

শ্রী রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর -
 কামাধেনু-এই পিতৃদেবতায়
 স্মারিত মাতৃ দেবতায়
 স্মিত পাত্রে স্মিত দেবতায় ।
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 স্মারিত মাতৃ দেবতায়
 স্মিত পাত্রে স্মিত দেবতায় ॥

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শ্রী রবীন্দ্রনাথ ঠাকুর

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A poem written by Rabindranath Tagore for a magazine of Jagannath Hall.

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'.

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 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 Muslims had thus largely withdrawn from what was happening in colonial Bengal politically and culturally.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



Rabindranath Tagore visiting University of Dhaka during 1926. On the right Professor R C Majumder, famous Indian historian and DU teacher.

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 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

DU had developed from 1921 to 1947 in an atmosphere of remarkable communal harmony. The only disruption of the harmony occurred in the 1940s where the pre-partition riots occurring elsewhere in the subcontinent impacted the university's students on a few occasions.

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 University towards the Muslims, the deputation pressed [sic] a vigorous demand for a University of Dhaka' (ibid, 5). Hardinge, for his part, said that he would recommend this measure to the Secretary of State of the Government of India since he too believed that education would be 'true salvation' for the Muslims of the region.

Accordingly, 'on February 2, 1912, a communiqué was published stating the decision of the Government of India to recommend the constitution of a University of Dhaka' (ibid, 5). This was followed up by a letter sent to the Government of Bengal to come up with a scheme for setting up the university which, in turn, led to the formation of the Nathan Commission to come up with such a scheme.

Not surprisingly, some of the Hindu leaders of Calcutta opposed this decision in print and through speech-making. We learn from Rahim that they sent a delegation to the Viceroy on February 16, 1912 to convey their fears that 'the creation of a separate University of Dhaka would be in the nature of "an internal partition of Bengal"' (ibid, 5). This view is clear evidence of the way the formation of DU was so closely linked to the situation created by the partition of 1905 amidst people of both communities, or to put it somewhat differently, the people of East Bengal. To some extent their fears would be realised in that at least a few of the Muslim Bengalis who would strive for the second partition of the region would be DU graduates.

Hardinge disagreed with the contention of these Hindu leaders though and stated his intention to recommend to the Secretary of State the formation of DU. He stressed by way of a concession that he would suggest that the university be secular in orientation and not a 'Muhammadan' one (ibid, 6). However, in his 1922 Convocation, Lord Lytton stressed the main reason for the existence of the university: 'the University of Dhaka was a way of making up to the Muslims of East Bengal for the annulment of the partition of Bengal' (ibid, 1). He pointed out that the Nathan Commission had explicitly decided that they were designing the

institution as 'a splendid Imperial compensation' for the loss of partition. Lord Lytton ended his speech with a prophecy: 'this University is Dhaka's greatest possession, and will do more than anything else to increase and spread the fame of Dhaka beyond the limits of Bengal or even of India itself.' Prophetic words ended, even though one may now be inclined to doubt that the university is Dhaka's greatest possession and surely it is fair to say that its fame is now limited to the region, even if that! Lord Lytton's hope was that that DU would soon become 'the chief centre of Muhammadan learning' in India and would devote special attention to higher Islamic studies' (Choudhury, 26); arguably, this has to an extent been realised, one could add.

This reminds one that the Calcutta University Commission had recorded the view of someone from the Muslim community of the region who had expressed that a university set up there should be one where the community 'would have a voice in its guidance and there would be a faculty of Islamic Studies' (Rahim, 2). It was no doubt in response to this demand that in a letter dispatched on April 4, 1912 the Government of India invited the Government of Bengal to come up with a scheme of a university that would have a 'Faculty of Islamic Studies' to reflect the special needs of the people of East Bengal (ibid, 10). It is pertinent to point out here that DU had Arabic and Islamic Studies and Persian and Urdu among its 12 original subjects, reflecting the Islamic bias of the university at its inception. It can be pointed out too that now the university has a department of Islamic Studies, of Islamic History and Culture, as well as departments of Arabic, Persian and Urdu, that is to say, 4 out of 16 departments of the Arts Faculty. This is surely evidence on how the first and the second partition determined the academic orientation of the university in a definite way.

