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# Labors of Representation: Cultivating Land, Self, and Community Among Muslims in Late Colonial Bengal

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# Labors of Representation: Cultivating Land, Self, and Community Among Muslims in Late Colonial Bengal

## **Abstract**

LABORS OF REPRESENTATION: CULTIVATING LAND, SELF, AND COMMUNITY AMONG MUSLIMS IN LATE COLONIAL BENGAL

Ananya Dasgupta

Lisa Mitchell

This dissertation studies how the specificity of regional practices of cultural productions, ideological strands, forms and practices of civil associations, and styles of literary expressions among Muslims inflected the Pakistan movement in late colonial Bengal. Using wide-ranging sources that include vernacular religious tracts, the popular genre of Muslim improvement texts, pamphlets of tenant-peasant associations, journals, diaries, autobiographies, and literary archives, I trace historical transformations in practices and ideas about religion and political representation among the Muslims of Bengal from the mid-nineteenth century to the late colonial period. In so doing, I examine key shifts in Islamic theological concepts, Muslim forms of civil associations, social movements and Muslim literary cultures to argue that by the inter-war period (in the 1920s and 1930s) these altered the meaning of being Muslim, in the context of Bengal, in very critical ways by, at one level, linking up notions of cultivation of self and community to ideas of cultivating land, thus valorizing labor as a positive repository of value, while positing sites and actors engaged in the spheres of exchange and circulation as full of deceit and dubiousness, and at another level, by conjoining the meaning of cultivating land and Islamic moral community to the land of Bengal, thereby creating new kinds of claims of ethnic belonging rooted in a regionalism. I show how such transformations were critical in instantiating subjectivities that could inhabit modalities of organized politics, which, in an era of expanding franchise, became available to mobilization and manipulation by political players and parties who championed the primacy of the producer in a claim to politically represent them. Broadly speaking, my dissertation traces the rise of an ideology of labor as the touchstone of Bengali Muslim politics in the late colonial period for our understanding of the conjunction between leftist populism and religious nationalism rooted in a regional identity.

## **Degree Type**

Dissertation

## **Degree Name**

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

## **Graduate Group**

South Asia Regional Studies

## **First Advisor**

Lisa Mitchell

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**Keywords**

Bengal, Cultural History, Muslims in Colonial Bengal, South Asia

**Subject Categories**

Asian Studies | History | South and Southeast Asian Languages and Societies

LABORS OF REPRESENTATION: CULTIVATING LAND, SELF, AND  
COMMUNITY AMONG

MUSLIMS IN LATE COLONIAL BENGAL

Ananya Dasgupta

A DISSERTATION

in

South Asia Regional Studies

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2013

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the course of writing this dissertation I have accumulated countless debts. I am thankful, above all, to my advisor, Lisa Mitchell, for her guidance, constant support, infectious intellectual curiosity and patience. I shall always remain greatly indebted to my committee members, Ramya Sreenivasan and Daud Ali for their generosity.

I thank the University of Pennsylvania, which has provided me with grants for fieldwork and writing. Thanks are also due to numerous scholars in Dhaka and Calcutta who exposed me to ideas and material and helped me navigate libraries and archives.

Professor Anisuzzaman, Professor Sirajul Islam, Sonia Amin, Aksad Alam, Shantanu Majumdar and Asha Islam deserve special mention. To the librarians and staff of Bangla Academy, Dhaka University Library, Nazrul Institute, Bangladesh National Archives, Bangiya Shahitya Parishad, Jantindramohan Granthasala, and the West Bengal State Archives I remain ever grateful. David Gilmartin, Bodhisattva Kar, Rupa Vishvanath, Ram Rawat, Kathy Hall and Deven Patel have enriched me with their thoughts, comments, and kindnesses. Zoe Beckerman and Jody Chavez have been unfailing in their support.

I could not have survived graduate school and much else besides without my friends and comrades. I thank Srinivas, Varuni, Sanjukta, Peter, Rich, Amruta, Erin, Pushkar, Raili, Manjita, Katy, Steve, Sharmadip, Sudan, and Omar for helping me stay sane. From my family – Seema and Anjan Dasgupta, and Sherina and Abu Abbas, I have always received loving and unquestioned support. Finally, I thank Zaheer for being my constant interlocutor and my greatest friend.

## **ABSTRACT**

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This dissertation studies how the specificity of regional practices of cultural productions, ideological strands, forms and practices of civil associations, and styles of literary expressions among Muslims inflected the Pakistan movement in late colonial Bengal. Using wide-ranging sources that include vernacular religious tracts, the popular genre of Muslim improvement texts, pamphlets of tenant-peasant associations, journals, diaries, autobiographies, and literary archives, I trace historical transformations in practices and ideas about religion and political representation among the Muslims of Bengal from the mid-nineteenth century to the late colonial period. In so doing, I examine key shifts in Islamic theological concepts, Muslim forms of civil associations, social movements and Muslim literary cultures to argue that by the inter-war period (in the 1920s and 1930s) these altered the meaning of being Muslim, in the context of Bengal, in very critical ways by, at one level, linking up notions of cultivation of self and community to ideas of cultivating land, thus valorizing labor as a positive repository of value, while positing sites and actors engaged in the spheres of exchange and circulation as full of deceit and dubiousness, and at another level, by conjoining the meaning of cultivating land and Islamic moral community to the land of Bengal, thereby creating new kinds of claims of ethnic belonging rooted in a regionalism. I show how such transformations were critical in instantiating subjectivities that could inhabit modalities of organized politics, which, in an era of expanding franchise, became available to mobilization and manipulation by

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## NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

All translations from Bengali are mine, unless otherwise indicated. I have devised and followed my own code of transliteration in this dissertation, keeping in mind that the non-English words and terms mentioned here appear in at least three, if not more, South Asian languages: Bengali, Urdu, and Hindi. To mark their specificities in words and texts, I have abided by the following general rules:

1. I have avoided cumbersome diacritics, and instead, used phonetic transliterations attuned to American English. However, in remaining faithful to their usage in primary sources, certain non-English terms, personal and place names may appear in variant forms in quotations or titles. For instance, a term such as ‘zamindar’ appears as ‘zemindar’ in a quote, or the proper noun Abdul Latif appears as Abdool Luteef in a quote from a colonial document.
2. Non-English terms are italicized. For a term which is italicized, its meaning is explained either in context, parenthetical remarks, or finds mention in the glossary provided at the end of the dissertation. A few words common in Anglo-Indian usage are not put in italics, for example, zamindar, nawab, and bazaar.
3. All names of places have been transliterated according to the official spellings followed by the Governments of Bangladesh and India respectively. The only exception is my use of the name Calcutta, instead of the now-official Kolkata, in part to denote a larger than colonial association with the name.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

This dissertation is a cultural history of distinctive ideological strands, institutions, forms of social associations, and literary styles, operational in different social strata, that came together to energize the specific form in which the demand for Pakistan took root among the Muslims in late colonial Bengal. Focusing my lens of scrutiny on representational practices, using wide-ranging sources that include vernacular religious tracts, the popular genre of Muslim improvement texts, pamphlets, journals, diaries, autobiographies, poetry, essays, and short stories, my dissertation traces how a whole range of affective investments, attitudes to work, self, and community, and disciplines of religio-moral and political self-making paved the conditions of possibility for a Bengali Pakistanism rooted in the primacy of the value of labor and redistributive justice as exemplified in the powerful slogan “land to the tiller”.

### **Formulation of Research Question**

In Bengal, one of the provinces in British India where Muslims outnumbered Hindus, the imperative of the Bengal Muslims to be drawn into the Pakistan movement demanding separate statehood in the years immediately preceding decolonization cannot be explained as stemming from the community’s fear of being reduced to a political minority in the impending postcolonial polity. Especially since Ramsay MacDonald’s Communal Award of 1932, which dramatically altered the balance of power in the provincial political domain, gave the Muslims of Bengal a decisive edge in the domain of organized provincial politics. Yet, notwithstanding the political advantage accruing from

their numbers, the demand for Pakistan found massive support among Bengali Muslims. How did the idea of Pakistan take root in Bengal?

Schematically put, South Asian historiography has been dominated by two ways of looking at the history preceding the formation of East Pakistan. The first, focusing on the Muslims of Bengal, propounds some variation or the other of “the communalization of the Muslim peasantry” thesis. The overarching narrative employment of such communalization thesis consists of how what was essentially a class-based movement of Muslim tenant-peasants got communalized (i.e. how the movement degenerated into the political organizing of a religious community for the furtherance of its own ends, often in hostile and violent ways).<sup>1</sup> The starting point of the process of communalization varies – beginning way back at the turn of the twentieth century in one account,<sup>2</sup> or in the 1920s in another,<sup>3</sup> or in the 1930s in yet another.<sup>4</sup> The agents instrumental in thus communalizing the Muslim peasantry are variously identified – in the rich Muslim peasant, or the *ashraf*, or the *ulema*, or a combination thereof. The second manner of dealing with the subject of the formation of East Pakistan is exemplified by the work of Joya Chatterjee, where the lens of scrutiny is focused on the phenomenon of *bhadralok* communalism instead of Muslim communalism and, very crucially, the ‘event’ of

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<sup>1</sup> This communalization of class thesis is most emphatically put forth by Taj-ul Hashmi. See Taj-ul Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant’s Utopia: Communalization of Class in Bengal, 1920-1947* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> See Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengali Muslims, 1871-1906: The Quest for Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> See P.K. Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> See Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), and Iftekhar Iqbal, *The Bengal Delta: Ecology, State and Social Change, 1840-1943* (Cambridge: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

partition of Bengal is understood as the outcome of *bhadralok* separatism, instead of Muslim separatism. Put differently, Joya Chatterjee's work has shown how following the Communal Award of 1932 and the Government of India Act of 1935 – which in dramatically expanding franchise, not only enlarged the electorate by 600 per cent, enfranchising about six million people, in effect giving the vote to four Muslims for every three Hindu voters in Bengal, but also drastically reduced urban weightage – the Hindu *bhadralok*, ensconced in the metropolitan centers, became increasingly anxious about living under the tyranny of Muslim rule; this anxiety, ultimately, led to partition when the *bhadralok* deployed the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha to this end.<sup>5</sup>

The scholarship that traces the communalization of the Muslim peasantry in terms of the rich (Muslim) peasant acquiring an upper hand in agrarian relations, also points to the increasing absence of the *bhadralok* from rural Bengal as a precondition for the “rise of the rich peasants.” Both Sugata Bose and Partha Chatterjee have argued that the process of empowerment of the rich peasants became particularly intensified with the onslaught of Depression in the early 1930s, when the *bhadralok* zamindars and moneylenders fled the countryside to engage increasingly in white-collar employments and trade. According to Bose, the exodus of the *bhadralok* from the countryside snapped practical patron-client relations that existed between them and the Muslim peasantry, thereby opening up a lacuna that came to be promptly occupied by Muslim *jotedars*/ rich peasants who inserted themselves into credit relations (as creditors) at a time when rural indebtedness intensified with the collapse of a cash crop market centered on the capital-

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<sup>5</sup> See Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994).

intensive cultivation of jute.<sup>6</sup> Chatterjee does not necessarily contradict Bose's thesis, but emphasizes that it was not merely in the relations of production that the Muslim *jotedars* assumed an increasingly advantageous position, but that they were successful in establishing hegemony over small Muslim peasants precisely because they rose to economic prominence from a hitherto culturally undifferentiated peasantry.<sup>7</sup> Yet neither the cultural worlds of the Muslim peasantry, the *ashraf*, or the mofussil intelligentsia, nor the manner of establishing hegemony is analyzed in any detail in his study, which continues to be governed primarily by naturalized political economic categories of "labor", "production", "rent" and "debt" overlaid with a political history of representational politics in the Bengal Council and Legislative Assembly and a "prepolitical" history of peasant rioting.

In a relatively recent and quite compelling work of scholarship, Iftexhar Iqbal has emphasized the active presence and indeed, the return of the *bhadralok* to rural Bengal in the early twentieth century induced by a dynamic agrarian domain that emerged in relation to the ecologically specific character of the deltaic regions of Bengal, where huge tracts of wastelands in the form of *chars* or alluvial deposits arising out of the fluvial actions of rivers, excluded from the revenue code of the Permanent Settlement, were made available for cultivation by the colonial state by offering low rates of rent and lenient terms of tenancies to cultivating settlers.<sup>8</sup> Iqbal shows how in the 1920s and 1930s, the *bhadralok's* willingness to return to the agrarian environs of eastern Bengal

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<sup>6</sup> Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, social structure and politics, 1919-1947* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>7</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal 1920-1947: The Land Question* (Calcutta: Center of Studies in Social Sciences [by] K. P. Bagchi, 1984).

<sup>8</sup> See Iftexhar Iqbal, *Bengal Delta*.

was facilitated by the government's policy of giving preferential treatment in allocating such reclaimable low-rent *khas mahal* lands<sup>9</sup> to the *bhadralok*, and allowing them to settle on such land as "ordinary cultivating *raiyats*", often with the express purpose of re-orienting persons who had abandoned revolutionary terrorism to a life of productive citizenship. Of course these newly settled *bhadralok raiyats* did not turn into actual cultivators; instead, the productive power on their lands was largely harnessed from the ranks of *bargadars* (sharecroppers). "It was no wonder that some of the most serious communal conflicts took place when the ecologically better domain came to be dominated by the *bhadralok*", remarks Iftexhar Iqbal. He adds, "the victimization of the peasantry during the great Bengal famine (of 1943) fuelled further conflicts and suspicions between them and the *bhadralok*, these developments culminated in a support for partition."<sup>10</sup>

Iftexhar Iqbal is right in drawing our attention to the fact that in the riverine deltaic ecology of Bengal (particularly eastern Bengal), with land continually opening up from the rivers and made cultivable under arrangements where the government entered into direct settlements with the *raiyats* (tenants), large swathes of land were either actually outside the purview of Permanent Settlement or settled in a manner where Permanent Settlement was practiced with calculated indifference. It is also true that Permanent Settlement has long dominated the historiography on Bengal as the bane of peasant discontent, and a focus on social relations on land settled otherwise is absolutely

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<sup>9</sup> *Khas mahal* lands were typically outside the purview of Permanent Settlement, where the government had entered into direct settlements with the *raiyats*.

<sup>10</sup> Iftexhar Iqbal, 'Return of the Bhadrakok: Ecology and Agrarian Relations in Eastern Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 43, no. 6, Nov, 2009, p. 1352.

critical and needs to be attended to. Yet it is well known that in 1946, both the Muslim League and the Communists shared the slogan “land to the tiller”, both demanded the abolition of Permanent Settlement set in place by the British in the late eighteenth century. The abolition of zamindari without any compensation to the landlords (or the abolition of Permanent Settlement) was declared as an important objective of the party after the Bengal Muslim League Conference in January 1946, held under the presidency of Liaquat Ali Khan, Jinnah’s right-hand man. Such populist promises, without a doubt, contributed to the phenomenal performance of the Muslim League in the 1946 Bengal elections – bagging 110 out of 117 seats in constituencies reserved for Muslims – as it established itself credibly as the sole mouthpiece of the Muslims in Bengal and demonstrated popular Muslim support for a separate nation-state of Pakistan. By 1946, the League’s demand for ‘Pakistan’ became a slogan of such great power among large sections of the peasantry in Eastern Bengal that Hindu communist leaders of the Tebhaga movement often had to assume Muslim names (Barin Dutta, for instance, took the name Abdus Salam), attend *namaz* prayers with Muslim peasants in an expression of solidarity and hoist both the Red Flag of the Communists and the Green Flag of the Muslim League at the same meeting venues. That Muslim peasants chanted slogans in favor of both Pakistan and Tebhaga at the meeting organized by CPI leaders<sup>11</sup> is telling in the manner in which the political cultures of leftist populism and religious nationalism had converged in Bengal’s Pakistan movement.

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<sup>11</sup>Taj-ul-Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant Utopia: The Communalization of Class Politics in East Bengal*, p. 219-267.



This begs the question: If large swathes of land were actually outside the ambit of Permanent Settlement, why then did the abolition of the same become such a powerful slogan among Muslims all over Bengal, particularly in the eastern part? Why was it one of the key planks on which the Muslim League contested the 1946 election, if social relations of production in the countryside where Muslims were most populous were, as Iftekhar Iqbal points out, not really over-determined by the terms of the Permanent Settlement?

Economic histories and political economic frameworks alone cannot adequately explain the conundrum thus posed: when there is no direct one-to-one correspondence or an easy fit between the affective power of a popular political demand and the social relations of production structuring the lives of those who demand it, how does one explain wherefrom the demand, the slogan, and the political culture in which it resonates draw their power, without raising the old bogey of “false consciousness”? It is in a modest attempt to face up to such conundrum that I turn to the realm of cultural practices of Muslims in late colonial Bengal – as they manifested themselves in the countryside in simply rhyming verse for easy memorization, or appeared in flamboyant apocalyptic poetry infused with Bolshevik ethos, or in the reformist Islamic rhetoric of the *ulema* – and to the nature of institutions in which such practices were anchored, whether in rural and mofussil *anjumans*, or literary associations and societies located in the urban centers of Calcutta and Dhaka. In studying the effects of such cultural practices and institutions, this dissertation attempts to trace the emergence of the concept of labor, which became the touchstone of Muslim politics in the Indian province of Bengal during the late colonial period.

Unlike the Punjab where rural Muslim political mobilization depended on navigating networks of colonially sanctioned hierarchical, kinship-based structures of socio-political authority rooted in the *biradari*/“tribal” heads or *zaildars* who were almost always landlords<sup>12</sup>, the political mobilizational success in drawing Muslim peasants in Bengal depended on a strictly non-hierarchical, even a counter-hierarchical, political language and agenda which, from the 1920s onward, staunchly opposed landlordism, sought to strengthen occupancy rights of *praja*-peasants, and by 1936 was actually calling for dismantling the institution of landlordism or at least substantially altering it in favor of *raiyyati* interests. A comparison between the political landscapes of these two largest Muslim majority provinces of colonial India in the mid-1930s effectively dramatizes this difference: whereas in the Punjab, the 1937 elections reinstated to provincial political power the Unionists, commonly understood as a landlords’ party, whose sphere of influence was rural Punjab, it was the Krishak Praja Party (The Peasant-Tenants’ Party; henceforth KPP) that aggressively rose to political prominence in rural Bengal, contesting elections exclusively from Muslim constituencies, on the plank of abolishing landlordism.

