

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



The All India Muhammadan Educational Conference, at Dhaka (1906), which led to the foundation of the Muslim League, on December 30, 1906.

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 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 Muslims had thus largely withdrawn from what was happening in colonial Bengal politically and culturally.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 begin 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 dependence on them as much as they could. This policy would ultimately lead to the partition of Bengal.

The Partitioning of Bengal in 1905

The partition of Bengal was, in fact, initiated by Curzon



Madhur Canteen—The Jalsagar buildings in 1904.

PHOTO: FRITZ KAPP

To put it bluntly, DU is the result of all the developments that led to the partition of Bengal in 1905 and its annulment in 1911. It was conceived to focus on Indian Bengali Muslim needs for tertiary education.

as part of a 'divide and rule policy'. Partition took place eventually on January 11, 1905 and for this purpose he toured Bengal 'to block the influence of the anti-British Hindu elite' (Sengupta, 289) and to appeal to Muslims inclined towards separation. The demographic fact was that in Bengal there were 18 million Muslims and 12 million Hindus in 1905.

Muslims in Bengal were soon in support of partition since it created a kind of an awakening amidst Muslims and gave them a sense of empowerment. Sengupta observes: 'paradoxically, while Calcutta was fasting and mourning the partition with a hartal, many Muslims in Dhaka were celebrating the partition with prayers of thanksgiving' (Sengupta, 296).

Hindus in general saw partition with suspicion and were resentful—it was to them clearly an example of British policy aimed at separating the two groups, and they saw this policy being applied in full force by Mr Fuller in East Bengal. The Hindu response was the Swadeshi Movement and terrorist agitation. Amongst the Muslim leaders, Nawab Salimullah and Nawab Ali Chowdhury were 'in favour of continuance of the partition' as 'necessary for the protection of the interests of the Muslims' (ibid, 291). Muslim leaders in the Indian Congress, however, had opposed the idea of separation and the Muslim League—though first initiated in Dhaka—eventually veered away from Bengal, and

seemed to be led by UP Muslim interests. But under Nawab Salimullah's leadership, 'the number of Muslims supporting the partition' in East Bengal 'grew' (ibid, 309). The British government gave active support—even financial measures—to support his leadership. Most Muslims in Bengal had become dismayed by increasing Hindu rituals and symbolism associated with the anti-partition movement.

Annulment

In the end, the British government gave in to the Hindu Bengali campaign. The annulment of the partition of Bengal was announced by King George V at a durbar in Delhi on December 12, 1911. Obviously, the British Government had lost its appetite for enforcing its policy in Bengal because of the continued agitation. A decision was now taken to reunite the two wings and move the capital to Delhi.

The annulment of partition was a cause of celebration for Hindus but upsetting for Nawab Salimullah and his followers; it had Muslim leaders divided over the issue. According to Sengupta, Muslims in East Bengal were 'somewhat upset, although many of them welcomed the return of Calcutta as the provincial capital' (ibid, 326). Fazlul Huq, a protégée of the Nawab, was also initially bitter about the annulment. However, they would part ways by the end of the decade.

Dhaka University as a 'splendid compensation' for the annulment of Partition

All these events provide the context for the birth of the University of Dhaka. To put it bluntly, DU is the result of all the developments that led to the partition of Bengal in 1905 and its annulment in 1911. It was conceived to focus on Indian Bengali Muslim needs for tertiary education. Even if partition was to be annulled it would give their community the stimulus it needed to finally move towards gaining their rightful position in the administration of colonial East Bengal. As the Calcutta University Commission report revealed: 'The chief determining factor in the decision of the Government to make Dacca the seat of a University was doubtless the desire to accede to the demand for further facilities for the Muslim population who formed a vast majority in Eastern Bengal' (M A Rahim, *History of the Dhaka University*, 1). The Commission had noted that during the years of the first partition, there was noticeable improvement in education amidst the Muslims of the short-lived province.

In M A Rahim's *History of the University of Dhaka* (1981), we learn that among the reasons Muslim leaders were upset after the annulment of partition was their feeling that the 1911 decision would retard the 'material and education development' of their community that they felt had taken place in the years when they were able to reap the fruits of partition. When the Viceroy Lord Hardinge visited Dhaka on January 31, 1912 a delegation of Muslims of East Bengal that included Sir Nawab Salimullah, Nawab Syed Nawab Ali Choudhury, and A K Fazlul Haq had 'expressed their fears' that 'the modification of the partition of Bengal' could 'retard the educational progress of the community' (Rahim, 4). It was this delegation that first articulated the demand for the establishment of DU. To quote Rahim, 'As compensation for the annulment of the partition as well as protest against the general antipathy of the [sic] Calcutta