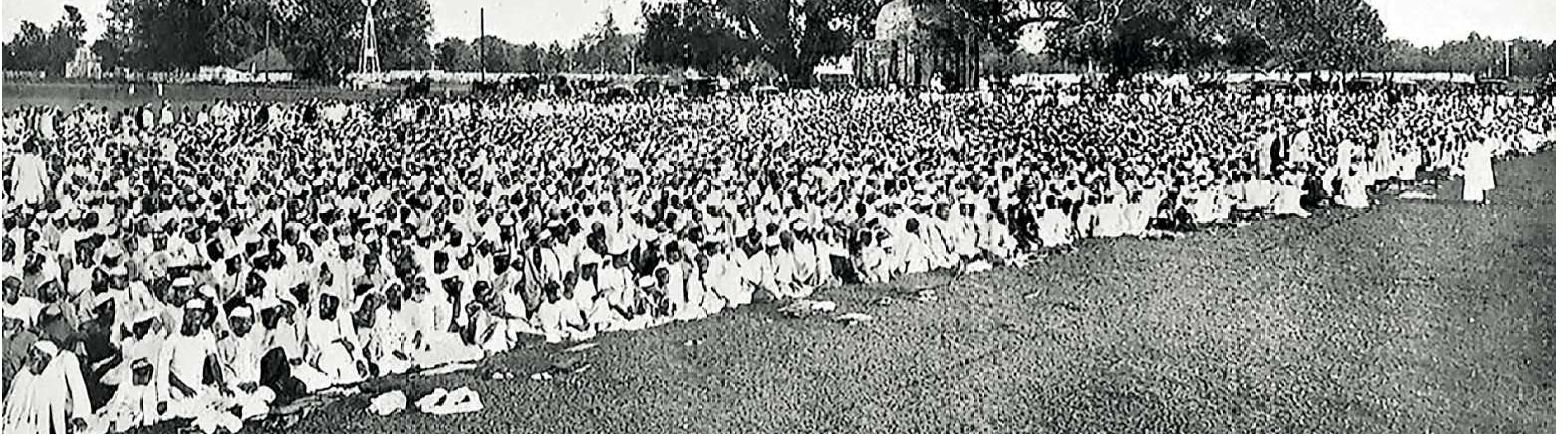

A mass meeting of Muslims held at Dhaka on September 4, 1906 in favour of the partition of Bengal. The photo was published in The Sphere on October 27, 1906 (Courtesy: Bangladesh on Record).

Bengali Muslims and their identity: From fusion to confusion

AHRAR AHMAD

One of the grand paradoxes facing Bangladeshis is expressed in the negotiations and contestations on the simple question about who they are, particularly in the context of the strains caused by the Universalist claims of their religion on the one hand and the particularist demands of their ethnicity and culture on the other.

Consider, for example, that in the Bengal Legislative elections of 1937 they demonstrated their ambivalence about themselves by voting largely in favor of independents, preferring A.K. Fazlul Huq's Krishak Praja Party to form a coalition Government, and rejecting the nationalist/communalist appeals of both the Congress and the Muslim League. But in 1946 that very population voted overwhelmingly in favor of the Muslim League in its quest for Pakistan thus embracing the religious distinctiveness of its identity. However, in 1970-71 a huge majority of the same people chose to repudiate that idea, and eventually fight a war, to assert a new consciousness of self that was anchored on linguistic/

Overcrowded train transferring refugees during the partition of India, 1947. This was considered to be the largest migration in human history.

A vendor is seen tying a rakhi on a boy in Calcutta on October 16, 1909. Following Rabindranath Tagore's call, many Hindus and Muslims in Calcutta, Dhaka and Sylhet tied rakhi threads as a symbol of unity to protest against the decision of partition of Bengal. The photo was published in The Sphere on December 4, 1909. Courtesy: Bangladesh on Record.

cultural determinants. This reveals the fraught nature of Bangladeshi identity, its duality, its schizophrenia. The "problem" is rooted in history and, as this essay will argue, in the "long 19th century" (1793-1905) when many of these tensions and contradictions evolved. (1)

It is worth remembering that Islam came from the outside, but Muslims in the region were primarily locals (though some non-Bengalis also arrived, ruled, preached, proselytized and settled). (2) What was striking is that there was no overt conflict between Islam and the variety of local religious convictions and observances that pre-existed here under the over-arching umbrella of Hinduism. (3) This may be traced to several factors.

