MUSLIM SAHITYA SAMAJ CENTENARY

In the light of Shikha: A letter tainted by anachronism

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To the late thinker and writer
Kazi Abdul Wadud

Sri Charaneshu,
You have been resting in eternal sleep for more than fifty years now. You will never read this letter. Memory, conversation, politics, the world itself—these exist only for the living. Why, then, am I writing this one-sided letter to you? I write on the occasion of the centenary of the Muslim Sahitya Samaj. The founding of the *Muslim Sahitya Samaj* and the launch of the journal *Shikha* in 1927 constitute a golden chapter in the history of Bengali intellectual life. Today, that chapter completes one hundred years.

On this occasion, when Morshed Shafiul Hasan invited me to write something for a forthcoming volume, I could not decline his request, despite the endless pressures of professional life. Although I am an interested reader of the history of the *Muslim Sahitya Samaj* and the journal *Shikha*, I am not a researcher of the subject. It is not as though I can add any new factual material to what has already been collected. Yet, while revisiting your debates and, in particular, reading your writings, I found within myself an irrepressible urge to enter into conversation with you. [...]

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When I read about the *Muslim Sahitya Samaj* and *Shikha*, a particular quality of your sense of time becomes strikingly clear to me—especially when contrasted with the later period (1937–1947). In the years 1926/27 to 1931, despite the many justified and unjustified grievances that Hindus and Muslims held against one another, Partition was unimaginable. You—and perhaps everyone in the late 1920s and early 1930s—held this historical reality as a given. The absence of the assumption that Partition might offer a solution to Hindu–Muslim antagonism (as Abul Mansur Ahmad or Shyama Prasad Mukherjee would later come to believe) created a space for your thinking that became impossible once Bengali Muslims began to invest themselves in the imagination of "Pakistan".

You assumed that Muslims and Hindus were historically and territorially bound to live together, and it was within this assumption that you reflected on the problem of modernity for Bengali Muslims. You observed that from Rammohan Roy to Rabindranath Tagore, Bengali Hindu society had pursued modernity and nationalism, yet within their notions of modernity or "nation", Bengali Muslims remained marginalised, neglected, or in some cases almost entirely forgotten. Nor was this accusation unfounded. Rabindranath himself acknowledged it in various writings and statements. [...]

Around 1940, the Pakistan Movement emerged as a response to this long-standing erasure, opening up the possibility of political sovereignty for Bengali Muslims. One might say that the period from 1947 to 1971 represents a linear history of the unfolding of that sovereignty. If necessary, that journey would begin by letting go of Hindu partnership. Without Partition, such political sovereignty would not have come into the lives of Bengali Muslims—or would have arrived much later. I was born after Partition, and therefore all my thinking inevitably accepts its reality.

Yet in the years 1926–1931, the conditions shaping your thought were different. Partition still lay beyond imagination. You believed that the pursuit of political and national sovereignty for both Bengali Muslims and Hindus, despite countless grievances and resentments, would have to be undertaken in mutual contact, hand in hand. That is why your thinking was not as directly political as it was cultural. [...]

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Thought does not consist of argument alone; it seems to me that thought also possesses a disposition, a temperament, even a character. Since your discussion of Hindu–Muslim antagonism begins from the cultural premise that neither can exist without the other, I discern in your thinking five qualities or traits that help me clarify my own intellectual project as well.

You never imagined that this problem could have a geopolitical solution; nor do I believe—while fully accepting, indeed welcoming, Bangladesh's political sovereignty—that political division can offer any way of understanding, let alone addressing, the complexities of our shared history. I do not deny that division may, under certain conditions, become necessary. But such division is a contingent arrangement. The deeper question is this: if a genuine dialogue is to be sustained between two contending communities who share the same language and belong to the same cultural tradition, despite their many differences, what might be the conditions of that dialogue?