Even the terms in which rural interests in Punjab and Bengal were articulated were dramatically different - in rural Punjab, Unionist support lay in its promise of warding off any threat to the Land Alienation Act (introduced in 1901) that prevented sale of land from groups that were gazetted as “agricultural tribes” (very often headed by

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<sup>12</sup> See David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)

landed *sajjada nashins*) to individuals who were not members of such groups<sup>13</sup>, whereas one of the key demands of the *praja* movement in Bengal, even before it was formalized into the Krishak Praja Party – a party with an overwhelmingly Muslim mass base, was the individual *praja*-peasant's right to freely transfer landholding without any legal constraint whatsoever.

Ironically, the anti-hierarchical character of *praja* assertions increasingly demanding less stringent control of the zamindars over the sale and transfer of occupancy rights or tenancies had a tremendously damaging impact on the health of agrarian Bengal, intensifying the process of depeasantization during the depression years, when under duress of acute indebtedness, tenants with smaller landholdings readily sold off their lands to bigger tenants and to the non-cultivating *bhadralok*, thus swelling the ranks of *bargadars*, sharecroppers, and wage laborers, and paving the way for the consolidation of landholdings in the hands of the rich peasants and the return of the *bhadralok* neo-*raiyats* into rural Bengal. I underscore this to point to how the increasing assertion of the value of labor (of cultivation) in the domain of Muslim politics, and indeed in Bengal's provincial politics as a whole, as signaled by the rise of the Krishak Praja Party (KPP), did not necessarily work to prevent the separation of actual producers from their ownership over the means of production and subsistence, quite to the contrary, it appears to have accelerated such a separation. It is not that this connection between depeasantization and the increasingly vocal pro-peasant demands, raised in the domain of official politics, to the right to free transfer of *raiyati* holdings had not been noted by historians (particularly

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<sup>13</sup> See David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan*.

those of a Marxist inclination), either implicitly or explicitly.<sup>14</sup> As a matter of fact, Iftekhar Iqbal himself acknowledges when a version of the Land Alienation Act that was set in place in Punjab in 1901, in an attempt to prevent land passing out of the hands of small cultivators to non-cultivating people, was passed in Bengal in 1944, it was already too late.<sup>15</sup>

A logical next step, it seemed to me, would then be to probe into how such ideologies of labor, which produced and entrenched relations of capital, historically emerged and took root in society, why such ideologies became such a defining feature of Muslim politics in late colonial Bengal, and why some Muslim landlords were forced to seek election on KPP tickets in spite of the party's avowedly anti-landlord stance. Existing historiography gave me no satisfactory answers. In fact, it would not be unfair to say that these questions had not really been posed with any clarity, even by historians of a most rigorous Marxist variety. In re-reading the existing historiographical literature on the period of my research, it then struck me that the posing of such questions were prevented by methodological impasses rooted in a peculiarly anti-historicist Marxist prejudice, which in its unspoken assumption of the ontology of labor, refused to historicize it. To put it simply, in such literature the assumption that labor or production is the reliable and enduring source of all value acquired the status of metaphysics, which is to say that this assumption about value itself could not be made available to critical examination, and by extension, it could not be historicized.

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<sup>14</sup> Both Partha Chatterjee and Iftekhar Iqbal made note of this process of de-peasantization.

<sup>15</sup> Iftekhar Iqbal, 'Return of the Bhadrakok: Ecology and Agrarian Relations in Eastern Bengal, c. 1905–1947', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol 43, Issue 6, Nov, 2009, p. 1351.

But if ideologies of labor, manifested in forms of leftist populism, featuring prominently in the domain of Muslim politics in colonial Bengal of the inter-war period, were major conduits for the production, reproduction, and entrenchment of relations of capital, that is to say, they effected the separation of the producer from the means of production (or “depeasantization” to use a term more prevalent in Bengal historiography), then the manner in which an ontology of labor took root in Bengal’s Muslim society needs to be historicized. Precisely, this historicist impulse lay at the heart of my project.

I set out to find answers to the following questions: In Bengal’s Muslim social imagination, how did value come to reside in the realm of production or in the act of tilling the earth? If the instantiation of this social imagination centered on the ontology of labor had a history, what discourses, institutions, practices, rhetorical styles produced this imagination? Which social actors were involved? If such actors belonged to different socio-economic strata, what maneuvers, or contingencies, or networks of patronage guaranteed that such socio-economic cleavages would not assume a relation of dominance that could explode an imaginary in which labor was posited as the primary and enduring source of all value? And ultimately, as “land to the tiller” emerged as one of the most potent slogans of Bengali Pakistanism, did such ideologies of labor only become available to communalist appropriation, as historiography has conventionally claimed, or did they also make themselves available to progressive articulations in legitimating the aspirations to a new kind of nation that Pakistan could stand for? These are the key questions that have guided this dissertation.

In relation to the emergence of Pakistan, David Gilmartin, Marcus Daeschel and Taj-ul Hashmi have approached the subject of varying regional specificities that

contributed to the strength of the Pakistan movement.<sup>16</sup> My own project is also an attempt to give substantial recognition to the regional dynamics at play in colonial Bengal that inflected the movement for Pakistan.

Gilmartin's study of colonial Punjab is pioneering in marking a departure from an exclusive focus on institutional party politics and prominent political leaders, whose actions and motivations historians had hitherto studied to explain the demand for Pakistan.<sup>17</sup> Gilmartin shifts the lens of inquiry on the relationship between Punjabi society and the state by delineating how the Pakistan movement in Punjab emerged through the interplay of two contending understandings of Muslim community – premised on radically different cultures of socio-political authority – that were operational in urban and rural colonial Punjabi society.<sup>18</sup> According to Gilmartin, the urban centers of colonial Punjab spawned a non-hierarchical, horizontal imagination of Muslim community through a politics of self-making routed through direct identification with Islamic ideals as encapsulated in the classic Muslim idea of *musawat*, or the equality of believers, and the ideal of *mard-e-khuda*, the true man of God, who by saintly example and impassioned commitment to Islam could act as a bridge between common people and the supposedly classical Islamic ideals where *musawat* would be possible through individual moral transformation. But in rural Punjab, where the British had structured

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<sup>16</sup> See David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan*; Taj-ul-Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant's Utopia*; Marcus Daeschel, *Politics of Self Expression: The Urdu Middle Class Milieu in Mid-Twentieth Century India and Pakistan* (New York, Routledge, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Ayesha Jalal's monograph, *The Sole Spokesman: Jinnah, the Muslim League, and the demand for Pakistan* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), is typical of this approach of exclusively focusing on political leaders and parties.

<sup>18</sup> See David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan*.

society through the recognition and patronage of “tribal- *biradari*” identities – organized via hierarchical relations of kinship – Muslim community was premised on an ideology of socio-political authority and leadership that was vertical, kinship-based, patronage-oriented and essentially mediated between the society and the colonial state. Gilmartin reads the Muslim League’s demand for Pakistan as tapping into urban Punjabi Muslim society’s search for a new moral ideological foundation for a state which, far from being premised on the colonially sanctioned ideology of hierarchical, “tribal” patronage-oriented political authority, was to be founded as a direct expression of a religious community made up of individual ‘Muslims’ who were self-made through moral action. And yet during the Pakistan movement, notwithstanding the rhetoric of direct, individual attachment to Islamic symbols that sought to be popularized by the Muslim League, the mobilizational strategies of the Muslim League in rural Punjab, as Gilmartin shows, were heavily dependent on region-specific, hierarchical, “tribal” patronage-based structures of political authority that the British had put into place. This was made possible by recruiting *pirs* (often *sajjada nashins*, or custodians of shrines whose power was grounded in hereditary rather than personal piety) who had influence over specific *biradari* networks that structured local politics in the countryside, but had, since Mughal times, combined a concern for local mediation with a religious interest in the overall cultural definition of the state. In their ideological commitment to Pakistan, these *pirs* were able to bring together hierarchical, kinship-based *biradari* identities, around which local influence was built, and Pakistanism’s express ideological commitment to a state resembling the perfect community of individual Muslims led by the prophet, without

actually resolving the tension between *din* (exemplary personal ideals) and *dunya* (the actual workings of rural socio-political structures of authority).<sup>19</sup>

Marcus Daeschel's work argues that the demand for Pakistan, as it came to be overwhelmingly articulated by the middle classes in Punjab and UP, requires to be understood in relation to an incipient culture of consumerism which – constituted through advertisements – structured middle class politics. As advertisements re-signified consumption as an act of self-expression, inasmuch as via choice of products one could showcase who he/she really was, consumerist logic created a style of “self-expressionist” politics which assumed that the only politically meaningful activity was the expression of an “inner”/ “authentic” self. Daeschel argues that, in the Punjab and UP, the idea of Pakistan as a primarily middle-class demand was the commoditization and consumption of the middle class's need to generate some surrogate form of “authenticity” for itself.<sup>20</sup>

From Gilmartin and Daeschel, it is possible to aver that there were two distinct cultures operating in late colonial Punjab – an urban, middle-class political culture (the outcome of Islamic reform or consumerism), where religion and politics were seen as expressions of some “authentic”, “inner” self, and a rural political culture in which the question of “authenticity” of the self was not a necessarily a political (or religious) problem since here, politics was about managing social relationship through memberships in hierarchical kinship-based networks and not about the expression of some “inner self.” But in colonial Bengal, where peasant societies were not structured

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<sup>19</sup> See David Gilmartin, *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan*.

<sup>20</sup> See Marcus Daeschel, *Politics of Self Expression: The Urdu Middle Class Milieu in Mid-Twentieth Century India and Pakistan* (New York: Routledge, 2006).



through colonial policies and legislation (of the Land Alienation Act, which required registering “agricultural tribes” and barring the sale of land from such “tribes” to those who were not members of such groups) that reified kinship-based or *biradari*-oriented access to state patronage and land, what was the nature of rural political culture on which the Pakistan movement took root? What kinds of institutions, discourses, and ideologies shaped notions of Muslim community in late colonial rural Bengal? Were there organizations, styles of rhetoric, and ideologies that were operational among the Muslims in rural Bengal that can explain the formation of subjectivities that could inhabit political demands, which were of a far more individuated nature than those of their counterparts in the Punjab? My research confirmed that there were, and pointed in the direction of the *anjumans* in Bengal – distinctly Muslim forms of civil associations – whose local chapters in mofussil towns and far-flung villages were undergoing significant transformations and struggles in terms of their class composition as well as their manner of functioning in the 1910s and the 1920s. Most importantly, they appear to have played a major role in spreading a culture that gave primacy to voluntary association of individuals, and were key in disseminating practices of individual voting as the basis of decision-making in such institutions. This at a time when franchise was severely restricted, and several individual Muslims voting in the *anjumans*, in all likelihood, had not yet acquired political votes. The impact of such practices in shaping individuated subjectivities in rural Bengal has been explored in this dissertation, in addition to the larger, but related question of how such *anjumans* were instrumental in changing the very notion of what it meant to represent the Muslim community, for such changing presuppositions about who could represent the community also took on a fundamentally

anti-hierarchical character. How such conceptions of Muslim community forged in rural Bengal interacted with, contradicted, or coalesced with conceptions of Muslim self and community that were being forged among sections of the Muslim literati and intelligentsia in the urban centers of Calcutta and Dhaka as they articulated visions of territorial collectivity, namely, Pakistan, is explored in this dissertation.

### **Method, Sources, and Refinement of Topic**

I have attended closely to the culturally specific articulations of economic phenomena and socio-political identities for their power to explain how certain groups made meaning of supposedly self-evident and universally legible economic categories such as debt, for instance, or understood what it meant to be represented politically in modern democratic government began to implode the glass ceiling of apparent “transparency” that economic historians and political theorists routinely place on such phenomena.

Let me furnish a quick example of what I mean. Credit relations in late colonial Bengal has been a topic over which much ink has been spilled by historians, and deservedly so. Since the Rent and Tenancy Legislations of 1859 and 1885 put checks on arbitrary enhancement of rent by zamindars – the latter legislation in fact ensured that rent could only be raised once every fifteen years, and fixed the quantum of such enhancement – rent ceased to be a major reason for peasant discontent<sup>21</sup>, while debt became the bane of the peasantry in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> Historians have typically been attentive to the demand and supply of credit, to the social identities of

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<sup>21</sup> Bipasha Raha, *The Plough and the Pen: Peasantry, Agriculture and the Literati in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2012), p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> See Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*.

the creditors and debtors, to the paucity of credit supply and its impact on agrarian social relations.<sup>23</sup> But none paused to ask, in the cultural world that the peasants inhabited, what did debt actually mean? Was economic distress the only meaning they attached to it? As the problem of debt resulting from exorbitant rates of interest came to be identified increasingly as a problem affecting the Muslim community, did debt mean the same thing to the Muslim peasants of the countryside and their urban co-religionists? It is possible that the so-called “prepolitical” resistance of the peasantry, as evinced in instances of rioting, is better understood not only in terms of the economic fact of being in debt, but in the historical specificity of its religio-culturally defined meaning? More importantly, did the religio-culturally defined meanings of debt or economic interest share the presuppositions that structure such phenomena for economic historians who set out to analyze their impact?

To understand what debt, or labor, or political representation, or tenant (*praja*) identity, or citizenship in the nation-state of Pakistan really meant to the participants of the “prepolitical” resistances, the Muslim electorate, and the Pakistani nationalists from Bengal, required moving beyond the colonial archives of land settlement records, debt settlement reports, and government files to a rich and understudied world of Bengali vernacular ephemera including Muslim self-improvement texts, religious tracts, social pamphlets that circulated in rural Bengal in the period under consideration, autobiographies, memoirs and biographies of prominent Muslim social reformers, religious and literary figures from Bengal of the time, Bengali Muslim literary archives

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<sup>23</sup> See Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal*; Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal 1920-1947*, Vol. 1; Ifthekar Iqbal, *Bengal Delta*.

comprising of poetry, short stories, essays, novels as well as the institutional archives of Bengal's Muslim literary associations and other kinds of civil society organizations as they left traces of their histories primarily through journals which they published or patronized. Public libraries such as the National Library and the Bangiya Shahitya Parishad and private collections such as the Jatindra Mohan Granthasala and the Hiteshranjan Sanyal Memorial Archives in Kolkata, as well as the Bangla Academy, the Dhaka University Library and the Nazrul Institute in Dhaka proved to be treasure troves for such sources. In short, I was led to access a world of representations that was quite different from the order of representations that make up the colonial archive. Upon entering this world, I realized that ideological strands (such as the discourse of self-improvement), identities (such as *praja*), and institutions (such as *anjumans*) that informed the thought-worlds and actions of rural Muslim populations were neither 'communal' nor 'secular', nor were they expressions of 'secular' demands in a 'communal' form, for these categories were not quite relevant to the socio-cultural world of this domain. I have, on the contrary, tried to trace how what happened in this rural domain created entirely new possibilities by which its consequences could be taken up in a variety of forms by the urban intelligentsia as well as the parties operating in the formalized political domain: these included forms of communalist appropriation just as they included forms of secular appropriation. The manner in which the imagination of the nation of Pakistan was realized from the bottom up, not just the top down, forms the subject of this dissertation.

My study is quite different from prevalent standard formulations, according to which, "it was for economic reasons, far more than because of any religious motivations,

that the Muslim peasantry finally threw in their lot with the Muslim League and its claims for an independent Pakistan.”<sup>24</sup> In studying discursive representations of so-called economic phenomenon such as debt, articulations of demands thrown up in the early days of asserting *praja* identity, and the structure of patronage of the *raiyat samitis* (tenant associations) via which a peasant-tenant movement coalesced around such *praja* identity, I show that it is not possible to disaggregate economic reasons, demands, or categories from religious dispositions, charismatic religious figures, and prominent ethico-social ideological strands that shaped conceptions of cultivating self and community among Muslims in rural Bengal. How such conceptions of self and community were taken up and transformed by the urban Muslim intelligentsia and literati both in the sphere of formalized politics and in forging a domain of Bengali Muslim cultural autonomy also forms the subject of this dissertation.

### **Chapter Summary**

Broadly speaking, in the following four chapters, organized thematically rather than chronologically, I examine key shifts in Islamic theological debates, Muslim forms of civil associations, assumptions about ethnic belonging, and Muslim literary cultures, to argue that by the inter-war period (in the late 1910s to the early 1940s) these altered the meaning of being Muslim, in the context of Bengal, in very critical ways by linking up notions of cultivation of self and community to ideas of cultivating land, thus valorizing labor as a positive repository of value, while positing markets, traders, and merchants – sites and actors engaged in the spheres of exchange and circulation – as full of deceit and

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<sup>24</sup> Willem Van Schendel, *A History of Bangladesh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 93.

dubiousness. I also show that such transformations in theological, literary, and associational practices among the Muslims of Bengal were critical in instantiating subjectivities that could inhabit modalities of organized politics which, in an era of expanding franchise, had the *effect* of successfully bringing hitherto excluded sections of the Muslim populations into the domain of organized provincial politics, thereby making them available to mobilization and manipulation by political players and parties who championed the primacy of the producer in a claim to politically represent them.

Following this introduction, my dissertation is divided as follows:

*Chapter One: Debt, Riba, and Muslim Self-Making in Bengal*

In this chapter I explore the issue of indebtedness through its discursive representations in sites as diverse as Muslim literary journals, pamphlets, religious tracts, and Muslim self-improvement texts that circulated in early twentieth century Bengal. In early twentieth century Bengal, at a time of acute indebtedness among the peasantry, debt, far from simply being an economic category, took on the distinctive valence of being “the burden of the Muslim”. The problem of debt was often spoken of in relation to the Koranic injunction against *riba*, which, in popular understanding, prohibited transactions that generated profit as interest. This chapter looks at how in contested ways of thinking about circumventing the condition of indebtedness, the meaning of *riba* emerged as a matter of fierce debate among the Muslims of Bengal. Debt, whether as a problem or an experience – as it got more and more entangled with interpreting the injunction against *riba* in public discourse – became inextricably linked to the problem of defining a moral vision of the Muslim self and community. In attending to the ways in which the interpretation of the *riba* prohibition by urban Muslim rationalists and reformers differed very significantly

from their rural co-religionists, I show that such differing interpretations dramatized fundamentally different conceptions of what it meant to be a Muslim for these two constituencies. Also, I show how the ethico-social discourse of ‘Improvement’ (*unnati*) circulating among the Muslims in the Bengal countryside during the 1910s and 1920s, in positing labor as the highest form of worship to Allah, structured the meaning of interest (or *riba*) as a mode of making wealth without expending labor as well as a manner of prospering bereft of Islamic piety. Upholding the prohibition on interest by citing the absence of expenditure of labor, as the intent behind a Koranic prohibition was a stunningly novel spin introduced by Muslim ‘Improvement’ ethical discourse, and had no precedence in the Islamic theological discourse on *riba*. I track how this innovation was successfully taken up by left-minded members of the urban Bengali Muslim intelligentsia and introduced into the domain of formal politics to establish relationships of affinity between Islam and communism. Finally, I point to how this development shaped the course of Muslim politics through the 1930s and informed the Pakistan movement in the subsequent decade.

