



Members of the Nathan Commission which was formed on May 27, 1912 by the Government of Bengal to prepare a complete scheme for the establishment of a university in Dhaka.

The making of Dhaka University and a new Society

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In his convocation speech at Dhaka University in 1922, Lord Lytton remarked, '... in my opinion this University is Dacca's greatest possession, and will do more than anything else to increase and spread the fame of Dacca beyond the limits of Bengal or even India itself. Within few years of the establishment of the University, Dhaka, once the provincial capital of Mughal empire, famed for its muslim worldwide, became known for its educational excellence. The establishment of the University opened up doors of higher education that were closed to the former Muslim service elites of Mughal empire in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The intellectual colonization of Bengal in the early decades of the nineteenth century undermined the position of earlier educated Muslim service elites.

The starting point of this intellectual colonization was Macaulay's infamous minute of 1835. This minute initiated the process of intellectual colonization. Ignorant of South Asian knowledge and education, Macaulay in his minute arrogantly declared 'I have never found one among them [Indians/South Asians] who could deny that a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.' As Macaulay's proposal for making English as medium of instruction was accepted, the old Mughal Persian knowledge

recruitment of Muslims in government services and also encouraging Muslims to embrace western education. The Earl of Mayo, Viceroy to Indian government articulated his opinion in a poignant language, 'so large and important a class, possessing a classical literature replete with works of profound learning and great value, and counting among its members a section specially devoted to the acquisition and diffusion of knowledge, should not stand aloof from active cooperation with our education system and should lose the advantages both material and social, which others enjoy'.

In the late nineteenth century as agriculture in rural hinterland was integrated with global cash crop

production, Bengal also witnessed the rise of a class of surplus farmers from the ranks of Muslim peasantry of East Bengal. Aspirant to be middle class, in the opening years of the twentieth century, these new elites invested in cultivating vernacular literature and demanded more access to government education. As the colonial government discovered in 1871 that Bengal had a Muslim majority, they also paid more attention to the democratization of the education system. Yet jobs in government sector were few and upper caste Hindus were deeply entrenched in these jobs. Incipient Muslim middle classes encountered fierce competition from them. The partition of Bengal, announced in 1903 and executed

in 1905, spoke to the aspirations of emerging Muslim middle classes. Hindu landholding and service elites were unnerved by the possibilities of their interests being undermined due to the partition though many among both Hindus and Muslims were genuinely inspired by patriotism and a concern for a Bengali identity. Yet no doubt, as Eric Bloomfield has put it, elite conflicts in a plural society framed the politics of Bengal in an era of mass nationalism.

Yet as partition materialized, newly constituted East Bengal and Assam Province made significant progress in Education. Before 1905, Eastern Bengal had very insignificant facilities in higher education. In 1906 the total number of college students in Eastern Bengal and Assam Province was 1698 and the total expenditure on the college education was 1,54,358. In 1912 the number of college students increased to 2560 and the total expenditure on the college education rose to 3,83,619. Yet, facing significant degree of popular organized movement primarily from Hindus, colonial government rescinded the Partition of Bengal in 1911.

This move obviously disappointed many among Muslim community in East Bengal. It was during Viceroy Lord Hardinge's visit to Eastern Bengal, a Muslim delegation, comprising Sir Nawab Salimullah, Nawab Syed Nawab Ali Choudhury, A.K. Fazlul Huq and some other leaders demanded a university in Dhaka. The Viceroy agreed with their demand of a university and

gave them words that he will highly recommend to the Secretary of the state to take proper initiative to establish a university in Dhaka. On February 2, 1912 in a press release Government declared, it had taken a decision to establish a university in Dhaka. Calcutta University Report says, '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 form a vast majority in Eastern Bengal.' This announcement produced a consternation among Calcutta based Hindu elite groups who opposed the foundation of Dhaka University. On 16 February, 1912 a deputation to Viceroy under the leadership of Dr. Rashbehary Ghose, an advocate of the Calcutta High Court, claimed that the establishment of Dhaka University would be a kind of internal partition. Viceroy negated the idea of 'internal partition' and assured that the university in Dhaka would be a secular university. The Secretary of State, in 1912, in his letter to Government of Bengal wrote that he wanted a university in Dhaka which would be a teaching and residential university bounded in a single area. Nonetheless, the Secretary of State, made it clear that he intended to make education accessible to the Muslim population of Eastern Bengal. He also suggested a faculty of Islamic Studies at Dhaka University.

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system of Muslim service elites was rendered redundant. As political power slipped out of their grip, Muslim service elites sought to preserve their cultural tradition and rejected the new education policy. Unencumbered by such cultural legacy, Hindu service elites switched to the new knowledge system and education and established a stranglehold on low level government jobs though this appeared to be truer in Bengal than in north India.

Nonetheless, as nineteenth century progressed the British were haunted by the fear of rebellion of imagined Muslim radicals. Since many in the community had been alienated from colonial rule, the British colonial establishment remained in dark about community elites' political inclinations. W. W. Hunter, a perceptive colonial bureaucrat in his book Indian Musalmans explored the possibility of winning over the Muslim elites to the side of the Government. He suggested