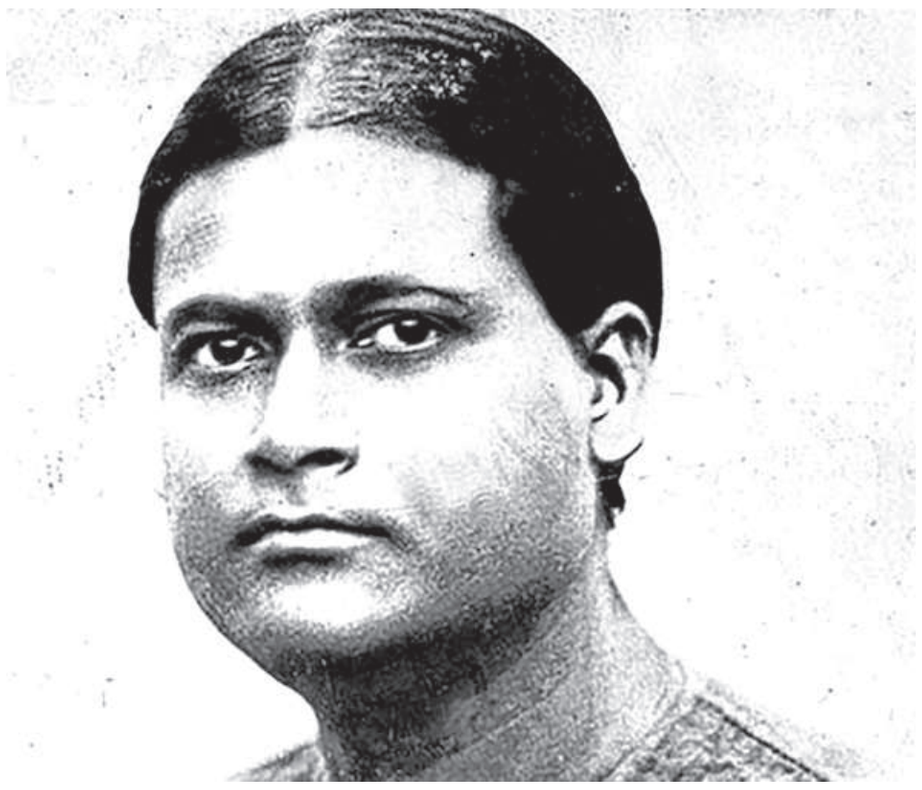
With this question in mind, I have read a number of your writings from the *Shikha* period (and later as well), and in the character of your thought I find, at least, a constellation of five qualities worth reflecting upon. First, your aversion to intensity; second, the honesty and courage of your thinking; third, your refusal to sever yourself entirely from those whom you criticise; fourth, your constant attentiveness to the idea of the common good—a trait that often found expression in your use of the word *Prem* (love); and fifth, the final disposition of your thinking that I wish to note: your refusal to think from the vantage point of the majority. [...]

Let me now elaborate, in some detail, on those dispositions of your thinking that remain relevant to me even today. [...]

One. Avoiding intensity in debate

You made this point in a letter written in the month of Kartik, Bengali year 1344 (October, 1937), to your friend "Taslim", also known as Muhammad Wazed Ali (1896–1954). You wrote, "You have expressed disappointment that you did not find in me a strong enough intensity of attachment to the past." In articulating the character of your thought, you went on to say: "Your disappointment is not difficult to understand. But it is intensity itself that I fear—and I believe everyone ought to fear it; this, you see, is my conviction."

A closer reading of your letter makes it clear that by "intensity" you meant one-sidedness, a monocular mode of judgement. Your friend had argued that "so much debris has become entangled with whatever is good in religion that unless religion is entirely discarded, there can be no human welfare; otherwise, humanity will continue to entangle itself in endless complications." Your response was: "Good and evil have always coexisted; the seeker, according to necessity, distinguishes between the two and proceeds along the path of life with the aid of



Kazi Abdul Wadud (1894-1970)

that discernment."

You further argued: "You will find an example of this even within your scientism—it is evident that alongside it, a fascination with destruction has also found a place of honour in the human mind. Who, then, can separate true scientism from this destructive impulse? No one but humanity's concern for the common good—that devotion to society which we call moral or religious sensibility." Otherwise, you wrote, "scientism is nothing more than a purified intellect; ... a clear intellect is merely a powerful instrument, nothing more. With it, mountains and forests may be levelled to create new settlements, and with the same ease, a brother's throat may be cut."

In today's world, amid a global environmental crisis, you might no longer have described the technological capacity to fell mountains and forests as an unqualified good. Yet the logic of your opposition to "intensity" remains easy to grasp. If Muslims and Hindus wish to carry their relationship forward amid their many conflicts, they must avoid this one-sided gaze—whether directed at themselves or at the other. You upheld this argument throughout your life. [...]

Two. Honesty and courage in thought

No thinker can avoid one-sidedness of thought without valuing honesty. Yet courage is also required to give expression to that thought. One may be honest in one's thinking and still, out of fear of public opinion, refrain from articulating the truth one has grasped. You, however, possessed that courage—perhaps because you were willing to endure censure and sharp criticism. From what I have read and understood of you, you maintained this position throughout your life.

It is well known that during the period of *Shikha*, the publication of your essay *Sammohit Musalman* (The Hypnotised Muslim) in *Nabaparyay* provoked the wrath of *Monthly Mohammadi*. And yet, criticising one's own community is, in a sense, easier; others within the *Shikha* circle did so as well. What is far more difficult is to speak uncomfortable truths about a community with which one is in conflict, especially when one does so at that community's own invitation.

In India, I have observed that orthodox Marxist Muslim historians have spoken out forcefully against Muslim communalism, while assuming that Hindu Marxists would take responsibility for criticising Hindu communalism. The reasoning behind this is easy enough to understand. But you did not take this convenient path.