### *Chapter Two: Changing conceptions of Muslim Political Representation*

This chapter explores the shifting presuppositions about political representation among the Muslims of colonial Bengal. Focusing on prominent Muslim public personalities of late nineteenth century Bengal and institutions such as the National Mohammedan Association (1878) and Mohammedan Literary Society (1863) to which they were attached and through which they conducted the business of representing the Muslim community of Bengal to the British Government, I show how for such figures and institutions the matter of representing was based on a principle of distinction – rooted in

wealth, social rank, influence, and a fundamental non-identification with the constituency one acted for. Even as those who considered themselves leaders of the Muslim community in Bengal became signatories on the Shimla Memorial led by an all India-level Muslim deputation, which marked a move from a politics of nomination to a politics of election, the demand for separate electorates was mooted in terms of receiving state patronage for a community, which as they put it, “enjoyed status and influence” up until a not-so-distant past and protecting the interests of the propertied Muslim tax-payer. Then I shift the lens of scrutiny to the plea for retaining separate electorates for Muslims as it was raised by a prominent Bengal Muslim public personality, Azizul Haque in 1931. In so doing, I study how within less than two decades, Muslim conceptions about representing the community had changed so dramatically that the need for retaining separate electorates was now being argued in terms of preventing men of wealth, rank, and influence – attributes that Haque’s nineteenth century predecessors had deemed essential for representing the community – from posing as the community’s representatives. If the transformed nature of the terms in which the demand for separate electorates was being raised provides clues to the changing self-definitions of the Muslim community in Bengal, which was now loath to accept a wealthy *ashraf* as its true representative, what transformations in the moral vision of self and community, I ask, could account for this change? Focusing on the Anjuman-e-Ulema-e-Bangla (founded in 1913), and to some extent, on a rural chapter of the Anjuman-e-Islamia in Bengal, I demonstrate how such *anjumans*, distinctively Muslim forms of civil association which were spread out across rural Bengal were crucial sites within which subjectivities oriented to democratic practice and politics were being worked out in the early decades of



twentieth century Bengal and were crucial to the dissemination of a certain vision of Muslim community, which enabled habitations in an idea of political sovereignty rooted in popular mandate. I suggest that rather than focusing exclusively on political parties and elections (with severely restricted franchise up until the Government of India Act of 1935), a more systematic study (than what I have been able to undertake here) of the activities of *anjumans* in Bengal could prove profitable in understanding how practices in democracy historically evolved within Bengal's Muslim society in a manner such that progressive Bengali Muslim activists, in making the demand for Pakistan in 1940s, could justify the demand in terms that an Islamic state embodied true democracy, of which western imperialism and Indian nationalism – ridden with imperialist tendencies, as it were – only offered corrupted and constricted versions.

*Chapter Three: From Respect to Redistribution: The Hegemony of Praja Identity*

Using *praja* pamphlets in prose and verse, autobiography, newspapers, and other pertinent material, this chapter traces how the early assertions of the *praja* movement in the second decade of the twentieth century – which were non-violent and involved methods of collectivization and negotiation similar to the modalities of the domain of organized politics involving associations, deputations, memoranda, conferences, and press releases – were responses to experiences of social discrimination as Muslim *qua* Muslim and infused with dispositions shaped by a longer history of Islamic revivalisms, which surged through rural Bengal in the nineteenth century. In following my line of inquiry into the mutual imbrication of Islam and *praja* assertions, I study social actors who pioneered local-level *raiyyat samitis* in far-flung villages, the rhetoric used to mobilize the local populace, and the larger networks to which such *raiyyat* associations

were connected. I show how *raiyat samitis* were often pioneered by locally influential, charismatic, Muslim religious leaders who were connected to *pirs* wielding influence over several districts of Bengal through them; such *pirs* were often themselves landed, or at least patronized by the landed Muslim gentry. In tracing the nature of *raiyat samiti* patronage in the 1910s and 1920s, this chapter shows how potentially conflicting class interests between Muslim landed interests and the Muslim *raiyat* were simultaneously produced and contained. I also study how the language of *praja* mobilization tied visions of a better social order to the restoration of a religio-moral Islamic order so effectively that the issue of garnering religious legitimacy in the eyes of large populations of Muslims in Bengal got inextricably connected to the support of the *praja* movement, and religious figures, irrespective of bitter sectarian differences, started patronizing the movement. Furthermore, I study how the rhetoric of the *praja* movement, as evinced in the *praja* pamphlets, enlisted the support of the *bargadars* even though the demands of the movement were not in their interest. I show how the movement's discourse made this possible by: at one level, propagating acute xenophobia directed not only against the Marwari moneylenders but also the Bihari coolies and the wage laborers from Orissa; at another level, by setting up Bengal as a sedentarized realm of bounty vis-à-vis the "uncivilized" wilderness of Assam, and finally, by latching on to the religiosity-infused ideology of labor popularized by the Muslim improvement texts, while extending and expanding its meaning – of a moral cultivation of self equated with diligence in cultivating land – to a conception of moral cultivation of self connected not only to labor, and the piece of land one toiled on, but to land of Bengal at large. Thus, I show how the rhetoric of the *praja* movement generated energies by which Bengali Muslim

identity was formed at a grassroots levels and entirely new kinds of assertions of ethnic belonging rooted in acts of cultivating the land of Bengal could be made. Finally, I turn to the manner in which in the domain of organized provincial politics in the 1930s, where both the League and the KPP were vying to represent the Muslims, questions of which of them was the real *praja* party, and issues of Bengali Muslim-ness vs. non-Bengali Muslim-ness, made their way into claims of who could more authentically represent the Muslims of Bengal. Also, I evince how Bengali Muslim identity forged, as it were, in the discursive terrain of the *praja* movement informed the cultural politics of the literary elite and intelligentsia located in Calcutta or Dhaka, as they strove to carve out a space of literary-cultural autonomy for the Muslims of Bengal through the establishment of literary societies, journals, and conferences.

*Chapter Four: The Cultural Politics of the Pakistan Demand in Bengal: Islam, Egalitarianism, and the Individual in Bengali Muslim Literary Praxis*

It is to the literary domain of late colonial Bengal that I now turn, to study how that crucial connection between labor and Islamic moral cultivation forged in the crucible of the improvement ethic, and taken up by left-minded members of the Muslim intelligentsia in Bengal to establish relationships of congruity between Islam and socialism, or communism, was explored and experimented with in literary imagination. By focusing on the figure of Nazrul Islam, who rose like a meteor in the literary world of Bengal in the 1920s, I show how his works and life choices, the body of criticism they generated, and the following that grew up around his literary style was key to the development of a subjectivity where Islam, redistributive justice, as well as forceful individualism could seamlessly co-exist. I show how this heady mix of Islam, socialism, and individualism brewing among sections of the Bengali Muslim literati from the 1920s

onward, informed the politics of cultural-literary organizations, such as the East Pakistan Renaissance Society (Calcutta) and the Purba Pakistan Sahitya Samsad (Dhaka), which came into being in the early 1940s with the express purpose of acting as cultural fronts of the Pakistan movement in Bengal. Records of the literary-cultural activism of such organizations show that the demand for Pakistan was hailed as a revolutionary movement, a people's movement which, far from being parochial, sectional, or communal, was seen to be a blow to imperialist tendencies that inhered within nationalism. Indeed, for the cultural activists of the East Pakistan Renaissance Society (EPRS), the idea of the "people" as the touchstone of political sovereignty was envisaged as a collective formed by the equal capacity of each individual for autonomy and free choice. Thus the EPRS was welcoming of all members irrespective of caste, creed, and religion. Several non-Muslims were members; many of them chaired sessions at the organization's major conferences. For organizations such as the EPRS, membership, and in a larger sense, investment in the Pakistan movement, were matters of inner commitment and autonomous choice, abstracted from, in some ways, society and its constraints. This chapter attempts to show how a subjectivity that could inhabit the Pakistan movement as a non-sectarian, "people's movement" in the 1940s was historically instantiated, and explores the manner in which this subjectivity was connected to a historically specific understanding of Muslim culture.

## CHAPTER 1

### Debt, *Riba*, and Muslim Self-making in Bengal

#### Introduction:

The figure of the debt-ridden Muslim peasant of the Bengal countryside – mostly passive and emaciated, but occasionally insurgent and avenging the local Hindu moneylender – forms a staple in the histories of twentieth century colonial Bengal. Was the insurgent Muslim peasant “communally” motivated? Or was his act of rage propelled by the “economic fact” of his indebtedness? Put simply, is it religion or economics that can most satisfactorily explain the widespread unrest among sections of the overwhelmingly Muslim peasantry of Bengal that sporadically erupted in collective acts of violence, throughout the 1920s and the early 1930s, in which the targets were inevitably moneylenders? These are questions that plague today’s historians, much in the manner in which they plagued colonial officials who set out to understand, control, and often brutally suppress such “riots” or “disturbances”. Today’s historians, in the manner of the British officers of colonial India, continue to adjudicate on these matters – religious or economic, Islam or debt, this way or that. My chapter is a stubborn refusal to partake in such adjudications by entertaining the possibility that this debate itself – “religious or economic? Islam or debt?” – is, in all likelihood, a misplaced one; it may not be possible to historically disentangle the religious from the economic. So I take another tack in asking a different set of questions, which are of this nature: what was the meaning of “debt” as it emerged in the discourses circulating among the Muslims of Bengal in the 1920s and 30s? In what terms did Bengali Muslims speak of the problem of “being in

debt”, and in what kinds of spaces was the meaning of “debt” being negotiated and determined?

In attempting to answer these questions, this chapter will explore the issue of indebtedness in relation to discursive practices in sites as diverse as literary journals, pamphlets, religious tracts, and most importantly, the Muslim self-improvement texts that circulated in early twentieth century Bengal. It will do so by drawing on a wide array of writings dealing with the problem of debt by English-educated Muslim “progressive” intellectuals, journalists, social reformers, well-respected Islamic scholars based out of urban centers as well as the itinerant ulema preaching in the Bengal countryside. But before that, it would be in order to attend to the anatomy of one such peasant insurgency that shook the Eastern part of Bengal in late colonial India, in a district where the peasantry was reeling under massive debts, to observe the specific forms such acts of violence typically took. Using one rather typical instance of peasant insurgency in Eastern Bengal as an entry point, this chapter will then turn to the contested discursive field in which the meaning of “debt” was being negotiated in the Bengali Muslim public domain to account for the conditions of possibility for the specific forms in which such peasant insurgencies occurred.

In 1930, reporting on the widespread disturbances in the Kishoreganj subdivision of East Bengal’s Mymensingh district the District Magistrate, L.B Burrows, gives an account of how Muslim peasant agitators were involved in acts of violence and intimidation that affected a total of ninety villages in the district. According to Burrows:

The trouble began apparently during the last Mohurram when the then Naib [an official] of the Atharabari Zamindari Kacheri [the landlord’s estate] at

Hossainpur interfered with the usual procession and gave the local Muhammadans great offence. On Sunday the 7<sup>th</sup> July, a big Muhammadan meeting was held at Hosseinpur at which the Naib and all his works (including, besides the above, the alleged oppression of Muhammadan tenants and the active support of the Congress Party) were denounced and resolutions were passed against the payment of interest to moneylenders.<sup>25</sup>

There were several instances of police firing to bring the situation under control; approximately 631 people were sent up for trial, and moneylenders were the principal targets of the rioting peasantry. He describes how a “mob of 100 to 1000 men” would collectively threaten a moneylender, demanding back “all documents in his possession”. In instances where the moneylender could not produce mortgage and credit documents immediately, he was asked to have them ready for surrender within a stipulated time period, failing which “his house was looted, and in some cases burnt.”<sup>26</sup> A petition to the governor from the leading Hindu professionals of Kishoreganj alleged that “the ruffians entered the houses of Hindus” possessing themselves of “holy *khargos* reserved for sacrificing animals on special festivals” and described, at length, the manner in which these armed raiders held up such “weapons over the heads of the principal householders, until bonds, ornaments, and cash were forthcoming in abundance.”<sup>27</sup> A very interesting feature of these raids in Mymensingh district emerges from reports and petitions that populate the colonial archive: during the disturbances, all raids on moneylenders were carried out during the day, since the raiders thought that to go out in the night was thieving, an act that was against the *shariat*, but was brave and laudable to commit loot and plunder by daytime.

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<sup>25</sup> L.B Burrows, District Magistrate, Mymensingh to W.S Hopkins, Chief Secretary, 18 July 1930. GB Poll. File 613/30. WBSA (West Bengal State Archives).

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Although admitting the presence of Muslim religious leaders goading the peasantry to act against moneylenders, the District Magistrate opined that the Kishoreganj disturbances were not communal, notwithstanding “the necessary communal tinge” owing to the “fact” that “more than 90 percent of the debtors and tenants in the affected areas [were] Mohammedans”. About the motives of the peasant agitators, the District Magistrate was categorical:

I am of the opinion that *the disturbances are fundamentally economic* and many Hindu pleaders and others with whom I have discussed the matter agree with this view. Last year was a bad year for jute cultivation, and it is feared that this year will be as bad, if not worse, because the crop is likely to be a bumper one over an increased area, while the demand from the mills will be diminished. The present price of about Rs 5/8 a maund is hardly sufficient [for the cultivators] to cover their expenses.<sup>28</sup>

The colonial bureaucrat’s judgment that the “disturbances” were fundamentally economic explains little about why peasant violence took specific forms such as raids carried on in broad daylight, instead of at night, which the raiders considered thieving and against the *shariat*. Or why, indeed, did the moneylenders emerge as principal targets, when according to the colonial archive, the discord in Kishoreganj “originated” with a grievance against the landlord’s (zamindar’s) official (the *naib*) who had allegedly interfered with the Mohurram procession?

Sugata Bose’s influential work, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947*, identifies early twentieth century Bengal as a time of generalized indebtedness – with debt replacing rent as the central mode of surplus extraction. This “economic fact” of indebtedness, according to Bose, holds the key to explaining

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<sup>28</sup> L.B Burrows. GB Poll. File 613/30.WBSA.



widespread unrest among the peasantry that erupted in collective acts of violence in the early 1930s, in which the targets were inevitably moneylenders.<sup>29</sup> And yet, it is important to note that the burden of debt made its appearance on the discursive terrain of early twentieth century Bengal as a distinctive kind of burden – “the burden of the Muslim”. In Bengal, by the 1920s, exorbitant interest on loan was identified as the prime reason for indebtedness; newspapers and journals from the time are replete with reportage of how a relatively small sum loaned by an unsuspecting peasant transformed fantastically into an unbelievably huge and incomprehensible debt. The monthly journal *Mohammadi*'s account of the plight of one Zeenat Ali Sheikh is typical of such reportage. According to a 1928 issue of the journal, Zeenat Ali Sheikh, a small peasant of Ilbari village in Bengal had borrowed a sum of Rs. 20 from one Mahendra Chandra Pal on a rate of interest charged at 200 per cent, with an additional clause that in the instance of default on annual interest payment, the interest would be added to the principal amount loaned on which, as per the principle of compound interest, interest would be further calculated. Within a brief period of time, Zeenat Ali Sheikh's loan of Rs. 22 had transformed itself to a debt amounting to a mammoth sum of Rs.37721. In the same year, when this piece of news from the *Mohammadi* was quoted in a cheaply printed tract titled *Krishaker Unnati* (Improvement of the Peasant), directed primarily to Muslim peasants, the debt of Zeenat Ali Sheikh of Ilbari had come to be seen as a debt of the entire Muslim community in

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<sup>29</sup> Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, social structure and politics, 1919-1947*, especially chapter 4 (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

Bengal, and was presented as the root cause of the economic and spiritual degeneration of the Bengali Muslims.<sup>30</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, the condition of indebtedness was all too often spoken of in relation to the Koranic injunction forbidding Muslims from engaging in *riba* or usurious activity - more generally, understood as partaking in any transaction that involved the receiving or giving of interest on loans. Some argued that the Muslim's burden of debt was an outcome of flouting the Islamic injunction against interest-related transactions, which jeopardized not only one's worldly (*duniyabi*) condition but also one's relationship to religion (*deen*). Yet loans were almost always available on interest and were needed, the opposing camp contended, for commercial and agricultural ventures and, therefore, urged the *ulema* (the clergy) to rethink the prohibition on *riba* in light of practical necessities. Moreover, some Bengali Muslim reformers even argued that the Muslims in being forbidden from wealth-making activities that generated profit as interest, in fact, impoverished themselves both materially and spiritually, since the spiritual wellbeing of the community was inextricably tied to its material wellbeing. This chapter traces the terms in which the status of the *riba* prohibition was fiercely debated in the public domain of early twentieth century colonial Bengal – in literary journals, theological writings, as well as in the Muslim self-improvement texts which circulated in the Bengal countryside and were meant to teach the peasants how to be good Muslims and good peasants.

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<sup>30</sup> See Khademol Islam, *Krishaker Unnati* (Mohammad Moyejjadin Hamidi, 1929).

In the Muslim public sphere of Bengal, no consensus emerged regarding the manner in which this “traditional” injunction prohibiting *riba* had to be dealt with or indeed understood and, as my sources will attest, the diversity of opinions ranged from declarations of complete irrelevance of the *sharia*’s injunction, to a plea to re-interpret the *shariat*, to advocating a strict adherence to the injunction as the duty of every good Muslim. Yet the limits of the debates in the public domain, notwithstanding the multiple and contradictory positions on the issue, were structured by the near impossibility of any Muslim in Bengal of the time to speak of indebtedness without referring the implications of his position to his identity as a Muslim. In other words, the condition of indebtedness, whether as a problem or an experience - as it got more and more entangled with the status of the *riba* prohibition in public discourse - became inextricably linked to the problem of defining a moral vision of the Muslim self and community.