DU from its beginnings to the Second Partition of Bengal

Once DU was operational, it swiftly established a reputation of excellence as a new kind of university that combined residential as well as teaching facilities and tutorial supervision of students in the manner of its Oxbridge models. For some time at least, DU seemed set to fulfill the hope implicit in Lord Lytton's inaugural convocation speech that it would be Dhaka's greatest claim to fame in the wider world. Another hope was that 'the Dacca trained student' would prove to be a 'superior man' (ibid, 55). His hope was that such a man would be 'a type that shall be conspicuous both in learning and in politics' (Choudhury, 43). We remember that although he wanted it to be a centre of Islamic studies, he also wanted it to be secular.

In the years since Lytton delivered his convocation speech, the university appeared to fulfill all three of the Viceroy's hopes for a while. It became reputed for the quality of its teaching and research; the study of Islamic history and culture flourished and a secular strain was clearly evident, one reason being the curriculum and teaching but the other that Hindu students—constituting a majority till 1947, lived side by side with Muslim ones on or off campus. As a result of the second development, some of its graduates took the lead in making their part of the world a site for cultivating Islamic values and affiliating themselves with political developments in the rest of India that would soon favour the 'two nation theory' and the partition of India and the second partition of Bengal in 1947. Other Muslim Bengali graduates of the university though, came out of the university inculcated with secular values and proud of their Bengali, as well as Muslim heritage. These were the people who would ultimately become associated with Bengali linguistic nationalism, and I am thinking here of my teachers such as Professor Kabir Choudhury and Professor Khan Sarwar Murshed at this point, who studied in DU in the years leading to the second partition of Bengal but were leaders in the movement for Bangladesh.

At this point I am reminded of the 1942 convocation address delivered by the Diwan of Mysore, Mirza M Ismail, where he reminded graduates that those who conceived this institution had wanted it to be a 'synthesis of all that is good in the East and the West' (Serajul Islam Choudhury, 388). Gesturing to the beautiful ambience in which they were all present for the convocation, Ismail suggested that they inculcate the modernising impulses that had been transmitted to them at this site to society at large. Ismail was thus gesturing at the secularising, modernising impulse that many DU graduates would inculcate. This impulse would lead them to eventually oppose the Pakistani state bent on minimising the Bengali side of their people by claiming that it was important to embrace only the Islamic side and even learn Urdu in the process. Clearly, my teachers were products of the secular and liberal tendency and not the Islamising one. Here we can recall an earlier convocation speech, one delivered by G H Langley in 1926 where he emphasised how Salimullah Muslim Hall had been set up alongside Jagannath Hall, 'so that its students can come into contact with Hindu students and compete with them in Hindu rivalry' (Choudhury, 1988). We can also go back at this point to the words of Chancellor Francis Johnson, who in 1931 had stressed that though Salimullah Muslim Hall was built to meet the demands of Muslim students it was created as a dormitory where they could get a 'liberal education' and have the occasion to have 'free intercourse' with students living in Jagannath Hall (Choudhury, 183).

What I am suggesting here, then, is that two distinct strains developed in Dhaka University graduates in the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century. One would lead to the demand for the state of Pakistan, where Muslim Bengalis of the region would bind themselves to Muslims in the western areas of the subcontinent. These graduates would play an active role in creating and upholding an Islamic state. Another strain would lead to secular intellectuals dedicated to upholding the Bengali side of their culture at any cost. These are the people who would take up leadership roles in opposing the Pakistan regime and creating Bangladesh.

One final point should be made before I conclude. DU had developed from 1921 to 1947 in an atmosphere of remarkable communal harmony. The only disruption of the harmony occurred in the 1940s where the pre-partition riots occurring elsewhere in the subcontinent impacted the university's students on a few occasions. It was for this reason that in the last convocation speech delivered before partition by Professor Mahmood Hasan, the Vice-Chancellor of the university, could say that with the exception of the 'mean communal bickering' that had resulted in the death of a Muslim student earlier that decade, the university had been the site of 'a remarkable re-awakening among the Muslims of Bengal, one that had been welcomed by liberal Hindus of the region as well as the Muslims themselves. This is the glorious tradition of the University of Dhaka that has dominated its graduates/alumni for generations now!

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