

Recasting the Region: Language, Culture and Islam in Colonial Bengal

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Bangladesh today is the only nation-state in the Indian subcontinent with levels of ethnic homogeneity similar to Western or Central Europe. It does have some minority communities – ‘tribal’ people, Urdu or Bihari speakers, and in religious terms Hindus, Buddhists and Christians – but with more than 90 per cent of the population being Bengali-speaking Muslims there is far more uniformity than in India, Pakistan and Nepal with their hundreds of languages and multitude of religious identities. Bangladesh’s homogeneity has been the result of successive waves of marginalization and exclusion, often associated with extreme discrimination and violence: first, over the 19th and first half of the 20th century the exclusion of Muslims from a dominant high-caste and Hindu notion of what it meant to be ‘properly’ Bengali (and ‘Indian’), then after the creation of Pakistan in 1947 (which then encompassed Bangladesh as ‘East Pakistan’), the exclusion of a strong sense of Bengali identity from what it meant to be properly Muslim and Pakistani; and finally, after the Bangladeshi nation attained statehood in an exceptionally bloody liberation struggle, the exclusion from the national body politic of non-Bengali speakers, as well as violence and persecution against anybody who is either not Muslim enough or too Islamic to fit into a hotly contested national ‘mainstream’.

To its many detractors along the way, Bengali Muslim identity has often appeared as fickle, contradictory and ill-developed. How could anybody who professed such love for the Bengali language then refuse the leadership of a Hindu elite that included the greats of Bengali literature and culture – men like Rabindranath Tagore or Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay? And how could a population that was more than any other in the region in favour of Jinnah’s demand for a separate Pakistan then go on to reject Pakistani ideas of national culture after Partition had been achieved? Such apparent paradoxes were in fact products of political circumstance, not matters of cultural substance. As Neilesh Bose demonstrates in this encyclopedic and important study, there was a remarkably stable and intellectually well-developed identity at the heart of what it meant to be Muslim Bengali which just happened not to fit into the hegemonic identity models of either India or Pakistan. It was developed not so much in the realm of politics and through the language of nationalism but in conversations about language, literature and culture spanning a number of civil society institutions and journals over the early 20th century. Abul Mansur Ahmed, a writer-activist whom Bose

quotes often in the book, was a typical protagonist of this debate. He first opposed then became a stalwart of the Pakistan movement, and soon after found himself in a Pakistani jail for his support for Bengali language rights. Or take Abu Jafr Shamsuddin, who is quoted in programmatic fashion right at the outset of the book. Only two years after the horrors of the war against Pakistan in which Bangladesh was born, he could declare without qualification or irony that support for Pakistan earlier in his life had been the only truly correct 'revolutionary' position to take.

For Shamsuddin, Abul Mansur Ahmed and the many other poets, writers, polemicists and academics discussed in Bose's book, Muslim Bengali identity was held up, as it were, by three conceptual anchor points around which ongoing and increasingly sophisticated debates revolved. They were class, language and religion, all inextricably linked to each other.

The idea that a single vernacular language could be the bedrock of one's political identity was the direct result of colonial modernity (a point insufficiently developed by Bose). The Bengali comprador elite – mostly Hindu – were the first to realize that in the age of mass education, modern bureaucracy and print, proficiency in a modern 'national' language was needed to benefit from new opportunities. They largely ditched the exclusivity of Sanskrit as a literary and ritual language and developed modern 'high' Bengali into a literary medium capable of taking on English in most aspects of life. Literary sensibility and socio-economic change combined to produce a new 'middle-class' stratum, usually referred to in the wider literature on Bengal as Bhadrak ('respectable people'). Muslims were almost immediately excluded from this development, even though – or rather precisely because – they had played a prominent part in vernacular literary production in pre-colonial times. Before the British came, Bengal had been under the overlordship of a Muslim aristocracy who, as Bose points out in a substantial section at the beginning of his book, were the first to sponsor literary activity in the regional language, often without much religious prejudice or preference. Patronage for Bengali went side by side with patronage for Urdu, Arabic and Persian, and covered specifically Hindu as well as Muslim literary forms and traditions.