The fact that Hinduism does not assert one God, one Church, one doctrine, one text, or one practice that determines the faith, may have led to a relative tolerance of diverse traditions and practices (although internally, caste stratification could be quite harsh and intractable). Similarly, Muslim rulers in India, with a few exceptions, were more interested in extracting revenues and administering a sprawling, often restless, empire than in saving souls, particularly in a distant province like Bengal. The "fire and sword" theory of forced conversions has little empirical validity. The Pirs, Fakirs and "holy men", around whom dargas and mazars (shrines and tombs) developed in Bengal, helped to spread the faith more through example and invitation, than confrontation or compulsion.

It is important to note that most of the people in the region were poor peasants, vulnerable to the whims of nature, and facing a common enemy in the tax collector. They were also tied together by the moral economy of the peasantry, where cooperation and mutuality were dictated by the circumstances of their life and the interests of collective survival and welfare. (4) Finally, as Akbar Ali Khan has noted, the distinctive openness of the village formations in Bengal dictated by nature and geography or, as Eaton has pointed out, the expanding frontiers of its settlements made possible by forest cutting, population movements and changing agricultural practices (from shifting cultivation patterns to wet-rice), indicated its accommodative and absorptive character. (5)

The arrival of Islam may have had deep and lasting consequences elsewhere in India. But in Bengal, it did not lead to significant departures or displacements in the continuities of its rural practices and rhythms. In fact, Islam's encounter with Bengal was long and quiet, its creeping advance almost surreptitious. Thus, everyone was taken by surprise when it was discovered in the late 19th century that in Bengal the number of Hindus (18m) and Muslims (17.5m) were almost the same. (6)

Some syncretistic impulses among the communities contributed to this indefiniteness about the "markers" of separation. Though some words and inflections could vary, and some food preferences unique, the language and cuisine remained essentially the same. Similarly, while some heroes and myths could cater to exclusive audiences, popular culture expressed in local musical forms (e.g., leto, pala, jhumur,and jari), village theater (e.g., jatra and gambhira productions), and folk literature (puthis and gitikas), manifested wide cross-over appeal. The vaisnav and sufic aesthetic and performative traditions were also not only compatible but overlapping in their mystical and allegorical representations. (7)

Admittedly, there were lines of distinctions between the communities - intermarriage was uncommon, social mingling limited, religious festivals easily tolerated but not commonly celebrated. But while these lines separated them, they did not divide them, nor lock them into hostile binaries.

The British arrival significantly aggravated those lines, not necessarily by sinister design, but certainly through the imperatives of colonial rule. This happened at different times and in various forms.

II

First, the British intervention in Bengal's agrarian structure through the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 profoundly affected the economic, social and political dynamics of the region. Supposedly predicated upon the need to maximize and rationalize land revenue, the strategy that was adopted was to transform some de facto revenue collectors into de jure land owners (zamindars) who agreed to deposit the hugely enhanced assessment levied by the British payable at an appointed time every year. (8)

These zamindars, and the intermediate title holders (based on a process of rent farming and sub-infeudation), (9) were mostly Hindus who had some money, education and experience through service to the British in comprador and "bridgehead" capacities. They seized upon this opportunity, and prospered in remarkable fashion. (10) The Muslims as the newly vanquished "enemy" were alienated, unprepared, and "lost ground" (in more ways than one), and swelled the ranks of the landless and artisanal classes.