### **Rationalist and Reformist Remedies for the burden of debt**

At the third annual session of the Muslim Sahitya Samiti, a literary association comprising primarily of Muslim teachers and students of varied ideological persuasions, that grew out of Dhaka University, Nazirul Islam, an important member of this influential Dhaka-based Bengali Muslim literary association, in his essay “*Manab Pragati o Mukta Buddhi*” (1929) or “Human Progress and the Liberated Intellect” attacked Islamic law for suppressing intellectual freedom (*buddhir mukti*) and attributed the Muslim community’s lack of economic development to this suppression of intellect.

According to Nazirul Islam, although Islamic texts had taught Muslims social and economic egalitarianism by upholding the abolition of interest and the introduction of

*zakat* (obligatory payment to be made annually for religious and charitable purposes), such decrees suited the needs of people at the time they were introduced, but had gradually become oppressive and outmoded. Nazirul Islam saw the introduction of compound interest in Europe as the key economic innovation that fuelled and sustained the industrial revolution. As per his largely distorted but tidy narrative of Europe's "progress", people deposited money in banks, and the principle of compound interest - by which money speedily begot money - enabled capital to be invested in building newer industries and infrastructure, thus leading Europe up the path of progress, as it were.<sup>31</sup> The Muslim, he lamented, could not accept this "creativity of humans" and Islamic societies remained resistant to change, economic innovation, and, ultimately, progress.

To quote Nazirul Islam:

He [the Muslim] opened the decaying pages of religious texts. He saw in there that it is an act of *haram* (sinful) to take interest... what happened, as a result, is that egalitarianism within Muslim society continued according to the rules of Islamic texts. But, between the Christians of the West and the Muslims, the inequity in material conditions assumed the vast distance between the sky and the earth... Applying *mukta buddhi* (freedom of intellect) will equip [the Muslim] to adjust and achieve victory in the changing circumstances of the world.<sup>32</sup>

The economic development of the Muslims, for Nazirul Islam, would require the application of emancipated intellect (*mukta buddhi*). To the question of what the intellect would have to emancipate itself from, his answer was unequivocal: from the coercive forces of religious injunctions that did not serve the economic/material needs of the time. According to his formulation, the soundness of intellectual judgment was to be based on

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<sup>31</sup> Mohammad Nazirul Islam, 'Manab Pragati o Mukti Buddhi' in Kazi Mutahar Hussain (ed.) *Sikha*, Vol. III (Dhaka, 1929), pp. 85-92.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90. (All translation from Bengali sources are mine unless otherwise indicated).

the condition of “freedom” and “autonomy” under which it operates - freedom from the bindings of religion and an autonomy vis-à-vis religion. Significantly, and indeed ironically, this secularized “emancipated intellect” (*mukta buddhi*) on which an influential group of Dhaka-based Muslim rationalist humanists placed premium, even as it freed itself from religion, could not free itself from the realm of “economic needs” to the satisfaction of which every intellectual judgment had to be, ultimately, directed.

I will briefly focus on three other vocal participants in the *riba* debate, who were based out of the urban centers of Dhaka or Calcutta, and were men in positions of considerably influencing public opinion by virtue of being prominent public personalities or renowned Islamic scholars who held key editorial positions in popular Bengali Muslim (and Urdu) newspapers and journals.

Mohammad Abdur Rashid, the editor of a well-known Bengali weekly called *Moslem Jagat* (Muslim World) and a short-lived literary journal *Raktasetu* (Bridge of Blood), was also a prominent member of the Muslim Sahitya Samiti, a literary association that grew out of Dhaka University and comprised of Muslim teachers and students of the University. From a reformed religious stance, Rashid argued that even though “the Koran has forbidden interest”, for Muslims to successfully compete with other *jatis* (communities) in the “economic sphere”, the giving and taking of loans on interest was a necessary economic activity. According to Rashid, an engagement in such interest-related economic activities was not to be considered un-Islamic, since a necessary adjustment to the requirements of the present was in consonance with “the

spirit of Islam”.<sup>33</sup> In his view, it was through the application of proper judgment that such adjustments were to be made. But unlike the radical humanists in the Muslim Sahitya Samaj, such as Nazirul Islam, for whom the application of judgment would first require the intellect to be freed from the constraining forces of religion, Rashid drew on the Islamic tradition of *ijtihad*, or independent judgment of original Islamic sources, emphasized in the theological writings of Shah Waliullah, a noted Islamic scholar of eighteenth century South Asia. Rashid saw the exercise of *ijtihad* as key to resolving the problem posed by the *riba* prohibition, and argued that it was only via the exercise of *ijtihad* that “the continuity of the inner meanings of *Shariat*” could be maintained to meet “the new necessities...of time and age.” To quote him, “this adjustment would not mean a change of inner thought and meaning of the *Shariah*, but only a rational change of their exterior form.”<sup>34</sup>

The essay “*Sudh Samasya*” (The Problem of Interest) published in 1930, and written by noted journalist, political activist, and a religious scholar theologically close to the Ahl-i Hadis, Maulana Mohammad Akram Khan, was precisely such an exercise in *ijtihad*.<sup>35</sup> In attempting to grapple with the issue of *riba* or interest, his first attack, in the tradition recognizable as the Ahl-i Hadis’s aversion to dissention within Muslim society, was on the multiplicity of arguments from different camps on the question of *riba* and the utter chaos that resulted from such diversity of opinions. He identified the views and

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<sup>33</sup> Mohammad Abdur Rashid, ‘Amader Nabajagaran o Shariat’, *Shikha*, Vol. I (Dhaka, 1927), pp. 85-99.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>35</sup> See Maulana Akram Khan, “*Sudh Samasya*” from *Samasya O Samadhan* (Calcutta, 1930). Khan was a prominent journalist who edited the bilingual (Urdu and Bengali) weekly paper of the Ahl-i Hadis, the popular Bengali monthly *Masik Mohammadi* and the Urdu newspaper *Zamana*.

modes of argumentation of the key camps in the *riba* debate – the reformist, the Hanafis, and the secularists. He pointed out that the reformists, in reading the Koran and the *hadith* had ascertained that according to the Koran, *riba* is forbidden, but made a distinction between *riba* of the Koran and modern day interest, thus refusing to equate *riba* and interest. According to this group, though *riba* was *haram* (unlawful), interest was *halal* (permissible) because modern day interest, they averred, could not be included within the Koranic category of *riba*. The *ulema* of the Hanafi *madhab* were of the opinion that the injunction against *riba* could be effective only in *Dar-ul-Islam* (the land of Islam), but since Muslims were living in *Dar-ul-Harb*, the land ruled by infidels – namely, the British colonizers – it was permissible to receive interests from non-Muslims. However Akram Khan reserved his most disparaging comments for the so-called secularized Muslims, who he alleged, “were generally least concerned with the well-being of the Mussalman, but when it came to the issue of interest made a big noise.” According to him, the so called progressive Muslim secularists were on a mission to prove that as a religion, Islam was not fit for “our [*sic*] times” and to support this they used the injunction against interest as a stick with which to beat Islam. The problem, according to Akram Khan, lay not in the Koranic injunction against *riba*, but in the failure of all parties invested in the debate – the *ulema*, the reformists, and so called “progressive” scholars – to attend closely to the Koran and the *hadith*. According to him, even the religious scholars took a partial view in their reading of the prohibition on *riba*, and thus missed the most basic principle that should guide the reading of the Koran – this principle, for him, was the recognition that in the Koran and the *hadith*, every prohibition was complemented by a direction, and alongside every renunciation was an acquisition.

Thus, for Akram Khan, the denial implied in the injunction prohibiting *riba* could only be fully understood in relation to the positive duty of *zakat*. Loans on interest became a necessity only in conditions of extreme economic desperation and the *farz* (religious duty) of *zakat* (charity) worked toward eliminating such economic desperation in society in the first place. Therefore, he argued, until the institution of *zakat* was not well entrenched in society, *riba* or interest could not be prohibited. He concluded that the *riba* prohibition was not a problem of Islam that had to be confronted and solved, but a problem that arose from partial readings of the Koran, which resulted from failing to exercise proper judgment. The lack of proper judgment led to mistaking the part for the whole and prevented a grasp over the basic principles of Islam.<sup>36</sup>

In 1925, in addressing a large gathering at the Islamia Jila Conference in Chattagram, Abdus Sattar - a social reformer, lawyer, and at the time a young, promising member of Calcutta Bar Association - expressed concern that the “maintenance of a stable economic life” for the Muslim community had become increasingly difficult because Muslims were entrapped in the web of debt. Insurmountable debts, which kept growing with high rates of interest charged by non-Muslim communities, resulted in the loss of land and property of several hundred Muslims who could barely prevent their ancestral homes from being auctioned off by moneylenders.<sup>37</sup> In addition, he claimed, the profit-making activity of lending out money on interest in being forbidden by Islam, aggravated the Muslims’ condition of indebtedness - they turned into perpetual debtors, handicapped by not being able to benefit from the profits that interest -- as the money-

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<sup>36</sup> See Akram Khan, ‘Sudh Samasya’ in *Samasya O Samadhan* (Calcutta, 1930).

<sup>37</sup> See Abdus Sattar, *Presidential Address of the Chattagram Islamia Jila Conference*, 1925.



value of passing time -- generated. "In these circumstances", Sattar urged, "the respected Maulavis must consider whether it is possible to think of any special procedures regarding the injunction against the giving and taking of interest."<sup>38</sup> Sattar argued that his plea was in consonance with the express agenda of the conference, which was, "to deliberate on the ways in which the [Muslim] community, in its current state of religious degeneration, could improve itself in the sphere of both *din* (faith) and *duniya* (worldly matters)".

An accurate understanding of *din*, according to him, would require that inessential customary practices be stripped away from the essential "core" of religion, for the "present" economic condition of backwardness of Muslim society was a result of this society's slavery to "customs". Only in stripping away "superstitions" and "customs" could one arrive at the "rational core of Islam". To help the ulema identify religion's "rational" core, Sattar suggested some concrete measures to the gathering, key among which was an initiative, undertaken under the supervision of the conference committee, to modernize the district madrasa by the inclusion of Economics (*arthakari bidya*) in its curriculum while turning all other local village-level madrasas, modeled on the district madrasa, into its branches. Economics, he believed, would help the ulema grasp the material, "economic needs" of the present, and in light of these economic needs,

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<sup>38</sup> See Abdus Sattar, *Presidential Address of the Chattagram Islamia Jila Conference*, 1925.

deliberate on separating inessential religious practices (such as the injunction against usury) from the core/inner meaning of Islam.<sup>39</sup>

In the writings of these urban social and religious reformists, the meaning of *sharia* was to be grasped through an interiorized process of intellection, not through outward practice. In their formulations, the exercise of intellectual judgment held primacy – it was the basis on which the distinction between the “inner meaning” of the *sharia* and its mere “exterior forms” could be made in the first place. The application of judgment, which for religious reformers such as Akram Khan and Abdur Rashid was itself sanctioned by religion, thus took precedence over religious practice and determined what outward practice ought to be. For Muslim social reformers such as Nazirul Islam and Abdus Sattar the relevance of religious practice was contingent on whether or not they were rational. The ability of religious practice to be able to adequately fit the “economic needs of the time” was seen as the touchstone of rationality. In other words, for them, the needs of the economic sphere as the final determinants of material conditions were absolute givens, whereas the requirements of religion (understood as an organizing principle of the social structure) could be molded and constituted in accordance with the absolute given of ‘economic’ needs.

### **The Muslim Improvement Texts: How to prosper in this world and beyond?**

The emphasis on the need to improve the *duniyabi* (worldly) condition as a precondition for the successful upholding of *din* (religion) that we find in speeches and writings of Muslim reformists such as Abdu’s Sattar was also to be found in cheaply-

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<sup>39</sup> See Abdus Sattar, *Presidential Address of the Chattagram Islamia Jila Conference*, 1925.

printed Muslim improvement texts in verse and prose which proliferated from the 1920s onward and circulated in the Bengal countryside. Unified by the theme of the Muslim peasant's self-improvement, these texts were written in country dialects and oriented primarily toward rural, barely literate or even non-literate, peasant audiences of the Bengal countryside. Such tracts, frequently composed in rhyming couplets, lend themselves more readily to be learned by rote and were, in all likelihood, read out to audiences of eager listeners more frequently than they were read in silent contemplation. One such tract repeatedly emphasized the need for material stability as the key to upholding religion, by drawing on the example of the Malkana Rajputs who, because they were materially impoverished, in the 1920s, became easy targets for the Arya Samaj's aggressive "*suddhi* (purification) movement", by which this controversial socio-religious reformist Hindu movement claimed to "reconvert" certain populations back into the Hindu fold. The Muslim self-improvement text pointed to the dangers of poverty:

Listen, my Muslim brothers,  
The one who dwells in daily poverty,  
Finds it hard to maintain his *imaan* [religious integrity]  
Have you heard of the happenings in Rajputana?  
Several Muslims have become Hindus,  
Compelled by poverty,  
They parted with *din* Islam.  
Helped by the Arya [Samajis] who provided succor,  
They became Hindus...  
Listen, O Muslims brothers, if you're keen  
To uphold *din* Islam,  
Then come together  
To alleviate the poverty (*deen*)  
Of your *jati*.  
Look at other *jatis*  
Who loot our money  
And by engaging in business

Become masters, as we become impoverished.<sup>40</sup>

Typical of such verses was an interesting word play on the very different meanings of *deen*, which, in Bengali, could mean one's faith (*din* or *deen*) but also helplessness (*deen*). Muslim improvement texts typically spoke of how difficult it was for the economically helpless (*deen*) to be faithful to an Islamic way of life (*deen*). The condition of impoverishment (*deenata*) was therefore understood as both a material and a spiritual condition, and spiritual poverty (*deenhinata*) could both be the effect of material poverty or its cause. But interestingly in most self-improvement tracts, both material and spiritual poverty resulted from incorrect/irreligious practice. Such texts, in general, evinced a marked difference from the urban, Muslim reformists' take on the question of interest-related financial transactions. By and large, the Muslim self-improvement texts did not advocate a repeal of the "traditional" injunction against the giving and taking of interest, but asked for a strict adherence to the practice of refraining from participating in usurious activities. In other words, practice, in the case of improvement texts, was not deemed secondary to the material wellbeing of a Muslim. Indeed, such texts worked to delineate how it was through correct religious practice that both material and spiritual wellbeing could be best maintained.

The self-improvement text in verse titled "*Duniya O Akherat Do Jahan-er Najat*" (Prosperity in this World and Beyond), composed by Abdul Aziz, and published from Noakhali in 1925, identified the condition of indebtedness as the cause of the Muslim's

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<sup>40</sup> See Abdul Aziz, *Duniya o Akherat Do Jahaner Najat* (Noakhali: Noakhali Khodamel Islam Samiti, 1925).

religious as well as economic impoverishment. In the manner characteristic of such self-improvement verses, the point was illustrated by example. Here, it was a supposedly “true” story of two Muslim brothers from Noakhali district who got into a quarrel with each other over a petty domestic matter, as the quarrel spiraled out of control, they turned violent and broke each other’s heads. Egged on by other villagers, they dragged each other to the court of law. The protracted legal battle that ensued between the two brothers proved too expensive and resulted in a total depletion of their cash funds. This only served to aggravate their anger against each other, leading them, ultimately, to the door of the village *mahajan* (moneylender) who lend money to both brothers on exorbitant rates of interest to meet the legal expenses of fighting one another in the court of law. Finally the legal case was dismissed in court as too trivial. Neck-deep in debt, both brothers were driven out of their ancestral home by the moneylender who usurped their house and the plots of land they had mortgaged. In this Muslim improvement text, the plight of the brothers was shown to be the outcome of flouting the religious injunction prohibiting *riba*. According to this text, in taking loans given out on interest, the brothers not only reduced themselves to a state of penury but also committed a grave sin (*gunah*) that Allah would never forgive. The consequences of this irreligious act, it was said, would last beyond their life in this world (*duniya*) and condemn them to burn in the fires of hell (*jahannum*).<sup>41</sup>

Another self-improvement text, in prose, titled *Krishaker Unnati* (Improvement of the Peasant), by Khademol Islam, an itinerant preacher who had traveled extensively

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<sup>41</sup> See Abdul Aziz, *Duniya o Akherat Do Jahaner Najat* (Noakhali: Noakhali Khodamel Islam Samiti, 1925).

in the countryside of Bengal and Assam and was associated with the Anjuman-e Wazin-i-Bangla, founded by Mualana Abu Bakr Siddiqui, the Pir of Furfura, depicts debt as both a material problem and an irreligious act. To quote from *Krishaker Unnati*:

Incurring a debt (*rin*), even in performing a good deed (*punya*), is not in accordance with the *shariat*. If the ignorant peasants could understand this simple matter, then they would not jeopardize their existence in this life and after. Incurring a debt is a grave sin (*maha paap*) – for the debtor can never enter the house of *behesht* (heaven) until he frees himself from the web of debt. For those that are suspicious of what I say, I have quoted a saying of the Prophet. Readers, from this you will understand the gravity of the sin of debt. Hazrat says – In the hour of *qayamat*, a debtor will be imprisoned for not paying off his debt. According to the *hadith* collection, *Chahi Mocholman*: “O inspired Prophet, if in receiving the blessing of Allah, I move ever forward and die in *jihad*, in exchange will Allah forgive all the sins I have accumulated in the course of my lifetime?” The Prophet replied, “Yes”. But as soon the man turned to proceed homeward, Prophet addressed him and said, “All your sins will be forgiven, but not the sin of debt. This had been told to me by Jibrail.”<sup>42</sup>

But if debt was such a grave sin, how could the peasants circumvent the condition of indebtedness? In the manner characteristic of Muslim self-improvement texts, *Krishaker Unnati*, advocated a spirit of diligence, hard work, avoidance of extravagance, and an inculcation of the virtue of thriftiness. The disciplines of diligence and thriftiness, it was said, could lead to self-sufficiency of the individual Muslim peasant and the betterment of the Muslim community as a whole. Again in a manner typical of self-improvement tracts, *Krishaker Unnati* maintained that for the peasant, diligence was warranted because cultivation held a special place “among all the occupations that Allah has created for man” and iterated that many prophets of Islam - those that came before Mohammad - were cultivators. According to the text:

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<sup>42</sup> See Khademol Islam, *Krishaker Unnati*.