For the Bhadrak this old Muslim Bengali culture quickly became the primary 'other' to define oneself against. The Bengali Hindu high-caste elite was both a beneficiary of colonial rule, and one of the earliest and most outspoken proponent of an emerging Indian nationalist movement against the British. Demonization of the old Muslim culture worked very well to express the somewhat schizophrenic character of their position. The world of the Muslim Nawabs of old could be identified with effete aestheticism and religious ignorance as well as with an unwillingness or inability to stand up against colonial incursions. As one of Bose's Muslim Bengali writers recalls, the name of Siraj ud-Daula, the Sultan who lost Bengal to the East India Company at the battle of Plassey in 1757, became a common term of abuse that middle-class Hindus used against Bengali Muslims who dared to raise their head above the parapet. The new Bengali literary culture called for a cleansing of written Bengali of Persian and Arabic influences and often took on a virulently anti-Muslim tone in its subject matter. The most famous and well-studied example of this tendency was Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay (d. 1894), author of many famous novels in modern Bengali, and creator of one of India's most iconic nationalist songs – *Vande Mataram* – which has often been seen as deeply offensive to Indian Muslims both inside and outside of Bengal. Others were less overtly communal, for instance Nobel laureate, poet and philosopher Rabindranath Tagore, but even his work would be seen by many Bengali Muslims as entangled in an inextricably Hindu sensibility and literary agenda.

Of crucial importance for the story of Muslim Bengali identity formation was the fact that class differences coincided almost perfectly with religious differences not only at the top but also at the bottom of the social divide. The majority of Bengal's impoverished peasantry was also Muslim, particularly in the East of the region, a vast mass of people to be both controlled and feared by Hindu commercial middlemen and absentee landowners. For much of the late 19th and early 20th centuries this antagonism translated into a pervasive sense of sexualized dread in Hindu elite consciousness which in many ways resembled racist stereotypes elsewhere; the Bengali Muslim peasant was a creature irredeemably backward and ignorant but also more 'manly' and more violent than the Bhadrak Hindu. Unease turned into acute fear as the political game of late colonialism moved towards a system of electoral representation. In a fully democratic world,

the Bhadrakalok would always constitute a minority and have to accept the political predominance of the more numerous Muslims who would naturally seek to get their own back against their established class enemy. As Joya Chatterji has argued, such calculations led the provincial Hindu-dominated Bengal Congress movement to go against Gandhi's often stated belief in a united India, and to support the partition of the subcontinent and their province. Letting Pakistan have the Eastern half of Bengal may have been painful but also meant that the Western half could be a Hindu majority province where elite interests seemed more secure.

From the point of view of the Muslim Bengali literati keen to develop a strong cultural identity of their own, class profoundly shaped their thinking about language and religion. It was inconceivable to think about Muslim Bengali self-determination without also immediately thinking about peasant politics. This gave Muslim Bengali cultural discourse a strikingly 'left-wing' flavour from the start. There was to be no viable Muslim Bengal without a massive rural uplift and education campaign, and without substantial change to rural property relations. Many (but by no means all) of the writers discussed by Bose flirted with the Communist Party of India, a newly emerging force in the 1930s and 1940s, and for a long time the only space where Hindu and Muslim cadres could work together with a clear appreciation of each other's identity needs. Most others had at least some connection with Fazlul Huq's Krishak Praja Party, a Muslim-dominated but not expressively anti-Hindu agriculturalist party that dominated electoral politics in the late 1930s and early 1940s.