Thus, the Hindus became the dominant class (though not the "ruling class" in a Marxist sense), and exploited the peasants through ruthless rack-renting excesses. It pitted Muslim agriculturalists (ryots and projas) against Hindu zamindars, and this was dramatically expressed in various peasant uprisings. (11) Moreover, the economic inequalities and social/educational disparities also widened psychological distances. Some in the newly emerging (mostly Hindu) middle-class "bhadralok" groups began to express a snobbish disdain for the "uncultured" (mostly Muslim) peasants. (12) This communalization of class became integral to the problem of identity later.

Second, the Census of India, introduced by Lord Mayo in 1872, was initiated for ostensibly benign and administrative reasons. However, this was the first time that Indians had to confront the British obsession with classification, and were forced to make self-conscious decisions about where they belonged. What was personal faith and private practice now became a matter of public declaration and official choice. What had been diffuse and permeable now became bounded and definitive. The consciousness of "difference" now located them within discrete categories, and became articulated as numerical realities. (13) This did not "cause" communal misunderstandings, but it certainly generated a consciousness of being distinct, created some wariness among groups, and provided the colonial power with the statistical artifacts of division and manipulation.

Third, the Partition of Bengal in 1905, which may have been based on administrative logic, caused deep and bitter misunderstandings between the communities. On the one hand there were predominantly Hindus who felt that dividing "Bengal", the mythicized motherland, was a dagger aimed at their very soul. On the other hand were mostly Muslims, who felt that this would provide them with advantages and opportunities that a "united Bengal" dominated by Hindus, could not. The protests against the decision, led by the Hindu "bhadralok", were passionate, lively and widespread. When the Partition was annulled in 1911 the Hindus felt vindicated, the Muslims betrayed. (14) But, what it rudely exposed was a lack of trust between the two communities with one unsure about the other's nationalist commitments, and the other convinced that the first was hostile to its interests.

III

The increasing distancing between the communities was a bit counter-intuitive. It had always been presumed that the Bengal Renaissance founded on a liberal, cosmopolitan and a rationalist world-view, buttressed by the process of urbanization and professionalization, and sustained by the advent of new communication technologies and "print capitalism" (leading to a proliferation of new media and publications), would all serve to modify religiously driven sentiments. Some of this did happen in the intellectually heady environment in the early 19th century when teachers and students of Hindu College, led by the charismatic and iconoclastic Vivien Derozio (who died when he was only 22), challenged the dogmas, deities and diets of Hinduism (many ate beef, drank alcohol, and mocked temple-based rituals).

These sentiments were expressed widely, in perhaps less flamboyant ways, in 19th century Bengal. Intellectuals like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dwarakanath Tagore, Iswar Chandra Bidyasagar, Dinabandhu Mitra, Upendra Kishore Ray, Akshay Kumar Dutta, Gnadanandini Devi and others, supported by like-minded groups and print platforms, pursued an agenda of social justice, educational reform and religious broadmindedness. (15)

But ironically, it also led to some unanticipated counter-currents. The British Orientalists (such as William Jones, H.H. Wilson, William Carey, H.T. Colebrook, James Prinsep and others) helped to stimulate a "classicist revitalization of a Golden Age of Hinduism" both in terms of its historical content and cultural aspiration, as David Kopf put it. (16) Similarly, the introduction of English education, important to the needs of the colonial bureaucracy and Christian Missionaries, did not generate the expected modernist response, but provoked a defensive reaction as Prof Abdur Razzaq has noted. (17) Western education did not provide a tool to question their faith, it provided the confidence to affirm it in more sophisticated ways.

This trend, combined with the more traditional sources of religious authority and learning, created a formidable reactionary force. Thus personalities like Radha Kanta Deb, Keshab Chandra Sen, Ramkrishna Paramhansa, Raj Narayan Basu, Nabin Chandra Sen, Haraprasad Sastri, the redoubtable Swami Vivekananda, and the hugely popular Bankim Chandra Chattopaddya (whose Vande Mataram became the obligatory hymn of Indian nationalism), generated organizations and newspapers that were part of this revivalist campaign. Huge festivals like the Hindu Mela (after 1867) and Shivaji Utsob (after 1902), reflected this zealousness, often tinged with a new emphasis on masculinity. (18)

The "traditionalist" group was also more affected by national trends where the themes, motifs and symbols of Hinduism were appropriated into the nationalist narrative, and the concepts of Hindu and Nation became increasingly intertwined. It was entirely expected that many of their adherents in Bengal would consider the Bengali Muslims to be the outsider, the interloper, the "other".