Hazrat Adam and Lut were both cultivators. So were Hazrat Ali and Hazrat Maksud. The problem is that the educated look down upon those that feed them by calling them *chasha* [literally meaning a peasant but also derogatorily used to refer to an uncouth and uneducated country bumpkin.]<sup>43</sup>

That tilling the earth was not a simple act of labor but an act laden with a religious-moral valence was a theme that pervaded the Muslim self-improvement texts. To quote from the verse tract, *Najat*:

O brothers, listen to what the *shariat* says,  
Labor in this world (*duniya*)  
For it is your action in the world, that will determine your end (*akher*)  
According to the *sharia*,  
Allah says, “I have created man and animal  
Only so they can worship me”  
Now listen, only for worship (*ibadat*)  
If Allah had created us  
Why did he create work in the world?  
Listen O Muslim brothers,  
The truth (*haqiqat*) is  
All work is worship  
... And agriculture is the original work<sup>44</sup>

Another popular tract from the 1920s than went into several reprints, titled “*Adarsha Krishak*” (The Ideal Peasant) re-iterated that the labor of cultivation was the man’s original work:

Adam and Eve lived in the world  
And tilled the earth  
We who are alive,  
Bear their ancestry,  
Whether we are beggars or kings.  
(*Adam o Hawa thake duniya-e, Karen chasher kaj/ tar-I bangsha bhabe, achi mora shobe/ kangal ki maharaj*)<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> See Khademol Islam, *Krishaker Unnati*.

<sup>44</sup> See Abdul Aziz, *Duniya o Akherat Do Jahaner Najat* (Noakhali: Noakhali Khodamel Islam Samiti, 1925).

<sup>45</sup> See Abdul Hai, *Adarsha Krishak* (Mymensingh: Abdul Hai, 1921).

In the Muslim self-improvement tracts the ability to perform labor, especially the physical labor of cultivation, was depicted as the highest form of worship to Allah and tilling the earth acquired the status of man's original work. The relationship between land and labor was posited as a religiously sanctioned one - to respect this relationship was shown to be the duty of a good Muslim and the proof of his religiosity. Of course, the belief that to be a good Muslim, one had to cultivate the earth as Adam did was not an invention of the self-improvement texts. As far back as the sixteenth century, as Richard Eaton notes, this idea found expression in Sufi texts such as *Nabi Bamsa*, in which, the messenger Gabriel after giving Adam a plough, a yoke, two bulls and seeds, addressed him with the words, "God has commanded that agriculture will be your destiny".<sup>46</sup> Though Adam's career as a tiller of the soil is also found in the Book of Genesis, such an association is not made in the Quran. In the Muslim world, the perception of Adam as the first cultivator, and of his cultivating the earth at the command of God, was possibly a unique variant of Bengali Islam.<sup>47</sup>

And yet even in using these ideas that already held a place in the Islamic cultural repertoire of Bengal - of Adam as the cultivator, and cultivation as man's oldest and original work - the early twentieth century self-improvement texts actually achieved something quite new. They created a religio-moral vision of the Muslim self and community, where value lay in the act of cultivating, i.e. in production, while consistently depicting the realm of exchange, in this case, the market (bazaar) as a morally bankrupt realm of deception, duplicity, and lies. This deep suspicion of the market that

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Eaton, *Essays in Islam and Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 132.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.



characterized Muslim improvement texts of the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is significant. Traditionally, at markets and fairs lying on the path of pilgrimage, consumption and redistribution went hand in hand with the acquisition of religious merit. Some of the largest fairs followed the *urs* of distinguished Sufi saints, as market transactions on those days were considered particularly propitious. In Bengal, market fairs on the *urs* of Yakdil Shah in Barasat, of Pir Gorachand in Balanda, and Patharchapuri in Birbhum, among countless other dargahs and nazargahs, urged peasants, herders, artisans, and boatmen to travel to the market on specific days.<sup>48</sup> As Sudipta Sen has pointed out, in Bengal of the eighteenth century, idioms of the marketplace were pervasive in devotional as well as eulogic poetry, where authority over marketplaces could be invoked as an earthly sign of spiritual eminence.<sup>49</sup> But in the Muslim self-improvement tracts that began proliferating the Bengal countryside in the first two decades of the twentieth century this was far from the case – peasants were consistently warned that the market was the domain of misrepresentation and deceit.

In highlighting the dubiousness of the domain of exchange, the regime of value – both economic and moral – that was being forged in the early twentieth century in the countryside, far from the urban centers of Calcutta and Dhaka, and emerged with startling clarity in the self-improvement texts directed to Muslim peasants, unambiguously accorded primacy to the site of production. The widely read tract *Adarsha Krishak* (The Ideal Peasant), authored by Abdul Hai and published from Mymensingh in 1920 provides

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<sup>48</sup> Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade: East India Company and the Making of the Colonial Marketplace* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 38

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-50.

a telling example of the manner in which this regime of value was discursively instantiated. According to this tract:

It could be said, “I buy food grains in the market with money, so why should I care about the peasant?” But imagine a time of famine...when food grains are not available. During a famine, it is a fistful of rice that can save a man, not bags full of wealth. He could be sitting on a pile of gold (coins), but he would be loath to even touch it. Instead if a fistful of rice is brought to him, he would devour it like a lion and regain life. Then, if we pose the same question, “what is of greater value? Money or a fistful of rice?” He will most definitely answer, “rice”. If it is asked, “Is a wealthy man your friend? Or is a peasant your friend?” “A peasant”, he will answer. So if a person believes that I buy with money, why should I be grateful to the peasant, such an opinion will be foolish indeed.<sup>50</sup>

Here, the labor of cultivation occupied a depth, a profundity, and a potential which money as a medium of exchange could only represent at a surface level or, potentially misrepresent. Thus, the hypothetical buyer in *Adarsha Krishak* was said to confound the source of rice to be the market (instead of properly identifying it in the labor of the peasant) and mistakenly locate value in money (instead of the productive activity of labor). Value was represented as emanating from a depth – the potential for productive activity or labor – that the surface realm of exchange, namely the market, could only ever misrepresent.

It is also important to note that this value expressed in the relationship between labor and land was to be maintained through the centrality of practices – practices which, according to the self-improvement texts, constituted a good Muslim. The daily offerings of *namaz* and teaching one’s children how to offer prayer were as important as the daily activity of tending to one’s land with meticulous care – which was also a practice in *ibadat* (worship). When addressing the issue of how indebtedness was to be overcome, in

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<sup>50</sup> See Abdul Hai, *Adarsha Krishak* (Mymensingh: Abdul Hai, 1921).

the manner of urban reformers such as Abdus Sattar or Abur Rashid, the improvement texts did not advocate a repeal of the scriptural prohibition on *riba* by arguing that such practices were secondary to the inner essence of Islam, and therefore could be adjusted to the “needs of the present” so long as they were “in continuity with the inner essence” of Islam. The problem of indebtedness, according to improvement texts, was to be countered through everyday practices of frugality and thriftiness that were depicted as being enjoined by Islam. As *Krishaker Unnati* noted: “The plight of Bengal’s peasantry is largely caused by extravagance. In the Koran, Allah has said that extravagance is the brother of *shaitan* (the devil).”<sup>51</sup> This emphasis on practice, which dictated that the problem of indebtedness could be solved through the correct practice of thriftiness, also posited the problem of indebtedness as a matter of incorrect and un-Islamic practices of the Muslim peasant. Extravagance at weddings and an over-enthusiasm for litigation were identified, among others, as incorrect/ un-Islamic practices that resulted in debt.

As the subaltern domain of the rural peasantry, comprising the overwhelming numbers of Muslims, came to be marked by the rapid circulation of a specific kind of cultural production in Bengali, namely, the Muslim improvement texts, such texts in performing the pedagogic function of teaching peasants how to be a self-sufficient peasant and good Muslim stressed on the centrality of practice. It was through the practices of labor and worship that the good Muslim/ good peasant’s relationship to land was established. Again, it was through correct practices that the Muslim peasant’s burden of debt could be mitigated. Via concrete practices prescribed by the such self-

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<sup>51</sup> See Khademol Islam, *Krishaker Unnati*.

improvement texts such as tilling, weeding, and pruning – in short, a meticulous regime of care for the land - which were also practices of worship to Allah, one’s relationship to the land one occupied as a tenant and worked on as a share-cropper could be morally and legitimately maintained. The zamindars and *mahajans* (moneylenders) were non-cultivators who did not produce value. Land that accrued to such non-cultivators could be de-legitimized on the basis of the concept of the economic that the improvement texts had produced – where cultivation was the essential and enduring source of value. The land of the zamindars, and the landlord-moneylenders, and the wealth that accrued from such land was nothing short of deceit through which non-cultivators had usurped the land of the tenant-cultivators. Thus another Muslim self-improvement text lamented:

Not only is the *raiya* (tenant-cultivator) not the owner of wealth, as a matter of fact, in the eyes of law, he is not even the owner of land. Those that have accumulated wealth through deceit and force, those whose ancestors had endeared themselves to Lord Cornwallis’ Company agents and those who in broad daylight committed theft through usury are today the owners of land. But those poor creatures who turned their lifeblood to sweat – clearing dense jungles or by ceaseless toil, ploughed deeper and deeper into the earth to bring out ambrosia (*amrita*) – have no claims on the land today; they are merely hired hands.<sup>52</sup>

In trying to understand the condition of possibility of the violent acts of peasant self-assertions that mark the history of 1920s and early 1930s Bengal – insurrections of the kind that the “disturbances” in Mymensingh in the 1930 bear testimony to – the regime of value that emerged as an effect of the discursive practices of representation of the improvement texts has to be taken into account. A concept of the economic where laboring-activity was seen as the sole fount of value was the condition of possibility of acts of peasant self-assertions. The discursive practices of the Muslim self-improvement

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<sup>52</sup> See Abdul Samad, *Prajasatta Nuton Ain O’ Prajar Kartavva* (New Tenancy Laws and the Tenant-cultivator’s Duties) (Dhaka: Shatrauja Islamia Press, 1923).

texts, with the emphasis on labor and the correctness of practice, rendered the moneylender illegitimate on two principal counts. Firstly, he was guilty of incorrect /irreligious practice, namely, partaking in usurious activity. Secondly, his relationship to his wealth was morally illegitimate because it was acquired by deceit, not the correct and value-generating practice of labor. The manner in which raids on the moneylenders were carried out in Mymensingh – before sunset, in deference to the *shariat* which, it was thought, considers it cowardly to steal at night – attests to the premium placed on correct religious practice even during instances that were recorded by the colonizers as extreme unruly behavior.

## **Conclusion**

As I have mentioned before for historians such as Sugata Bose, such acts of violence by a predominantly Muslim peasantry had an essentially economic basis and arose from the real economic condition of indebtedness. I have tried to suggest that it is hasty to attribute such causality to indebtedness as an “economic fact” without paying attention to the ways in which the meaning of debt was being historically determined by specific discursive practices of representation. For the urban, Muslim rationalists and reformers, interest (which resulted in massive debts), as the money-value of passing time, increased incrementally all along the linear infinity of time, irrespective of practice. Time itself could generate value. It was this understanding of interest which necessitated that practice be maneuvered –the prohibition on *riba* be repealed or reinterpreted – to remedy the “Muslim burden” of debt and meet the needs of (value-generating) time. But in the Muslim improvement texts directed to the semi-literate and even non-literate peasants, debt was a problem that accrued from incorrect/ irreligious practice and could be

remedied through correct religious practice alone. The time of debt was made contingent upon practice, and was not, in principle, either infinite or independent of it. In other words, time itself was no guarantor of value. As I have elaborated at length, the “economic” as an object of knowledge that emerged in improvement texts attributed value to the practice of labor, not to the realm of exchange (of money-interest for time). Therefore, the Muslim burden of debt, as it was understood, could be remedied through correct practices - foremost among which was the activity of labor.

Increasingly, a principled refusal to repay their debts to the landlord-moneylender was becoming a matter of resolve among sections of the peasantry in eastern Bengal. In 1931, a colonial official from Comilla reports how “the *zamindar-mahajans* (the landlord-moneylenders) have become very unpopular... There have been meetings in which it was resolved not to pay interest to the moneylender; the zamindars and their families have removed themselves to Brahmanbaria for safety.”<sup>53</sup> To explain such a scenario, I am proposing that we understand these refusals to pay interest not simply through the dominant concept of the economic where interest is legitimately posited as the money-value of passing time, but through the possibilities opened up by the discursive practices of Muslim self-improvement texts as they proliferated and circulated in the first two decades in twentieth century Bengal, where the concept of the economic dictated that value accrued to the practice of labor alone. Here, value could not be legitimately generated through a process where money could beget money, because

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<sup>53</sup> As quoted in Sugata Bose, *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics, 1919-1947* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 195.

money (as a medium of exchange) was already the misrepresentation of labor, for labor alone was the guarantor of value and the site of its genesis.

It was in fact, a Bengali journal called *Langal* (The Plough), a mouthpiece of the Labour Swaraj Party, which for the first time made explicit the relationship between the Islamic prohibition on *riba*, the concept of labor, and communism. The Labour Swaraj Party founded in Bengal in November 1925, was a congregation of left-minded individuals and communists who worked within the umbrella of the Indian National Congress. It had links with the peasant-tenant movements developing locally across Bengal, and soon, within a year, changed its name to “The Workers and Peasants Party of Bengal”. Kazi Nazrul Islam - a revered Bengali Muslim poet, a champion of the underclass, and a dear friend of Muzaffar Ahmed a founder-member of the Communist Party of India - was given the task of editing *Langal*, the mouthpiece journal of Labor Swaraj Party. In the fifth issue of this short-lived journal, an essay titled “*Samyavad ki?*” (“What if Egalitarianism?”) was devoted to explaining the relationship between Islam and Communism and allay anxieties of there existing any contradiction between the two. To quote from this essay, published in January 1926:

Some Muslim leaders have alleged that *samyavad* (egalitarianism) is the enemy of Islam. Quiet to the contrary, it is only Islam that is a greater oppositional force to *dhaniktantra* (plutocracy) than *samyavad*. . . Without labor, enjoying interests is forbidden, thus the taking of interest on loans is forbidden among Muslims. *Because earnings from such interests are earning without expending labor, Islam does not tolerate those who make money from interests on loans.* Communism has also declared the taking of interest to be illegal.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *Langal*, vol. 1, issue 5 (Calcutta, January 21, 1926) as quoted in Sunil Kanti De (ed.) *Nazruler 'Langal' Patrika-e Krishak Sramik Prasanga* (Dhaka: Nazrul Institute, 2010), pp. 91-92. My italicization.

Here, the authoritative manner in which *riba* prohibition was equated with interest is telling, not least because the precise elucidation of *riba* in Islamic theological and legal discourse was a matter historically ridden with several contradictions and complexities that were completely glossed over, but more significantly because in this essay, interest (understood as *riba*) was deemed to be prohibited in Islam because it was a form of profit that was earned “without expending labor”.

The first statement of the Koran about *riba* is to be found in the Surah al Rum, which states:

And whatever you invest by way of *riba* so that it may increase upon people’s wealth, increases not with God, but what you give away by way of *zakah* seeking the pleasure of God, those they receive recompense manifold.<sup>55</sup>

And the again, these lines are found in the Sunah al-Imran of the Koran: “O you who believe, do not consume *riba* with continued redoubling and protect yourselves from God, perchance you may be blissful”. And finally in the Surah al Baquarah of the Koran, the prohibition on *riba* is asserted in the most emphatic terms, accompanied by a threat, “Those who consume *riba* shall not rise except like the one who has been struck by the devil.”<sup>56</sup>

In explicating the meaning of *riba*, historically there seemed to be a scholarly consensus that its most literal Koranic meaning was “in excess”; there was no consensus, however, on what constituted “excess” - what objects in excess, or what mode of giving the prohibition pointed to. The *hadiths* differed from one another, and complicated any

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<sup>55</sup> Fazlur Rahman, ‘Riba and Interest’ in *Islamic Studies*, vol. 3 (1) (Karachi, March 1964), p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.



easy equation of *riba* with interest. For instance, in the Muwatta of Malik (the first major Islamic work combining *hadith*/ reports of sayings or actions of the prophet with *fiqh*/ jurisprudence) and the Sahih of Al Bukhari (900 A.D), excess was deemed to be permissible in a transaction of cattle, even on credit, and such excess could not be characterized as *riba*.<sup>57</sup> According to the well-regarded Urdu scholar Fazlur Rahman, the Sahih of Muslim and other Sahih works contain *hadiths* (according to which credit transaction, not only of cattle, but also of slaves and copper coins, was permissible even when such transactions involve excess (in taking back what was given)).<sup>58</sup> In the words of the tenth century lexicographer and grammarian al- Zajaj, *riba* was defined as follows:

*Riba* is of two kinds, one of which is forbidden. This is the *riba*, which a person earns by taking from the debtor more than the principal sum which has been given to him on credit or any debt from which any profit might be obtained. The other *riba* which is permissible is a gift in exchange of which the giver demands a more valuable gift or in exchange of which he demands or receives a bigger gift.<sup>59</sup>

Even the twentieth century Arab dictionary of the *hadith* titled “*Kitab Al Nikayah fi Gharib al Hadith wa’l Athar*” compiled by Ibn al Athir says that in the terminology of the Shariah, *riba* means increase in principal without any contract of sale having taken place.<sup>60</sup>

I have very schematically laid out some of the contradictions that had historically existed in the Islamic discourse on *riba*, across *hadith*, dictionaries, and works on jurisprudence, as well as among them. There were questions asked about what objects received in excess of giving would come under the purview of the *riba* prohibition – to

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<sup>57</sup> Fazlur Rahman, ‘Riba and Interest’, p. 21.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., pp. 21-22.

<sup>60</sup> Fazlur Rahman, ‘Riba and Interest’ in *Islamic Studies*, vol. 3 (1) (Karachi, March 1964), p. 24.

which we find varying answers; there were questions asked about the existence, or not, of contracts of sale in determining what constituted *riba* according to the Shariah; in some cases, there was even a distinction made between permissible and prohibited *riba* in terms of whether what was given was a gift or a debt. But the criterion of the expenditure of labor, or the lack of it, in determining what constituted *riba* and what did not, was never posed in these discussions.