Let me return once more to your lecture on *Hindu-Musalmaner Birodh* (Hindu–Muslim Conflict) delivered at Santiniketan. Here, you also enjoyed Rabindranath Tagore's support and encouragement. Tagore wrote:

"When the mind, overwhelmed by the horrors of Hindu–Muslim conflict in this country, becomes breathless with despair and cannot see where this barbarity will end, one occasionally glimpses, from afar, bridges that embrace the two opposing shores with both arms. When the generosity of Abdul Wadud Saheb's intellectual disposition appeared to me as one such broad pathway of reconciliation, I bowed to him with renewed hope. Alongside this, I perceived his thoughtfulness, his subtle and impartial faculty of judgement, and the distinctiveness of his expressive power in the Bengali language."

Tagore was not exaggerating here. I remain struck by the way you could claim, as part of your own heritage and inheritance—through a combination of critique and appreciation—the nineteenth-century Hindu religious movements led by figures such as Rammohan Roy, Debendranath Tagore, Ramakrishna, Keshab Chandra Sen, and Vivekananda, much as you claimed Kabir or Dadu of the Bhakti movement as your own. You wrote:

"This Hindu religious awakening is not merely the pride of Bengal; it is the pride of the whole of India."

At the same time, you reminded your audience that when the proponents of this movement attempted to argue that "Hindu civilisation is the greatest civilisation in the world", that Hindu identity assumed a *fierce* or *terrifying*

form in the eyes of Muslims. You then offered an observation of remarkable foresight—one that, to my mind, remains true even today:

"There is a striking resemblance between this fierce manifestation of Hinduism and the Wahhabi doctrine within Islam. The origins of both lie in the same source. The Wahhabi reaction arose from the weakness of the Muslim world; likewise, this fierce Hinduism was born out of centuries of weakness and failure among Hindus. ... In the minds of Muslims today, hostility towards Muslims has come to be seen as one of the most prominent identifying features of Hinduism."

Three. Your cosmopolitanism

This disposition runs through every page of your writing. Your modern *cosmopolitan mind*—to borrow, or rather to accept the invitation of, the late Binoy Ghosh's phrase—seeks to draw what is best from every tradition. I often find myself wondering how your audience responded when, at the fourth annual session of the *Muslim Sahitya Samaj*, you presented a paper on Goethe in the month of Chaitra, 1336 (March, 1930). There is no way of knowing. Yet it is not difficult to see that through Goethe you were shaping your own ethical ideal of life—a process that would continue into your later years through your engagement with Rabindranath Tagore and your translation of the Qur'an.

You were attempting to situate your Bengali life within a larger moral vision. You wrote, "There was no intensity of ethnic self-attachment in Goethe"—once again invoking your aversion to "intensity". It is clear that you were not a radical revolutionary of any extreme persuasion. You did not wish to relinquish either your commitment to universal humanism or your deeply felt sense of Muslim identity.

Four. Your theory of love

In May 1946, at the fifth session of the Gulistan Literary Circle founded by your friend S. Wazed Ali—at a time when the Pakistan Movement was gathering force—you presented a paper entitled *Grihajuddher prakkale* (On the Eve of Civil War). In that essay, you described Hafiz as "the master of the path of love". And not only here: across the entire terrain of your writings, one finds this motif of love or affection woven throughout.

You sought to touch the *bhuma* (infinite). You wished to be human before being Muslim—yet also to be both, deeply. And this becoming, you insisted, can never be complete unless one condition is fulfilled: "unless love is given to the soul". What, then, is this path of love? Is it merely emotion? You clarify the matter further in your discussion of Rammohan Roy: "There are two clearly discernible currents in Rammohan's genius—on the one hand, he is a thinker, skilled in judgement; on the other, he is a lover of humanity." Once again, love returns as a central idea.

Indeed, love permeates every layer of your thought. You go on to explain with greater clarity: "Rammohan was well acquainted with the medieval saints. But his great difference from them lies in this: unlike them, he was not a devotee and poet; he was a devotee and a seeker of human welfare—and the aim of that welfare was the enhancement of everyday worldly life."

You approached the question of Hindu–Muslim antagonism in similar terms elsewhere: "At the root of our country's political failure lies the pitiable self-absorption and lovelessness of our educated classes." What does this *lovelessness* mean? You explain: "If it is said that at the dawn of political consciousness they worshipped the deity of contentment, and today they worship the deity of discontent, it may sound unpalatable, but it may not be untrue. They have failed to grasp that the 'country' consists of people of many classes and many levels of consciousness, and that service to the country means tireless striving for the improvement of all those lives—this understanding ... could not be conveyed to those who were active in the political sphere." [...]