IV

But surprisingly, the Bengali Muslims were marginalized by the "modernist" group as well. The progressive impulses that were expected from the "enlightenment ideals" professed by this group did not cause a secular embrace of the other. It may be easy and tempting (and partly justifiable) to blame this on Hindu prejudice. But, perhaps the question may be a bit more complicated.

It may be instructive to consider the comparative position of Muslims. In education they lagged far behind. In 1855-56, out of 7216 students in the schools and colleges of Bengal, only 731 were Muslims, and the vast majority of them attended Madrassas. (19) In 1865, 9 Hindus received M.A. and 41 their B.A. degrees from Calcutta University. There were no Muslims in the first category, and only 1 in the second. Between 1855 and 1877, out of 1337 "natives" with B.A. degrees in Bengal, only 30 were Muslims, and out of 331 with M.A. degrees only 5 were Muslims.

These disparities in education were also reflected in the employment sectors. Muslims had been well represented in the professions till in the early 19th century. For example, even till 1851, they equaled the number of Hindu and English pleaders in Calcutta. But over the next 20 years, while 239 Hindus became pleaders, only 1 Muslim did. Syed Ameer Ali's memorandum to the Government in 1882 pointed out that of the 3720 employees working for the city of Calcutta, there were 3045 Hindus and only 166 Muslims. Similarly, out of 2007 gazetted posts, 850 were Hindus and only 77 Muslims. In other words, Muslims were less than 5% in the first category, and less than 4% in the second. (20)

The relationship between the communities faced other obstacles. Calcutta, the young city (founded only in 1690) and glittering imperial capital (second only to London), became the nucleus of political and economic power in Bengal. The Hindu bhadralok classes flocked there for education, advancement and "entertainment", and Calcutta became the hub of the "babu culture" that emerged. (21) Muslims were generally service providers and low level employees who went there for livelihood and subsistence and, even in 1941, constituted only 23% of the city's population.

Predictably, the two communities occupied two very different economic and spatial realities and became increasingly segregated. Muslims congregated in areas where they sought the comfort of numbers, the small opportunities provided by the micro-economies of enclave settlements, and religious (mosque-centered) fellowship. They were localized in places like Rajabazaar, Metiaburz, Topsia, Park Circus and pockets in Howrah and central Calcutta. This ghettoization was perhaps inevitable. But it provided formidable barriers to encouraging any intellectual or textual interactions between the two.

The bhadralok classes, which shaped and reflected the values and attitudes of Bengalis in the 19th century, had no meaningful encounter with Muslims in their lives. They did not attend the same schools, work in similar environments, or share the same neighborhoods. The fact that the Muslims were neither part of their social experience nor their literary imagination led to an epistemic disjuncture expressed in a lack of interest or curiosity about them. The Muslims were not the hated minority but, ironically, the invisible majority. They became "sous rature" as Derrida would say, a community "under erasure", (22) there but not "there", not expelled from, but not acknowledged in, the site of discourse, and gradually deleted from bhadralok cultural projects, practices and products.

The social and intellectual developments under the leadership of the Hindu literati in Bengal did not create the enabling conditions towards the formation of a Muslim Bengali identity. Their own Renaissance, beginning in the latter part of the 19th century, could have encouraged the forging of such a synthetic resolution of the "self". The reasons for this failure will be explored in a subsequent article.

Dr Ahrar Ahmad, Professor Emeritus, Black Hills State University, SD, US and Director General, Gyantapas Abdur Razzaq Foundation, Dhaka.

NOTE: The footnotes are available in the online version.