In the case of Bengal, by the late nineteenth century the equation between *riba* and interest had become commonplace, but even then theological arguments in favor of the prohibition of interest were never made in terms of labor. In 1870, when Keramat Ali Jaunpuri, the renowned theologian and preacher of Sunni Islam, who had spend fifty years of his life preaching in the eastern districts of Bengal, issued his much publicized fatwa declaring that British India was *Dar-ul-Islam* (the land of Islam), not *Dar-ul-Harb* (the land of the infidels), and therefore it was “not lawful for Mahomedans of British India to make Jihad”, he spoke in favor of the *riba* prohibition in very different terms.<sup>61</sup> Issuing his fatwa verbally to the “learned” Muslims gathered for the annual meeting of the Mahomedan Literary Society, at the Calcutta Town Hall, he set out to answer the question of whether or not it was lawful for the Muslims to wage war against their British rulers who professed Christianity. His answer was that such jihad was not lawful, because British India was indeed the land of Islam. To bolster his argument he furnished the following example:

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<sup>61</sup> “Abstract of Proceedings of the Mohamedan Literary Society of Calcutta, on 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 1870” as reproduced in Enamul Haque (ed.) *Nawab Bahadur Abdul Latif: His Writings and Related Documents* (Dacca: Samudra Prokashani, 1968), pp. 75-110.

From the commencement of British Rule, all learned Mohammedans of India have considered it unlawful to take Interest (on money lent) not only from Mohammedans, but also from Infidels...Had this country been *Dar-ul-Harb*, the very reverse would have been the case. For it is lawful to take Interest from infidels in *Dar-ul-Harb*.”<sup>62</sup>

For Keramat Ali the prohibition on interest was unlawful because colonial India was still, according to him, the land of Islam. The status of the *riba* prohibition was determined in terms of the distinction between *Dar-ul-Harb* and *Dar-ul-Islam*, not in terms of the lack of expenditure of labor.

Upholding the prohibition on interest by citing the absence of expenditure of labor as the intent behind a Koranic prohibition was a stunningly novel spin introduced by Muslim self-improvement texts, which proliferated in 1920s and 1930s Bengal. It was an innovation that was successfully taken up by left-minded members of the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia to show up relationships of affinity between Islam and communism. These developments were not without important ramifications for Muslim politics in the late colonial period. In the Bengal province of colonial India, the mid-1930s saw the meteoric rise of the Krishak Praja Party (KPP/ Peasant Tenant’s Party) - a party with an overwhelmingly Muslim mass base which came to power on the plank of legislating greater rights for tenant cultivators and abolishing unchecked proprietary claims bestowed on zamindars by the Permanent Settlement (1793). Though the KPP, in its ruling career, retracted on its electoral promises, its rise had formalized a shift toward a growing leftist populism that would henceforth become a distinctive character of Muslim politics in Bengal. So much so, that the Muslim League, on the eve of the 1946 elections,

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<sup>62</sup> Enamul Haque (ed.) *Nawab Bahadur Abdul Latif: His Writings and Related Document*, p. 89.

raised slogans such as “land to the tiller” and “Pakistan belongs to the peasants”. In the same year, there would be curious convergences between the Tebhaga movement – a militant peasant movement organized by the Communist Party of India (CPI) – demanding the share of produce a share-cropper customarily owed to the landlord be reduced and the Muslim League-led Pakistan movement, where Muslim peasants chanted slogans in favor of both Pakistan and Tebhaga at meetings organized by CPI leaders.

In analyzing this curious conjunction of leftist politics and religious nationalism and in accounting for the overwhelming participation of the peasantry in Bengal’s Pakistan movement, historians have typically remained within the framework of political economy, explaining them in terms of political assertions of the tenantry and share-cropping peasantry in relation to factors such as debt, effects of larger forces such as the great depression on commodity prices in a colonial economy, or the relationship between landed interests and party politics. Significant though such studies are, the terms of these arguments remain somewhat tautological, inasmuch as they see the political assertion of alienated labor as natural, without inquiring how a group or a community come to, in a phenomenological sense, inhabit the assumption that value inheres in the site of production, as a precondition for such assertions. But how did value come to reside in the realm of production, in an activity such as tilling the earth? How did the ability to labor/ to produce become the touchstone of measuring the worth of man, the tensile strength of an economy’s backbone, and the power of a community? That labor is the primary and authentic site of value is perhaps the most enduring presupposition of Political Economy and progressive politics alike; its axiomatic status has long resisted historicization and, by and large, escaped ideology critiques. In a methodologically conscious move away from

political economy, by focusing my lens of scrutiny on discourses about debt in the Bengali Muslim public domain of late colonial Bengal, I have shown how the realm of production came to be valorized thus, over and above circulation and exchange.

I have focused on the ways in which debates on debt and interest played out among the Muslims in the public domain of early twentieth century colonial Bengal, not to simply show up the messy entanglements of putatively economic categories in the realm of religion. But more importantly, I have examined the manner in which these debates and contentions on the status of interest in the Muslim public domain of late colonial Bengal – in negotiating the relationships between the practical and the ethical, the essential and the inessential, the material and the spiritual, the man of need and the man of ideals – had the *effect* of historically instantiating labor or the realm of production as the positive repository of value.

## CHAPTER 2

### Changing conceptions of Muslim Political Representation

In this chapter, I trace transformations in ideas and practices of political sovereignty (and political representation) among the Muslims in Bengal, by focusing attention on the views of key political figures of nineteenth century Muslim politics in Bengal, and contrasting them to the views of Muslim political luminaries who rose to prominence in the early twentieth century. Moreover, it is the argument of this chapter that practices and organizational structures of distinctively Muslim forms of civil society institutions, such as the *anjumans*, were critical to transformations in conceptions of political sovereignty, and enabled large swathes of Muslims in colonial Bengal, still excluded from the privilege of franchise, to inhabit modes of representational practices oriented to the novel conception of political sovereignty based on people's mandate.

#### From Patronage to People's Power

In a letter to *The Times*, Ameer Ali, a Shia man of letters prominent in the public life of Calcutta who served as a High Court judge between 1894 and 1903, defended the Muslim League's demand for separate electorates (self-contained legislative constituencies for Muslims) in arguing that:

The importance of a nation cannot always be judged on numerical considerations. Whatever may be the view regarding the historical and political position of the Mohammedans, to which the government of India attaches some value, Mohammedan loyalty is an asset to the Empire which I venture to submit ought not to be lightly put aside.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> 'From Moslem Representation and Indian Reforms' (Letter to *The Times*, 14 January, 1909) reprinted in K.K Aziz, *Ameer Ali: His Life and Work* (Lahore: Publishers United Ltd, 1968), p. 314.

Here the Muslim demand for separate electorates was justified not merely in terms of an institutional measure to offset the numerical disadvantage that would be suffered by Indian Muslims in the context of joint electorates (though that too was recognized). The demand for separate electorates, very significantly, was posited as a “just” and “fair” reward for loyalty displayed to “His Excellency” and articulated with the expectation that in return for loyalty, recognition and protection were due.<sup>64</sup>

Ameer Ali saw himself as a leading man, a representative, and a spokesman of the Muslims in Bengal and wrote extensively about their plight. “Perceiving the complete lack of political training among the Muslim inhabitants of India, and the immense advantage and preponderance the Hindu organizations gave to their community”, Amir Ali founded the National Mohammedan Association in Calcutta in 1877 and served as this organization’s secretary for over twenty-five years. He was born in Chinsura, a former Dutch settlement in the Hooghly district of Bengal in 1849. He received his early education from the Calcutta Madrasah, subsequently shifted to Mohsina College in Hooghly from where he graduated in 1867, and became the first student from the College to earn a Master’s degree in History and Political Economy. He advocated in favor of the Bengal Tenancy Bill, proposed by the Government in an effort to grant occupancy rights to tenant-cultivators, and argued that such a measure was a step in the right direction in being “the only means of promoting the agricultural prosperity of the country”.<sup>65</sup> Yet Ameer Ali cared little to identify with Bengal; indeed like most *ashraf*, his greatest pride

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<sup>64</sup> ‘From Moslem Representation and Indian Reforms’ (Letter to *The Times*, 14 January, 1909) reprinted in K.K Aziz, *Ameer Ali: His Life and Work* (Lahore: Publishers United Ltd, 1968), p. 314.

<sup>65</sup> K.K Aziz, *Ameer Ali: His Life and Work* (Lahore: Publishers United Ltd, 1968), p. 314. Also see Introduction.

lay in his foreign origins – whether Persian ancestry or Arab Sayyid heritage. Nor did he ever assert that his claim to representing the Muslims of Bengal was founded on a genuine association with his Bengali domicile co-religionists.

The claim to represent, to speak for, and act for the Muslims of Bengal was not, in the self-understanding of nineteenth century leaders such as Ameer Ali, based on a principle of likeness with the constituency they claimed to represent, but rather on a principle of distinction – on social rank and moral worth. His *‘Memoirs’* begins with an account of his family’s descent from the Prophet, followed by detailed descriptions of high offices held by his ancestors – one among whom was “a grand-chamberlain to the King who ruled over Persia shortly after the Afghan invasion”, another was the “Chief Mujtahid at Qum, a city in Persia famous for its scholars” and his grandfather, Mansur Ali Khan, was in the service of Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula of Oudh as a revenue collector and died in 1820 in a battle with a Raja “who had rebelled against his liege-lord”. Ameer Ali saw himself as part of the cosmopolitan ruling elite that flourished under the Mughals. He was brought up on such family lore as that of his grandfather’s loyalty to the Nawab exemplified by his death in the battlefield fighting a rebel.<sup>66</sup> It is in this context that his premium on Muslim loyalty as an asset to the British Empire has to be understood. For men such as Ameer Ali, loyalty to the state was not a question of pragmatism alone, it was equally, and perhaps more significantly an Islamicate code of behavior that governed those who partook in political governance and a desirable moral attribute of men of rank and influence worthy of official recognition.

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<sup>66</sup> See *Memoirs* by Ameer Ali as reprinted in K.K Aziz, *Ameer Ali: His Life and Work* (Lahore: Publishers United Ltd, 1968).



It is well-known that high Perso-Islamicate culture had evolved elaborate political rituals for the exchange of protection and loyalty which, in Mughal India and in the courts of Murshidabad and Awadh that emerged following the decline of the Mughals, bound the officers and their subordinates horizontally to one another, and vertically to the emperor. A seventeenth century chronicler, Mirza Nathan, described how after defeating the last Afghan chieftain resisting Mughal authority in Bengal, the Mughal general, Islam Khan, and his men when confronted with the question of how to deal with their defeated Muslim foes, “decided to extend hospitality to all Afghans in the first halting place and distribute salt of the emperor according to their status, because there was no heavier burden on the neck than the burden of salt.”<sup>67</sup> According to Richard Eaton, salt appeared in such instances as a metaphor for socio-political loyalty and dependence. Within the corps of Mughal officers, salt was understood as a substance either ceremonially or metaphorically accepted or eaten at the hands of the emperor, which in binding members of the imperial corps vertically to the emperor via exchanges of loyalty for patronage gave expression to corporate solidarity, especially at times when the group felt itself mortally endangered.<sup>68</sup> Such ritual exchanges of loyalty for patronage through “the ideology of the salt” thoroughly permeated the ruling elite of Mughal Bengal, and similar rituals of forging loyalty through the gifting of robes, betel, and titles to the client

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<sup>67</sup> As quoted in Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam in the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1776* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 160.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 162-167.

persisted through the eighteenth century and, indeed, lasted well into the late nineteenth century.<sup>69</sup>

From the time of their arrival in India, the British entered networks of such gift exchange which were key to the political culture of the state. As ambassadors and traders, Company employees traveled inland to the imperial courts, gave *nazrs*, and obtained *farmans* that allowed them to trade duty-free. As John McLane points out, both before and after Nazim Siraj-ud-Daulah's capture of Fort William in 1756, British and Dutch officers utilized signifiers of political fidelity in establishing relationships with Siraj-ud-Daulah, which included the gift of *nazr*, acceptance of robes of honor, and the exchange of betel (a customary pledge of honor). Even after the Company assumed Diwani rights (the right to collect revenue) of Bengal, Company officials continued to confer *khil'ats* (robes of honor) on zamindars and other persons of importance in order to ensure that vertical relations of political fidelity were forged via rituals that were central to the performance and instantiation of political sovereignty in pre-colonial Bengal.<sup>70</sup>

A contemporary of Ameer Ali, Abdul Latif (1828-1893) was appointed a Deputy Magistrate by Sir Herbert Maddock (the Deputy Governor of Bengal) in 1848. Later he rose to the rank of the Presidency Magistrate and was posted in Alipore, Calcutta. After the passage of the Indian Councils Act in 1861, Abdul Latif was also the first Muslim who was appointed to a seat in the Indian Legislative Council. When a Municipal Corporation was first created in 1863 for the town of Calcutta, he was nominated to serve

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<sup>69</sup> Sudipta Sen, *Empire of Free Trade: The East India Company and the Making of The Colonial Marketplace* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 183.

<sup>70</sup> John R. McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth Century Bengal* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 112-114.

in the civic body called the “Justices of Peace”, a component of the Calcutta Corporation. He was a prominent official and a distinguished man of letters, who was nominated as a Fellow of the Calcutta University, and remained so until his retirement.<sup>71</sup> In 1880, the Viceroy and Governor General of Bengal conferred upon him the title of Nawab “as a personal distinction” in “recognition of the public services rendered by the distinguished Moulavie, chiefly in the cause of Education and improvement of the Mohamedan community”; it was an event widely reported in the English Press.<sup>72</sup>

The *Indian Mirror* provides an interesting glimpse into the details of the ceremony of conferring the title that took place on June 4, 1880, at Alipore, in the upper flat of the Office of Mr. J. Monro, the commissioner of the Presidency Division. It mentions how the Alipore flat was made appropriate for the occasion, how the room where the ceremony was to be held was covered with the Durbar carpet with the Royal Arms embroidered in gold at the centre, fringes of gold running through the whole length of the four sides of the room, and the display of red cloth fitting for a place where a Durbar was to be held. In short, the Alipore upper flat was converted into a “Public Durbar”, where “a select gathering of European and Native Officials of the District of 24 Pergunnahs and a few Native Gentlemen assembled to witness the ceremony”.<sup>73</sup>

Every part of the event was reported in the English press with ceremonial precision and attention to details: we learn that the Commissioner of the Division entered

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<sup>71</sup> See ‘A Short Account of My Public Life (1885)’ as reproduced in Md. Mohar Ali, *Nawab Abdul Latif: Autobiography and Other Writing* (ed.) (Chittagong: The Mehrub Publication, 1968), pp. 1-34.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> See Md. Mohar Ali, *Nawab Abdul Latif: Autobiography and Other Writing* (ed.) (Chittagong: The Mehrub Publication, 1968).

the Durbar room and took his seat on a State Chair at the south end of the room, on the left of which the Officials were seated and to the right of which were the Non-Official attendees. Then Abdul Latif was brought before the Commissioner by his personal assistant and Mir Monshee. After a brief conversation with the Commissioner, Abdul Latif was taken to the robing room. There he was invested with the “*khillut*”, which consisted of “a diamond ring, a *Surpech* with *Kulghi*, and a Sword with richly embroidered Belt and Shield”. Latif was then brought back before the Commissioner, where the Collector of the 24 Pergunnahs handed over to him a valuable gold watch with an engraved inscription. The inscription read “Presented to Moulavie Abdool Luteef Khan Bahadoor, with the title of Nawab, conferred upon him by his Excellency the Viceroy and the Governor General of India. Calcutta, 12<sup>th</sup> April, 1880”. This was followed by the Commissioner presenting Latif with a “*Sunnad* of the title of the Nawab”. Abdul Latif presented the usual “*Nuzzarana*” and thanked the government for recognizing his humble service to the “cause of Muhammadan improvement” and iterated that this recognition would go a long way in convincing his “co-religionists of the interests which the government takes in their progress”. The Commissioner then presented *pan* or betel and conversed with the Nawab. At the close of the proceedings, Nawab Abdul Latif was led to his carriage by the same officials who had escorted him to the Durbar at the start of the ceremony.<sup>74</sup> The conferment of title in such elaborate ceremonial fashion, with the bestowal of the *khil’at* (robe of honor), the *sanad* (title deed which in pre-colonial Mughal and Nizamat Bengal were often accompanied by grants of

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<sup>74</sup> See ‘Title of “Nawab” Conferred Upon Moulavie Abdool Luteef Khan Bahadoor’ in *The Gazette of India*, May 29, 1880, as reproduced in Md. Mohar Ali, *Nawab Abdul Latif: Autobiography and Other Writing* (ed.) (Chittagong: The Mehrub Publication, 1968), pp. 34-40.

tax-free land, though no such grant was made to Abdul Latif), and the exchange of betel as a pledge of protection point to the ways in which such pre-colonial rituals of sovereignty were performed not only by the Company, but as the case of Abdul Latif indicates, by the Raj too.

The *khil'at* that the Raj conferred upon Abdul Latif, alongside the title or *sanad*, was a common ritual in Bengal during the Mughals and the Nizamat. By conferring a *khil'at*, a ruler proclaimed his sovereignty and incorporated the recipient into the governing class; by accepting the *khil'at*, the recipient acknowledged his donor's overlordship and pledged loyal service. According to F.W Buckler, part of the ritual's meaning derived from the fact that robes came from the personal wardrobe, and in theory, if rarely in reality, might have been worn by the donor. F.W Buckler argues that the *khil'at* was a symbol of "continuity of succession" and that "continuity rested on a physical basis, depending on the contact of the body of the recipient with the body of the donor through the medium of clothing."<sup>75</sup> In other words, the donor incorporated the recipient within his own person through the medium of his wardrobe. Via such rituals, Mughal sovereignty operated by the parceling out of patronage, protection, and recognition passed on from the superior to the inferior in rank and status, and instantiated a web of relationships of protections and loyalty through institutions such as gift-giving, which were simultaneously rituals of incorporation which consolidated relationships between the patron and the client. For over a century, the British continued to partake in

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<sup>75</sup> F.W Buckler, 'The Oriental Despot' in MN Pearson (ed.) *Legitimacy and Symbols: The South Asian Writings of F.W Buckler* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1985), p. 179.

traditions of political sovereignty that were familiar to the Mughal and Nizami ruling elites.