The close association between Muslim Bengaliness and peasant life also imposed a certain logic on language politics (which is often described by Bose but not consistently turned into a larger argument): because Bengali Muslim self-determination entailed massive social reform for the masses it had to operate in a vernacular language that the masses could understand. Following (often very simplistic and Western) pedagogic ideas of 'mother tongue' and education, this had to be some form of Bengali. Pakistani nationalists from the East could not live with Urdu – which the Muslim League movement pushed as India's only authentically 'Muslim' language – with the same ease as their counterparts in the West. Over there, the peasantry also did not speak Urdu but other vernacular languages like Punjabi, Sindhi or Pushto. But because the Pakistan movement was much more strongly rooted in new middle-class and landowner interests who could easily operate in several languages simultaneously, this was of no great bother for many of the activists involved. (The most elite sections of the Muslim League in Bengal – men like Khwaja Nazimuddin or the Ispahani industrial family – were similarly comfortable with Urdu and nonchalant about Bengali language rights, but they remained isolated and never represented the movement as a whole.) Bose takes characteristic care not to overstate the hostility to Urdu amongst an emerging Bengali Muslim cultural movement – many voices in the debate in fact advocated a dialogue and were quite happy to borrow ideas from Urdu writers such as Iqbal and Hali. But – and that is an important distinction that could have been brought out more explicitly – these activists no longer possessed the same easy multilingualism of a time when it was perfectly normal to operate in two or three languages according to context. Muslim Bengal had entered the modern age where concerns over mass culture and mass education made such subtleties impossible to sustain. 'Mother-tongue' and 'official' language recognition became overriding concerns.

The Muslim aspect of Muslim Bengali identity was present right from the start, even if this did not necessarily mean that Islam had to be discussed in narrowly 'religious' terms. It was an integral part of cultural life as highlighted in the very name of the first literary bodies under review in Bose's book: the Bangiya Muslim Sahitya Samiti of 1911 or the Muslim Sahitya Samaj of 1926 never had to spend much thought on why they were constituted as specifically Muslim bodies. The demarcation work had already been done for them by Hindu Bhadrakalok literati and their project of excluding Muslim cultural traces from Bengali high culture. The main imperative for the Muslim Bengali intelligentsia was not to prove that they were really different from Hindus but that they too could develop a literary culture in their Bengali 'mother tongue' that could compare with what the Bhadrakalok had achieved for their community. This means that – at least as far as the protagonists of Bose's account are concerned – the theme of 'cleansing' Islam from 'Hindu' accretions was far less dominant in Bengal than in other parts of India. Several of Bose's protagonists claimed orthodox religious expertise as 'calim' or 'maulana', while others advocated decidedly daring and heterodox interpretations of Islam in the pages of Bengali literary magazines. But by and large,

Islam and what it meant to Bengali peasant culture was considered as a given, as a positive resource, as a vehicle of revolutionary energy and of a radical ideal of egalitarianism.

Bose's account is driven by a highly sympathetic understanding of the people and ideas presented in his book. He is patently keen to show the reader with a marathon roll call of writers, magazines, literary organizations and individual texts how much creative thinking and cultural energy both the Bhadrakalok elite of early 20th-century Bengal and the Pakistani leadership of the 1950s and 1960s had misunderstood, denigrated and suppressed. He is clearly right in doing so, especially as even contemporary scholarship on Bengal – one of the most prominent, well-established and advanced in all of South Asian historiography – has managed to fill entire libraries on the Bhadrakalok and the 'Bengal Renaissance' but rarely has had anything much to say about Muslim Bengalis beyond of what Hindu elite thinkers thought of them. Similarly, much debate on the Pakistan movement today skirts round the issue of East Pakistan, as from a nationalist Pakistani perspective this is a part of the national history that is embarrassing and better forgotten. Bose adds substantially to what we know about the Pakistan movement in the East. Its politics have been studied in classic accounts like Taj ul-Islam Hashmi's Pakistan as 'Peasant Utopia', but nobody so far (with the partial exception of Andrew Sartori) has explored the solid and extensive *intellectual* and *literary* foundations of Muslim Bengali identity of the period in comparable depth to Bose. The widespread notion that somehow Pakistan as an idea was cooked up by Urdu-writing intellectuals and only received its manpower and cannon fodder from the East has to be thoroughly revised. While Venkat Dhulipala claims in a recent intervention that Pakistan was really a vision of an Islamicist state right from the start, Bose's account will immediately prove that such statements don't really survive impact with evidence from Bengal.

Bose's aim is to reconstruct and to give a voice, and only with lesser urgency to analyze and make sense of, and hardly ever at all to critique. When Bose speaks of 'Recasting the Region' he simply means to say that the interweaving of religious and regional identities in emerging Muslim Bengali thought does not fit in with the standard ideas expressed by Indian and Pakistani nationalist positions. This is an interesting and important point in itself, but a thorough critique and problematization of Bengal as a region of Indian historiography it is decidedly not – let alone an intervention into the long over-due debate about what 'region' as an analytical category should mean for the historiography of South Asia.