Five. Rejecting the position of the majority

In a letter written to Abdul Qadir, published in the Falgun–Chaitra issue of the year 1337 (February–March, 1931), you wrote that, should elections be held, you would stand not for separate electorates for Muslims but rather with the camp favouring joint electorates. Needless to say, this was still a time when Partition could not yet be imagined. Yet the question of who constituted the majority and who the minority had already been firmly established in public debate. Considered across the whole of India, Muslims were a minority—what you called the "smaller group"—while Hindus were the majority, the "larger group".

You wrote that "in the realm of politics, it is virtually impossible for the larger group to renounce the desire for dominance", because it is "intoxicated by the pride of numbers". "The resolution, therefore, lies in this," you argued: let that dominance remain, but let it be exercised in a manner as beneficial as possible for all sections of the country. And this can only happen if the smaller group, casting aside the spirit of factionalism, devotes itself to creative endeavour and thereby guides the larger group along the path of the common good. "... To many this may sound like a riddle. But in truth, this may well be the law of the world. Ibsen has said: The strongest man is he who stands in the minority of one."

It goes without saying that Pakistan did not come into being by following your counsel. No community trusted that its welfare could be secured while remaining in a "minority" position. Yet after Partition, you spent your entire life in Kolkata, voluntarily becoming a member of a minority community. You had no desire whatsoever for the "pride of numerical dominance". In this, I discern a moral summons that is profoundly necessary in our own time.

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Let me now return to my own time and ask why your thinking—and especially the thinking of your *Shikha* period—continues to draw me so powerfully. It draws me because within your thought I find a standpoint and a method from which to reflect on Bengali history while situated in today's globalised world. It is not exactly the same standpoint; rather, in your time I glimpse a refracted image of my own—much as in a mirror the left appears as the right. For between the time of *Shikha* and my own lies the trench-like divide carved by the politics of Partition.

As a result, the historical fact that East Bengal is today an independent and sovereign nation-state—a state that could not have come into being without 1947, and whose emergence created the possibility of a sovereign national life for Bengali Muslims by displacing what was experienced as "Hindu dominance"—must be acknowledged with respect. Bearing that respect in mind, and with a sense of kinship towards Bengali Muslims, I must nevertheless reflect on Hindu–Muslim antagonism within the broader history of Bengal, and on its possible resolutions—or, if no final resolution is conceivable, on the many small, provisional, everyday settlements that must constantly be reworked and renewed. And I do so while standing within a globalised, planetary world.

Today, Bengalis from both Bangladesh and West Bengal are dispersed across the globe. The solution to Hindu–Muslim antagonism that Partition offered was, fundamentally, geopolitical in nature. It enabled us to bind "place" to "culture", as Abul Mansur Ahmed once did in his book *Pak-Banglar Culture*. Theories of "Indian domination" or "Calcutta's dominance" likewise emerged from this coupling of place and culture. Even the pejorative phrase that has recently entered Bangladesh's political vocabulary—"agents of India"—has been made possible by this imagined spatial division of Bengali-speaking people. Without a political "solution" to Hindu–Muslim conflict, such terms would not have come into being.

It is precisely because of globalisation that this geopolitical solution no longer seems sufficient today. Bengalis on both sides now meet, converse, form friendships, and recognise one another—not only within their respective countries but also across the many parts of the world to which Bengalis have dispersed. Without 1971, would there have been such friendships, such movements back and forth, such rediscoveries of one another? The globalised Bengali today is no longer defined solely by India or Bangladesh; many now hold two or more passports. And yet it would be naïve to assume that old currents of conflict no longer circulate within these new identities. Even within friendship, one must swim against the undercurrents of difference in order to sustain it. And there is no obligation to do so—we sustain these ties out of our own volition. Hindu and Muslim Bengalis have been neighbours for a very long time; the history of that shared neighbourhood is far deeper and older than the history of our divided nations.

That is why I say that, although you and I belong to different eras, we share a common point of departure when thinking, as Bengalis, about the history of antagonism between Bengali Muslims and Hindus. You thought from a time before Partition could even be imagined as a practical solution. You wrote while claiming the cultures of both Hindu and Muslim Bengalis as your own heritage. I am one among the many Bengalis scattered across the world. I am not even a citizen of India. I, too, have no reason not to regard both Bengalis as my heritage. You never sought a political or geographical solution to questions of historical and cultural difference. It is here that I find something to learn from you—or, to put it differently, a reason to claim you as part of my own heritage and lineage.

It is in this spirit that I have tried to articulate some of what I learn from you, drawing especially on your writings from the *Shikha* period on Hindu–Muslim antagonism. Yet today, as the line goes, "Others abide our question; thou art free." And so, like the disciple Ekalavya, I have placed you within my mind in the seat of Dronacharya and spoken these words to you.

Yours respectfully,
Dipesh Chakrabarty
Chicago, 11 December 2025

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