Thus when decisive moves by the colonial government and the Congress towards electoral representation were made in the late nineteenth century, it is in the context of such patronage-based understanding of political power and state, that the initial unease of the Muslim leadership in Bengal, and indeed elsewhere in India, needs to be understood. By 1890, Sayyid Ahmad Khan had gathered 40,000 signatures on a petition appealing to the House of Commons to restrain any extension of the elective principle. The petition stressed on the dangers inherent in elections and upheld the importance of retaining the system of nomination as the only means of guaranteeing the interest of groups unable or unwilling to participate in the new system.<sup>76</sup> But in 1896 the Indian Defense Association, founded by Sayyid Ahmad Khan as an alternative to Indian National Congress, called for the system of nomination to be replaced by the institution of separate electorates.<sup>77</sup> The Shimla Memorial presented by a “Mohamedan Deputation” to Lord Minto in Shimla in October 1906 is the first document formally mooted before the British government that elaborated a systematic defense of separate electorates or self-contained legislative constituencies for Muslims as key to adequate political representation for the Indian Muslims. At one level, the Shimla Memorial marked a shift from the politics of nomination to a politics of elections – an idea they had previously rejected. And its demand for separate electorates accepted the principle of popular representation, but

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<sup>76</sup> Rafiq Zakaria, *Rise of Muslims in Indian Politics: Analysis of Developments from 1885-1906* (Bombay: Somaiya Publications, 1970), p. 13.

<sup>77</sup> Shan Mohammad (ed), *The Aligarh Movement: Basic Documents, 1864-1898, Vol 111* (Meerut, Meenakshi Prakashan, 1978) pp. 1063-1068.

denied that it involved the representation of individual interests; it endorsed elections but only on condition that electorates were organized on religious lines.

Yet it is important to note that the Shimla Memorial, while it recognized numerical considerations as important to the distribution of political power, held that they were essentially secondary to the questions of social status and moral virtue. Political representation, in this scheme of things, was still a function of official patronage accorded to communities with “status and influence” and thus the memorial proposed that due weight be given to the position Muslims “occupied in India a little more than hundred years ago, and of which the traditions have naturally not faded from their minds”.<sup>78</sup> Political representation, in the understanding of the memorialists, was not a function of popular sovereignty or the will of the people. The “people” as the fount of political sovereignty had not yet emerged as the protagonist in the arena of Muslim politics in India, since the signatories of the Shimla Memorial, even as they demanded separate electorates for the Muslim, remained firmly grounded in an understanding of political sovereignty where political power or the business of political representation was an outcome of official recognition. In other words, in the understanding of the “Nobles, Jagirdars, Talukdars, Lawyers, Zemindars, Merchants” who were the signatories on this document, political sovereignty lay in “the dispensation of State patronage”, not in the mandate of the people. Thus, the demand for separate electorates was justified as a plea for protection from the state in exchange for loyalty displayed by such men who were recognized by the government to be representing “Muslim interest”. And since the

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<sup>78</sup> Sharif Al Mujahid (ed.), *Muslim League Documents, 1900-1947: Volume 1 (1900-1908)*, (Karachi: Quaid-I-Azam Academy, 1990), pp. 90-91.

dispensation of state patronage at the local level, in “the representative institutions of the European type”, translated into the number of seats on Municipal and District boards, the memorialists urged that the proportions of such seats be determined “in accordance with the numerical strength, social status, and local influence of either (the Muslim or the Hindu) Community – in consultation, if necessary, with their leading men.”<sup>79</sup> The primary aim of this modality of distribution of state patronage, suggested by the Shimla Memorial, was to ensure the adequate representation of the “Mosulman tax-payers”.<sup>80</sup> Since taxation was measured by property, it was the Muslim property-holder, synonymous with men of rank and influence, who were required to be adequately represented via protected constituencies, namely, the separate electorates. The memorialists pleaded with the Government that in allocating the balance of patronage to various communities, the leaders of such communities be consulted. What criterion would be used to determine who the leaders of communities were? Of course here again, popular mandate or the will of the people had little to do with notions of leadership. The Shimla Memorial is silent on the issue, but from the tenor of the text – its emphasis on according patronage and protection to the loyal subjects – it is fairly clear that the leaders were those of who had historically cultivated, at least in theory, the moral quality of loyalty. In this sense, the Shimla Memorial had a forerunner in the memorial presented to the Government by the National Mohammedan Association in 1882. I quote parts from this memorial to evince the manner in which the rules for dispensation of patronage were

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<sup>79</sup> Sharif Al Mujahid (ed.), *Muslim League Documents, 1900-1947: Volume 1 (1900-1908)*, (Karachi: Quaid-I-Azam Academy, 1990), pp. 90-91.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.



understood by men such as Ameer Ali and Abdul Latif as being essentially in contradistinction to procedural standardization entailed by the British education system:

Your memorialists would humbly suggest, in the first place, that the balance of State patronage should be restored between the Hindus and the Muhammadans. In the actual distribution and dispensation of State patronage, an undue importance is attached to University education. It happens frequently that when there are two candidates, one a Hindu, the other a Muhammadan, preference is given to the Hindu candidate, on the sole ground that he possesses a University certificate, although, as regards general education, the Muhammadan may possess superior qualification. As a matter of fact, owing to some extent to the declared policy of Government, University education did not take root among Mohammedans until very recently, the consequence of which is that, proportionately, there are fewer graduated and undergraduates among the Muhammadans than among the Hindus. At the same time there are many Muhammadans who, without having graduated at the Calcutta University, possess as thorough an acquaintance with the English language as an ordinary B.A. *Your memorialists would, therefore, humbly suggest that in the dispensation of State patronage no regard should be paid to mere University degrees, but the qualifications of candidates should be judged by an independent standard. It will not be considered presumptuous on the memorialists' part if they venture to submit that stamina and force of character are as necessary in the lower as in the higher walks of life; and these qualities can scarcely be tested by University examination.*<sup>81</sup>

For the likes of Ameer Ali, since “stamina” and “force of character” were the criteria for the bestowal of official recognition, and therefore a measure of political power, the lower order of Muslims were not considered fit candidates for state patronage. The lower orders could be represented only by the *ashraf* class, which considered itself historically adept at cultivating virtues such as loyalty and force of character. Indeed, according to Delawar Hossain, another prominent member of Ameer Ali’s Central National Mohammedan Association, the root of the plight of the Muslims of Bengal lay in a crisis of leadership, and the ascendancy of village-based, low-born leaders such as Teetu Mir and Dudu Miyan who were influencing the masses of Muslims in Bengal’s villages and

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<sup>81</sup> ‘Memorial of the National Muhammadan Association (1882)’ reproduced in K.K Aziz, *Ameer Ali: His Life and Work*, p. 35. (My emphasis).

disseminating an interpretation of Islam that was bigoted, ignorant, and inherent with “decidedly democratic tendencies”.<sup>82</sup> The other major problem, according to Hossain, was the practice of *ashraf* marriages into the inferior classes, a problem that supposedly emerged out of necessities spawned by colonialism itself. To quote him:

But, as has been the case with us, the higher classes are obliged to intermarry with the inferior – not because the latter classes have won for themselves a conspicuous position, but merely because the number of the former is small – the blood is diluted, the high resolves, the noble aspirations, the feeling of pride, the self-respect which have belonged to the immigrant blood, diminished in strength with each successive intermixture until every characteristic is lost.

It is this intermarriage between the immigrant families and the convert families that has gradually enfeebled our physical powers, our intellectual faculties, and our moral constitution and nature, and will in the course of time, unless this process is checked, bring us down to the level of *jolahas* or weavers, *darzis* or tailors, *kasabs* or butchers, and *kunjras* or sellers of garden produce.

So long as the Government was in our hands, there was a constant immigration of new blood which, aided by the use of Perso-Arabic alphabet, preserved us from rapidly deteriorating in character and position; as the necessity of our intermarriage with convert-descended families did not arise – did not in fact seriously affect us. But with the firm establishment of British Government immigration entirely ceased – there does not exist a single circumstance tending to arrest the constant action of the depressing influences, which the presence of a large body of converts has on our social wellbeing.

It is clear then that the system of intermarriage has been a thorough evil, and has caused us to deteriorate in character, intellect, and the constitution – and thus the social degradation of the Bengali Mohammedans has been as rapid as it is unchecked. This is a most serious state of things and must at once be confronted. The social misery of the Bengali Muhammadans is daily becoming more intense, and the question of the best means of finding an elevating tendency out of the materials we have – of raising the lower classes with the materials we have – of raising the lower classes without allowing the higher to descend – can no longer be shirked and must no longer be postponed.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> ‘The Future of Mosalmans’ as reproduced in Sultan Jahan Salik (ed.) *Muslim Modernism in Bengal: Selected Writings of Delawarr Hosaen Ahmed Mirza (1840-1913)*, Vol. 1 (Dhaka: Center for Social Studies 1980), pp 74-75.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Future of Mosalmans’ in Sultan Jahan Salik (ed.) *Muslim Modernism in Bengal: Selected Writings of Delawarr Hosaen Ahmed Mirza (1840-1913)*, pp. 106-107.

For prominent Muslim men of Bengal who represented the community to the British government in the nineteenth century, so important was the principle of distinction with the mass of the co-religionists they represented, that intermarriage with such people would, in their view, in fact undercut their ability to represent by weakening their “physical powers”, “intellectual faculties” and “moral constitution” – qualities that, as Ameer Ali and his fellow memorialists had stated, were essential to leadership. Calcutta-based associations such as the Mohammedan Literary Society started by Abdul Latif in 1863 and Ameer Ali’s National Mohammedan Association that was founded in 1878 conducted all their proceedings in Persian, Urdu, and English, but never in Bengali.

Nawab Abdul Latif, though born and raised in the Faridpur District of East Bengal and a fluent speaker of Bengali, never used Bengali in public life and did not encourage it as a language of communication in the conversaciones, which constituted the public activity of the Mohammedan Literary Association.<sup>84</sup> Delawar Hossain advocated the use of Bengali for the *ashraf* in Bengal only because:

[T]he difference of language between the higher and the lower Moslems has placed the Feraizis of Eastern Bengal under the influence and leadership of men like Teetu Mir and Dudu Miyan. The higher Musalmans, disdainful or neglecting to learn Bengali – the only language that the great majority, if not the entire body, of the Mohammadans understand – gradually forfeited their claim to the guidance of these people. The educated continued to compile in Persian and declaim in Urdu, but the position vacated by them was adroitly occupied by men who are the founders of what is called Mosalmani Bengali, men generally ignorant and bigoted but with decidedly democratic tendencies.<sup>85</sup>

According to Hossain, the vernacular was a means “for the advancement in broad views and liberal ideas” among the bigoted lower orders of Muslims and a vehicle of translating

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<sup>84</sup> See F. B. Bradley-Birt, *Twelve Men of Bengal in the Nineteenth Century* (Kolkata: S.K. Lahiri, 1910).

<sup>85</sup> See ‘Future of Mosalmans’.

the rational impulse of Islam and the science and literature of the West to those whose poverty prevented them from devoting part of their time to English or Persian education.<sup>86</sup> For Hossain, Bengali was to be adopted by the *ashraf* in Bengal only as a means of communicating ideals rooted in Persianate cultural productions and Western education to the lower orders; it was not a basis for identity.

In contrast to the basis for representing the Muslim community that undergirded the memorial of the National Mohammedan Association and the Shimla deputation's plea for separate electorates, it is interesting to note the presuppositions about representation and political sovereignty that underlay Azizul Haque's "Plea for Separate Electorates", which he placed before the government in 1931, in response to the recommendations of the Nehru Committee Report.<sup>87</sup> In 1929, the Nehru Committee recommended that the institution of separate electorates (self-contained legislative constituencies for Muslims) put in place by the colonial state, ostensibly to protect the political interests of the Muslim minority, be abolished in the Bengal Presidency since "here the Moslems (had) nothing to fear." In response, Azizul Haque, a prominent Bengal Muslim public personality and member of the Bengal Legislative Council, put forth a compelling counter-argument. He argued that the numerical majority of the Muslims in Bengal did not obviate their minority status in the electoral arena, as the right to vote was determined by property qualifications that ensured that the voting strength of the economically weaker Muslim community could never be in proportion to the Bengali Muslim population. Furthermore, he argued that abolition of separate electorates could only, in

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<sup>86</sup> 'Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>87</sup> See Azizul Haque, *A Plea for Separate Electorates in Bengal* (Calcutta: Karim Bux Bros., 1931).

these circumstances, lead to the rule of the numerically smaller Hindu minority, and would thus be contrary to the spirit of “democracy (which) is not the rule of the minority.” Finally he asserted that contrary to widespread misconceptions about the unifying force of joint electorates, they fan communalism since in such electorates the Hindus and Muslims contesting against each other are forced to keep alive communal passions and are led astray from true nationalism.<sup>88</sup>

In Haque’s formulation, wealth or property (with their correlates in rank and influence), far from being the basis of representing the Muslim community was clearly an impediment to representing the community. For Haque, wealth was a “great danger to the return of Moslem members in any joint electorate.” Drawing on data from the provincial elections in Bengal held in 1926, Haque showed that in the popular Hindu constituencies, no less than 26 out of 41 seats were captured by landholders, at least 15 of who were from renowned zamindari houses in Bengal. According to him, the land-owing classes had spent thousands of rupees to “gain election” and had succeeded by “sheer power of money”. By contrast, he stated, the elections in Muslim constituencies were run on comparatively lower costs, not exceeding Rs.2000-3000 per candidate. He thus concluded:

It will not be possible to contest the elections in any scheme of joint electorate if they (Muslims) choose to run Muslim candidates on condition of their terms. Since the more ambitious among them may be tempted to barter their views in exchange for sure victory at the polls with no financial embarrassment on their own behalf. Thus the scheme of joint electorates, if introduced at this stage would in turn swell the number of such candidates, and the very expense of such

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<sup>88</sup> See Azizul Haque, *A Plea for Separate Electorates in Bengal*.

elections will have the effect of driving out those who have struggled to represent the real interest of the community.<sup>89</sup>

At one level, for Haque, the institution of separate electorate was to be maintained simply because the restricted franchise accorded to Indians by the colonial government was mediated by property qualifications, thus excluding those who did not pay above a certain amount in taxes, which in empirical terms meant that the Muslim population in Bengal, with far lesser numbers who would qualify for franchise, did not have voters in proportion to their actual numbers. But at a more fundamental conceptual level, by the 1930s when Haque made his plea for separate electorates, the very premise on which the community could be represented had undergone a massive transformation. Clearly wealth, rank and influence, in short, attributes which hitherto marked the true representative of the community in as much as such attributes expressed the principle of distinction with the community one represented, were now not only inadequate, but deemed a real impediment to representation. The deployment of wealth in elections was now understood as the use of “undue influence” that had the effect of supposedly driving out those who were true representatives of the community. The premise of representation had transformed from a principle of distinction with the constituency one acted for, that was hitherto the mark of the true representative, to a principle of likeness with the constituency one acted for as the mark of a true representative. Unlike Delawar Hossain’s assertion that the crisis of leadership in Bengal’s Muslim community resulted from living in close social proximity and intermarriage with the lower orders of co-religionists, for Haque, the key to representation was to be one of them, or at least like one of them. How would this principle of likeness be achieved?

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

If Haque's plea provides a clue to changing self-definitions of the Bengali Muslim community itself, which by 1931 was loath to accept a wealthy *ashraf* Muslim of Bengal as its true representative – an attitude toward representing and leading the Muslim community in Bengal that veered sharply from the attitudes of Muslim leaders and public intellectuals in the latter half of the nineteenth century who often boasted about their *ashraf*/elite descent – what transformations in the moral vision of self and community could account for this change?

In the following section I argue that new kinds of political institutions and practices, such as political parties and elections (with severely restricted franchise up until 1935), cannot adequately account for this transformation. I attempt to show how such transformations in the self-understanding of the Muslim community were, at least in part, the effect of very different kinds of institutional practices that took root among Muslims in Bengal in the domain which scholars would analytically identify as “religious”. To this purpose, I focus on the institution of the *anjumans* – distinctively Muslim forms of civil association. In paying attention to the history of the Anjuman-e-Ulema-e-Bangla founded in 1913, I demonstrate how *anjumans* were crucial sites within which subjectivities oriented to democratic practice and politics were being worked out in early twentieth century Bengal. Such institutions had reaches far beyond the urban centers of Calcutta and Dhaka and were key to the dissemination of a certain vision of Muslim community.

### **The *Anjuman*: Muslim civil associations and the practice of democracy**

Tamizuddin Khan, or Maulavi Tamizuddin Khan as is he was popularly known, was a prominent member of the Muslim League in undivided India. In 1926, he ran for a seat in

the Bengal Legislative Council from Sadar and Goalando divisions of Faridpur and emerged victorious. He won the Legislative Council elections again in 1930 and 1937. From 1937 until the partition of India in 1947, Maulavi Khan held portfolios in the Ministry of Health, Agriculture and Industry, and Education in the Bengal Cabinet.

In his English biography, *The Test of Time: My Life and Days*, Maulavi Khan charts the beginning of his involvement with communitarian politics. Strikingly, his account of the beginnings of his involvement with Muslim politics had little to do with the Muslim League of which he was a member, by nomination as it were - a membership that, if his own account is to be believed, took him by surprise, even though he was elated at being “recognized” and was pleased by the “distinction” that accrued from it:

While I was still fledgling in my profession (as a lawyer), in the autumn of 1915, I got a letter from the Secretary of the All India Muslim League informing me that I had been nominated as a member of the organization and that I should send as soon as possible the annual subscription of Rs.20. I felt elated at the distinction – there being no other member from the town of Faridpur and probably none in the entire district and send the subscription by money order though it was hard for me in those days to spare such a substantial amount.

