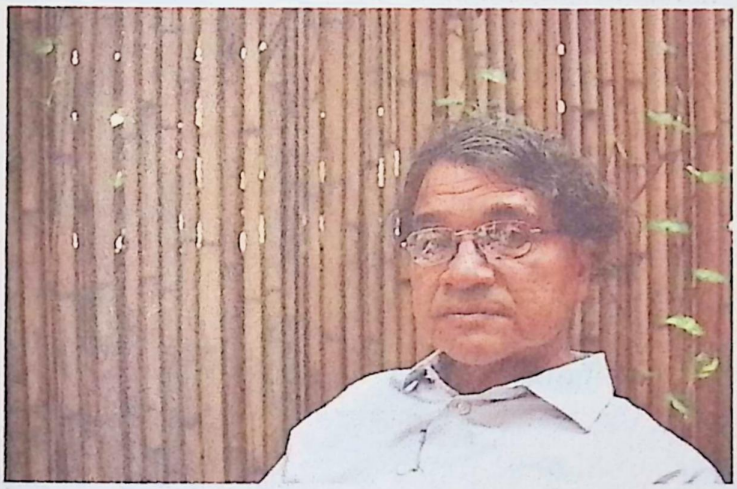
sion not unlike those based on religion, race and caste. See the constitution of Bangladesh, article 121, if you are curious.

Thus in Bangladesh, there are no constitutional minorities in the religious, racial, caste, or gender senses. But there is history. Take, for instance, 'scheduled caste', introduced in the censuses taken onwards from 1872. What is a member of a "scheduled caste", but a euphemism for "outcaste" or untouchables? Mohandas Gandhi's invention "Harijan" is but a shrewd metaphor for that isn't it? Whether you are a minority or majority depends on what definition of community you take for your wonder.



Salimullah Khan

In Bengal, interestingly, the Hindus had been shown to be a numerical minority ever since 1872, the year the first British census was published. Up until then, Hindus were supposed to be in a majority in Bengal. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, for one, comments on this. He opined, citing British ethnologists, that it is by conversion that Muslims have become a majority in Bengal. Muslim aristocracy in Bengal took exception. Khondokar Fazle Rabbi, Dewan of Murshidabad, in his Persian text "Hakikate Muselmanan i Bangala" (or its English version 'Origins of the Mussalmans of Bengal') claimed Arabian, Persian or central Asian descent for them. This is, as they say, history. The facts are otherwise. As many as ninety-nine out of hundred Bengal Muslims are by common consent considered Bengali Muslims.

The point the communal differences are products of ideologies, of creeds, faiths, and religious identities. After 1947, when Bengal was partitioned, parts of Bengal which were Muslim majority constituted East Bengal, parts inhabited by Hindu majority (not only presidencies or divisions but district also) were put in West Bengal. Majority and minority were census categories, and then it became political ones.

What are the results/implications of policies formed by the imperial British Raj in the Indian Subcontinent? How do you evaluate the policies of pre-partition British rule?

In Bangladesh people are oblivious of history, especially of the colonial era. It is unfortunate, indeed! The fabric of our polity today is a text woven in the warp and woof of events both pre-1947 and post-1947. The British in India found their main stake, their fundamental article of faith, in the concept of community along religious lines. The British thought they could rule India by harping on it. They did succeed in extending their tenure for 190 years, at any rate in Bengal. If this was possible because of mixing ice with wine, or politics with religion, why won't people exploit the legacy?

To be honest, India faced its biggest crisis ever in the eighteenth century. The Mughal were losing control over its "successor states"- Bengal, Awadh, and Hyderabad. And "challenger states"- the Marathas, the Sikhs, and Mysore were waxing in your face, without being themselves strong enough to deter the usurpers from Europe.

So eighteen century India was suffering from what one should describe, using a Gramscian term, as an "organic crisis of the state". The Mughal state was collapsing but no local successor state or rival power could claim suzerainty over the whole of India. It was in this interregnum or interlude that the British entered the stage. But the British were not alone. You know, they had strong competitors, namely the French, the Dutch and many other Europeans.

Not unlike Europe, India is a multinational continent. This is a fundamental truth. But the British pretended that India was neither a nation, nor was it a conglomerate of nations. They upheld the view that the only nations in the continent could be 'Hindus' and 'Muslims'. This was a Manichean super-imposition on an otherwise very colorful map.

India had many as, let's say, more than 50 nations. Whatever definition you use Bengal by the time was evolving as a colourful nationality, if not a full-bloomed Bengali nation. But the British would not allow it. So, they demanded, be a Muslim or be a Hindu. And Bengali Hindus actually stepped into the shoes which the British left for them. Rabindranath Tagore's grim instance that I was forced to cite earlier is only a mild testimony to this misfortune.

Caste (or kind of upper class) Hindus of Bengal thought it better to be Indians than being Bengalis.