Bengaliness itself is not something that ever needs to be constructed or delineated in Bose's account: it simply is. None of the writers discussed could ever be anything other than Bengali, when in fact the boundaries of the province of Bengal towards Bihar in the West, Orissa in the South and Assam in the North were always contested and porous, and its main urban centres always cosmopolitan. How is it, for instance, that the Calcuttan Muslim intellectual Abul Kalam Azad, is dismissed as an 'up-country, Urdu speaking, non-Bengali' (p. 48) without further discussion of his ideas or why? Or that 'Urdu-speaking' Bengali aristocrats such as Nazimuddin do not seem to fit into the subject matter? It seems to be taken as a given that only the off-spring of Bengali 'mother-tongue' families can count truly as a part of Bengal intellectual life. This is the end-product of a process of Muslim Bengali identity formation projected back to its beginning.

Throughout the book, we mostly hear the voices of Muslim Bengali intellectuals and occasionally their detractors, and see the outside world only through their eyes. What lies beyond this gaze does not seem to matter, be it other parts of India or the wider world. Again, little details point to larger problems. It is revealing, for instance, how Bose quotes the great poet Nazrul Islam speaking of one 'Anwar Pasha' as the more conservative and reactionary 'brother' and counterfoil to one 'Kamal Pasha'. Bose identifies the latter with Ataturk to give the reader some sense of what is going on, but does not even attempt to identify with the former. He was of course the Young Turk dictator of World War One vintage, Enver Pasha, who was neither Ataturk's brother nor, as it happens, really fits Nazrul's description as a religious conservative and pro-British toady. This does not seem to bother Bose, after all his topic is Nazrul Islam and not Turkish history. In a similar vein, a few pages later, we hear that Muslim Bengali intellectuals discussed various leaders of the Muslim world, as well as European nationalists such as Garibaldi and Mazzini. One of them is a person called 'Jaghlul Pasha'. This may well be an approximation of how he would be spelt in Bengali, but why is it not worth identifying him as Sa^cd Zaghlul, and explaining that he was the leader of the Egyptian

Wafd Party? Later on the book, Muslim Bengali intellectuals are reported to have engaged with Ernest Renan, French proto-anthropologist and thinker on religion. Not a word is devoted to the fact that Renan, who was long dead at that point, may have been of relevance because he had a series of well-publicized debates with the Iranian pan-Islamicist radical Jamal ud-Din Al-Afghani (who also visited Calcutta) who in turn had some heated exchanges with Sir Sayid Ahmad Khan the founding father of Muslim reformism in North India. For Bose, Renan simply emerges, almost as a new discovery *ex nihilo*, when his name is mentioned in one of the publications under consideration in his book.

Although Bose frequently *states* that Muslim Bengalis engaged with debates elsewhere such lines of connection are never followed up in detail or pursued beyond the boundary line of the Bengali language itself. This is particularly grating in discussions of Islamic theology, which lacks any awareness of the specialist literature both with reference to South Asia and the wider Muslim world, almost as if Bengali Islam was a case apart, entirely unconnected to the classical literature of Islamic theology and jurisprudence, or, for that matter, to scholarly networks that transcended not only region but also nation-state and Empire. Bengali nationalists themselves may have claimed that their religious tradition was special and self-contained, and that 'high' Islam was either elitist or a Pakistani imposition, but there is no reason to accept such claims at face value. This also leads us back to the unaddressed problem of multilingualism, that people could read and write Arabic and Urdu as well as Bengali.

This book has unquestionable merits and will be read by students of Indian history for some time to come, but it could have gone much further to satisfy its own stated objective of 'recasting the region'. A lack of critical distance from the subject matter means that Bose's account remains confined in the same cultural-nationalist parameters that for better or worse confined the discussions of the Bengali Muslim intellectuals. This is a pity: this may be a book about Bengal, written by a Bengali (judging by the name of the author) but it should not be a book written only for Bengalis. Just as students of nationalist self-formation in other parts of India must never ignore the case of Bengal, they should not be left to fend for themselves when it comes to piecing together a larger picture of the cultural politics of region and nationalism in South Asia as a whole.

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