriction Act, 1901 or the 'White Australia' policy which posed restrictions on the movements of the 'coloured' population or the



'aliens'.

'White Australia' as a national ideal developed in the latter decades of the 19th century, when politicians and journalists began to articulate a vision of a future Australia inhabited only by 'white' people, and predominantly by British protestants. The place of 'non-white' people in the Australian colonies had been a subject of concern for most of the 19th century. The rapid increase of the Chinese population as a result of gold rushes in the 1850s, the employment of Afghan camel drivers for the development of the drier areas of the subcontinent in the 1860s, the recruitment of Melanesian and other non-European workers for the Queensland