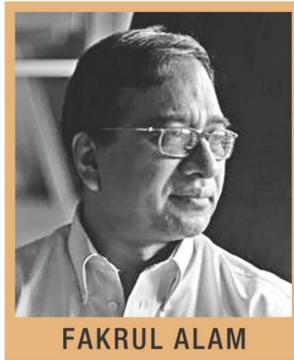


DHAKA UNIVERSITY AND THE PARTITIONING OF BENGAL



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Dhaka University Central Building in the 1940's. This later became Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

A recent and a very good historian of Bengal, Nitish Sengupta has observed that [in the mid-19th century] 'Nowhere else in the subcontinent were Muslims as worse off in Bengal, just as, paradoxically, few other communities derived as much benefit from British rule as the Bengali Hindus'. (*Land of Two Rivers: A History of Bengal*, 2011). William Hunter, in *Indian Musalmans* (1871), had observed a Muslim demographic explosion in Bengal. He had found out that they constituted a majority in East Bengal; he was one of the first Englishman to realise that a new policy had to be framed for them in post-mutiny India, one that could have some element of appeasement at its core.

Meanwhile, the Aligarh movement led by Sir Sayid Ahmad was beginning to make its impact felt in India, although initially very few Muslims of Bengal caught on to its implications. At the same time there was another great intellectual awakening in 19th century Bengal that is sometimes called the Bengal renaissance, but this too had little or no impact on Bengali Muslims till the very end of the 19th century.

The 1881 census revealed how pertinent Hunter's observation was: 'in 28 Bengali-speaking districts of undivided Bengal Presidency the Muslims numbered significantly more than the Hindus and... in Rajshahi, Dhaka and Chittagong divisions, they formed two-thirds of the



Curzon Hall of Dhaka University in 1950.

population' (Sengupta, 281). This had obvious implications for the future of Bengal and was the first indicator of the way the road would divide for Bengalis soon.

In education, the Wahabi movement, Muslim grievances, British suspicions and Muslim resentment after the Wahabi movement—all led to Muslims in Bengal shying away from western education and isolating themselves from higher studies.

If Muslims in India were hostile to British rule for political causes as well as the revival of fundamentalist notions of Islam in the nineteenth century, the British perception of Muslim had for a long time been that of subjects prone to discontent. Muslims had thus largely withdrawn from what was happening in colonial Bengal politically and culturally.

On the other hand, Hindu *bhadraloks* kept looking down on the Muslims of Bengal whose resentment kept growing. They would soon be wary of some of the developments that would lead to the first partition of Bengal and then to the creation of the University of Dhaka.

Hunter's Education Commission report of 1884 and another committee appointed by the governor of Bengal in 1885, unsurprisingly, emphasised the backwardness of Bengali Muslims in the province. The Commission recommended modifications in the state system of education to help attract Muslims and make them loyal public servants. Hunter was also for reforming madrasa education and opening up model schools. However, there was no thought of university education for Muslims in him.

It could be argued though that such British ideas of special measures to attract Muslims to education were part of the British forging ahead with their 'divide and rule' policy. Some of the Bengali Muslim leaders at one point began to

note, however, that people from their community were in fact doing poorly in education and employment. Soon Muslim leaders began to accept the necessity of education for their people, although even the progressive among them felt that in education what should be stressed was Arabic and Persian as well as English education.

Not much changed for a while—the state of primary and secondary education for Muslim Bengalis continued to be poor while tertiary education was almost non-existent for them at the turn of the century. Consequently, nowhere else in the subcontinent were the Muslims as downtrodden, socially, economically and politically, as in Bengal.

For a long time, Muslim Bengali leaders were not ready to take any major initiative to change the situation. An exception was Nawab Abdul Latif—a promoter of western education and a man who argued for intellectual development for the modernising world and against retreat from mainstream education. He thus founded the Muhammadan Literary Society in Calcutta in 1863. Latif was also against an exclusively madrasa system and stressed an English-oriented system of education that would run parallel to the madrasa one.

At around this time, the British began to actively pursue a policy of promoting Muslims to curb the influence of the *bhadraloks* and minimise