For many years however I was to all intents and purposes only a nominal member of the Muslim League, not having the means to attend its annual sessions. The only part I took was to express my opinion in writing about draft resolutions send to me for the purpose, from time to time. ... The Muslim League had no district branches in those days. At least there was none in Faridpur. Local interests had to be looked after by other organizations. ... The establishment of Muslim Associations (such as) Anjuman-i-Islamia almost in every district of the province even before the formation of the All India Muslim League was significant in this regard.<sup>90</sup>

Although his membership to the Muslim League remained patently nominal for a long time until after the Khilafat movement was on the wane, he was very actively involved

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<sup>90</sup> Tamizzudin Khan, *The Test of Time: My Life and Days* by (Dhaka: University Press Ltd, 1989), p. 90.



with the Faridpur chapter of the Anjuman-i-Islamia. His account of his involvement is full of interesting details about his clashes with other personalities prominent in the local Anjuman. His tussle with the older and “ultra loyalist” Abdul Ghani sheds light on the kinds of struggles going on with such associations in the second decade of the twentieth century. To quote from his autobiography:

Early in my career as a lawyer, I discussed with Abdul Ghani about the Anjuman-i-Islamia, which had no constitution or rules of business. The office bearers were more or less permanent incumbents. Nor were there any registers or list of members. When necessary Moulavi Abdul Ghani used to ask a few prominent Muslims to assemble in his bungalow for passing resolutions on certain matters generally at telegraphic requests from Nawab Salimullah, who was a recognized leader of the Muslims. I pleaded with him unsuccessfully to bring about necessary reforms in the Anjuman so as to make it more representative and broad-based. He was extremely conservative in his views. He also rejected my suggestion that the prominent Muslim shopkeepers of the place should be taken into the organization, on the plea that the presence of such lowly people would lower the prestige of the organization. Within a couple of years, the reforms were carried out and the Anjuman gained in popularity. I was elected Secretary and Moulavi Abdul Ghani was President. The membership of the Anjuman spread over the entire district and in all four Subdivisions, branches of the Anjuman were established. Annual sessions were big shows, periodic public meetings were held in which prominent speakers of all Bengal reputation were invited to lecture.<sup>91</sup>

Khan’s profound unease with the fact that the Anjuman’s members were permanent incumbents and decision-making was the privilege of “prominent people” who acted in obedience with the wishes of Nawab Salimullah of Dhaka, and his plea to include the shopkeepers of the locality into the organization indicate that gradual transformations in the principles of representation were being worked out in sites other than the official political parties, to which membership was still considered a matter of distinction and recognition. Maulavi Khan mentions an “unfortunate clash” with Abdul Ghani on another matter pertaining to the Anjuman when the British Government gave the body the

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<sup>91</sup> Tamizzudin Khan, *The Test of Time: My Life and Days*, p. 91.

privilege of nominating candidates for the appointment of Muslim marriage registers or *quazis*. In favoring the nomination of a candidate from the weaver class for such a post, on the grounds that the person in question was adequately qualified, Khan locked horns with Abdul Ghani who vehemently opposed the nomination on the plea that such a nomination would mar the prestige of Muslim marriage registers as a class. Reminiscing on the incident, Khan wrote in his autobiography:

It is an unfortunate fact that the shadow of the Hindu caste system overtook Muslim society in India, at least to the extent of ostracizing the weavers and a few other classes (of Muslims) with regard to the privilege of intermarriage. Since the weaver had adequate qualification I took up the stand (of supporting his nomination) to dispel any suspicion that he was discriminated against on account of his birth...I staked my position as Secretary (of the Anjuman) on this grave issue, and through the grace of Allah I succeeded.<sup>92</sup>

Maulavi Khan's struggle against the likes of Abdul Ghani within the Anjuman-i-Islamia was represented as a conflict between two visions of Muslim community – a vision and praxis of egalitarian community supposedly authorized by the Koran and the Hadith on the one hand, and an existing “corrupt” *sabiqi* order based on hierarchies, stratifications, and “misguided notions” of social-rank and prestige supposedly inimical to the spirit and praxis of Islam, on the other hand. In the 1910s and 1920s, the struggle between these two visions of community was being repeatedly dramatized in the rhetoric, agenda, and organizational structure of *anjumans* – a trend pioneered by the Anjuman-e-Ulema-e-Bangla.

Anjuma-e-Ulamae Bangla was founded in 1913. Among its founding members were prominent public personalities such as Akram Khan, Manisuzzaman Islamabadi, Maulavi Abdulahel Baki, and Maulavi Shahidullah. The *anjuman*'s headquarter was

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<sup>92</sup> Tamizzudin Khan, *The Test of Time*, p. 92.

located in Kolkata, though it delineated the whole of Bengal and Assam as within its ambit of influence and activity. It was an avowedly apolitical organization, which expressly stated a refusal to participate in any political activity. The stated objectives of the *anjuman* were to counter criticisms of Islam that were emerging from the Christian missionaries and the Arya Samajis, distribution of Islamic literature among the masses free of cost, and a consolidated and organized effort to check internal conflict and dissension among the *ulema* in Bengal, thus uniting them in the service of the community.

Islam Mission was a branch of the *anjuman* that comprised of preachers who traveled to the remotest corners of Bengal and parts of Assam to “counter the influences of Christian missionaries, to eradicate *shirk*, *bidat* and superstitions from Muslim society and encourage non-Muslims to embrace Islam.” But according to the Anjuman’s Joint Secretary, Manisuzzaman Islamabadi, the chief purpose of Islam Mission was to emancipate society from the clutches of those “*maulavis* and mullahs who preached the religion of the *murshids* (discipleship), and in so doing served their own interests while destroying all possibilities of social advancement.” Islamabadi opined that the Mission’s aim was to save *jatiyo jiban* (the life of the community) from the influence of those religious charlatans who placed premium on the value of spiritual intercession in reaching God and bred dependence on human agents by claiming to possess higher spiritual authority.<sup>93</sup> *Al Islam*, the mouthpiece Bengali journal of the Anjuman-e-Ulema-e-Bangla, relentlessly attacked all forms of social and spiritual hierarchies and distinctions. The

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<sup>93</sup> Mohammad Manisuzzaman Islamabadi, ‘Islam o Mission’, *Al Islam* (Bengali year 1324), pp. 393-405.

*anjuman* strongly opposed the division of Muslim society into *ashraf* and *atrap*.

According to one Mohammad Moijur Rahman:

In Bengal, creatures that call themselves *sharif* have done indescribable harm to the Muslims. Allah has made the high and the lowly from the same ingredients. The sense perception of the high is the same as that of the lowly. With the right opportunity, both communities can consolidate their strengths – there is no doubt about that.<sup>94</sup>

The *anjuman* preached that since Islam has no respect for lineage, a sweeper or chandal, once they have been converted to Islam, could offer namaz alongside the Mughal and the Pathan. Another prominent member of the *anjuman*, Mohammad Rampuri rued that although Islam's key attribute was *samya* (egalitarianism), Muslims of the day had no regard for an egalitarian ethic. He urged his fellow co-religionists:

Open your eyes and see... Qutbuddin, Iltutmish, Ghiyasuddin were all Slaves. *Ashraf*, have your dignity, prosperity and influence surpassed theirs? .... In Bengal today, who is your slave? Is the *atrap* lower than a slave? There is still time to rectify the situation. Wake up from your slumber, announce the objective of the *ulema*! Spread the power of truth everywhere!<sup>95</sup>

Mohammad Rampuri's suggestion that the political power of the Slave Dynasty in India was the most compelling historical evidence of Islam's egalitarianism would be echoed by Azizul Haque in his presidential speech at the 52<sup>nd</sup> session of the All India Muslim Education conference held in Calcutta. Under the patronage of Nawab Kamal Yar Jung Bahadur of Hyderabad (Deccan), the 52<sup>nd</sup> session of the All India Muslim Educational Conference was held in Calcutta, in December 1939, where a committee was appointed to survey the problems of Muslim education all over the Indian States, with a view to

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<sup>94</sup> 'Samaj Chitra', *Al Islam* (1920), pp. 247-248.

<sup>95</sup> 'Ashraf o Atrap', *Al Islam* (Chaitra, Bengali Year 1326), pp. 662-664.

preparing a broad-based scheme of education, helpful to the preservation of Muslim culture. Accordingly, a committee was constituted with the Nawab as the Chairman and a few other members, including Azizul Haque, who at the time was the Speaker of the Bengal Legislative Assembly and held the post of Vice-Chancellor at Calcutta University. At the presidential address of the session on Dec 29, 1939, Haque, who was then struggling to establish the department of Islamic History and Culture at the University of Calcutta, amid great opposition, stated:

In the welter of many small states, each divided against the other, with people still more hopelessly divided among themselves came the Musalmans with their teaching of brotherhood and fellowship. *By a divine coincidence in history, the first dynasty of Muslims that ruled was the Slave Dynasty and the first King of Delhi was a slave himself to teach the eternal lesson that the Commonwealth of Islam, even as a slave has the fullest right of a man and can be a king, in a caste-ridden, divided country...Let us remember that in the very threshold of modern civilization stand the distinctive marks of Islamic teaching and its cultural contributions to the history of modern thought. The recognitions and vindications of the principles of equality have been the very fundamental characteristics of Islamic ideal and outlook.* It is a matter of history that from its very inception Islam has been a great democratizing process and Islam and its prophet preached the principles of equality and democracy as the basis of human relationships. To preserve and safeguard these principles, wars and revolutions have ranged loud and long in the world. The world has not yet seen the last of the struggles for the recognition of these vital pre-requisites of human freedom. And yet centuries back when it was totally unknown to contemporary thought, Islam proclaimed to the world the overwhelming sanctity of the principles of Equality. Islam declared that Muslims are not only equal among themselves, but also before God! “The white man is not above the black, nor the black above the yellow; all men are equal before their Maker”, declared the prophet of Islam, and the Kings and the monarchs, had to bend low in giving recognition to these principles. Equal before the eyes of God and equal before law, Moslems all over the world constitute a commonwealth of individuals over which the sovereignty of God is direct and absolute. I pause here for a moment to ask, if there is anywhere in this wide world of ours a greater and better definition of Equality, a more absolute and unreserved surrender to the ideal of human freedom?... Today the rule of democracy may have been temporarily eclipsed in some countries...but I have no doubt in my mind that this is merely a passing phase; the ultimate victory of the forces of democracy is certain—it is more so because democracy has behind it the genuine loyalty of millions of Muslims. The day is not far off when democracy, clad in the glorious mantle of Freedom and Equality—will once again break through the

clouds, which deepen the world gloom today, and when the great day comes, it is the spirit of Islam which will once again come to rescue the aggrieved world. And in this scheme of human affairs there is no place for steam-roller democracy which does not take into consideration, the cultural, political and social rights of minorities.<sup>96</sup>

I have quoted from Haque's speech at some length to demonstrate the ways in which Anjuman-e-Ulema-e-Bangla's rhetorical linking of a principle of egalitarianism and Islam had become widespread and commonsensical among sections of Bengal's Muslim intelligentsia by the 1930s. And even though, this rhetorical linkage was by no means inaugurated by the *anjuman*, nor was it a discourse that was the *anjuman's* exclusive preserve, the Anjuman-e-Ulema-Bangla certainly was the first Muslim organization in Bengal to have systematically advocated it in both rhetoric and organizational structure.

Membership to the Anjuman-e-Ulema-e-Bangla was, least in theory, open to any man or woman committed to the *anjuman's* agenda; it was an association based on voluntarist engagement and funded largely by the subscription of the members. Membership could be maintained by paying an annual fee of Rs.1. The *anjuman* had three types of members: the *alem*, knowledgeable in Arabic and Islamic jurisprudence, who would deliberate and adjudicate on all *dini* (religious) disputes; the well-wisher members which included all those who were sympathetic to the agenda of the *anjuman*, and finally, the life members, whose membership did not need to be renewed annually since they were required to make a one-time subscription payment of Rs.150. A working committee of 125 members, holding office for two years, was elected by the general assembly of members. The working committee was in charge of executing the *anjuman's*

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<sup>96</sup> 'Presidential Address of Azizul Haque', reproduced in Shahanara Alam and Husainara Huq (eds.) *Azizul Haque: Life Sketch and Selected Writings* (Dhaka: Zaman Printers, 1984), pp. 46-47.

agenda, hiring and firing preachers, collecting subscription, and overseeing budgetary matters. Yet amendments in the *anjuman*'s rules and procedures of functioning, reconstitution of the Working Committee, approval of the *anjuman*'s annual budget, impeachment of a member of the Working Committee as well as defeating or passing a proposal put forth by the Working Committee were decided in the general assembly of members through the principle of voting. In the instance that a member from the mofussil could not be physically present at the general assembly meeting, the person could mail in a vote to the Calcutta headquarter. And since the salaried and honorary preachers of the Islam Mission - a branch of the *anjuman* - were engaged in missionary activity over a wide-ranging area covering Hooghly, 24 Parganas, Rangpur, Medinipur, Pabna, Bogra, Mymensingh, Tripura, Shillong and Guwahati, they could recruit members from a fairly expansive geographical radius.<sup>97</sup> The *anjuman* was thus a significant historical force at two levels – the monologic sermons of its preachers and the freely distributed literature advocating egalitarianism as a vision of Muslim society circulated far beyond the urban centers of Calcutta and Dhaka. More significantly, the *anjuman* played a role in the penetration of “democratic” practices in wide-ranging mofussil areas, thus training Bengali Muslims in the novel principle of representation premised on people’s mandate well before the successive expansions of franchise following the constitutional reforms of 1919 and 1935, and before political parties such as the Congress and the Muslim League became mass-based organizations. And yet the most important contribution of the Anjuman-e-Ulema-e-Bangla was this: in discursively positing Islam as a religion that had absolutely no regard for social distinctions and in working out an organizational structure

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<sup>97</sup> Sunil Kanti De, *Anjuman-e-Ulema-e-Bangla O Muslim Samaj 1913-1919* (Calcutta: Chintamani Press, 1992), pp. 5-13.

that so closely approximated parliamentary democracy, it had resolved the oppositional relationships between “modernity” and “tradition”, between the “West” and the “East” by positing the modern principle of political representation – “people’s mandate” – as both a continuation and a culmination of the egalitarian spirit of Islam. Thus in the late 1930s, it became possible for Azizul Haque to assert that the teaching of Islamic culture and history was necessary, not merely to maintain an identity that was under attack, but because Islam was the only true precursor of modern thought and ideas of democracy and equality were born in the crucible of Islamic civilization long before the West reinvented restricted and corrupted versions of political existence that could at best be called “steam-roller democracy”, and at worst, dictatorships.

The contrast between Haque’s articulation and that of the Shimla deputation seems stunning when we recall a few lines from the 1906 document presented to Lord Minto:

We hope that Your Excellency will pardon our stating at the outset that representative institutions of the European type are entirely opposed to the genius and traditions of the Eastern Nations, and many of the most thoughtful members of our (Muslim) community look upon them as totally unsuitable to the social, religious, and political conditions obtaining in India.<sup>98</sup>

As I have shown earlier, for Azizul Haque’s, the Muslim community needed separate electorates in order to ensure that political representation was an expression of people’s mandate (the touchstone of modern ideas of political sovereignty) - a mandate that could be insulated from the “corrupting” and “undue” influence of wealth and distinction. This was in stark contrast to the ideas about political sovereignty and representation that were held by the memorialists of the Shimla deputation in 1906, where “rank”, “influence” and “distinction” were key to the exercise of political

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<sup>98</sup> Sharif Al Mujahid (ed.) *Muslim League Documents*, p. 91.



sovereignty – a form of sovereignty that was supposedly “the genius and traditions of the Eastern Nations”. According to the older view, rank, hierarchy, and distinction were not, in principle, inimical to the true and proper expression of political sovereignty, in fact these were the requisites for proper governance. The idea of people’s mandate as a principle of political representation, though it was a stunningly novel idea in early twentieth century Bengal, became habitable for the Bengali Muslims precisely because this new presupposition of political representation sat well with, and drew its energies from reformist visions of Islam where the Muslim community was repeatedly being posited as a collection of equals, and Islam as a religion was understood to be fundamentally premised on an egalitarian ethos. This egalitarian ethos was the basis on which the Muslim community was meant to distinguish itself from other religious communities that were ridden with hierarchies, stratifications, and inequalities. Rank, distinction, and hierarchy were thus not only understood as “corruptions” of an idea of political sovereignty premised on people’s mandate, but also “corruptions” of what the reformist vision held up as the “true” vision of Islam and the basis of distinguishing the Muslims as a religious community from other religious communities with whom they co-habited. The presence and influence of reformist *anjumans* in early twentieth century Bengal point to the critical coalescing of seemingly antinomic vectors – on the one hand, the practices and rhetoric engendered by the *anjumans* opened up possibilities for habitations within models of political sovereignty premised on people’s mandate, following a modular “universal” form, on the other hand, positing this universalism as the essential spirit of Islam worked to distinguish the Muslim community from other religious communities, and rooted “universalism” in a “particularity” that simultaneously

worked to protect and delineate the boundaries of the Muslim community, thereby hardening identities based on religion. The relationships of such organizations with ideas of religious nationalism that took root in the Bengali Muslim public sphere and eventually translated into the demand for Pakistan need to be more systematically analyzed. Yet it is possible to make a considered conjecture that attention to the organizational structure, recruitment practices, and the rhetoric of distinctively Muslim civil society institutions such as the Anjuman-e-Ulema-e-Bangla provide critical windows into understanding the production of the Bengali Muslim public sphere as a mode of address whereby it became possible for Muslim leaders, often occupying class-positions very different from that of the bulk of the Muslim population, to credibly represent – both discursively and politically – the (Muslim) nation, which as Benedict Anderson has pointed out, is a *imagination* predicated on the horizontality of the political community.<sup>99</sup>

**Conclusion:**

The fact that separate electorates (self-contained legislative constituencies for Muslims) put in place by the colonial government led to the hardening of Muslim identity has almost acquired the status of historiographical commonsense. Yet little scholarly attention has been paid to how the premise upon which Muslims maintained the demand for separate electorates shifted considerably in the course of the colonial career of Muslim politics in the first four decades of the twentieth century. In 1906, if the Shimla deputation's plea for separate electorates was made in terms of the need to maintain the

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<sup>99</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

“status and influence” of the “Musalman community”, to give due recognition to “their political importance” and “due weight to the positions they occupied in India a little more than a hundred years ago, of which the traditions have naturally not faded from their minds”, the plea for separate electorates as articulated by Azizul Haque took on a radically different tone two decades down the line. To recapitulate, for Haque, separate electorates were a necessity in Bengal (where Muslims were numerically larger but economically weaker) in order to secure a people’s mandate and to prevent the principle of popular sovereignty from being undermined by the “undue influence”/“corruption” of wealth and distinction, which he claimed “would have the effect of driving out those (Muslims) who have struggled to represent the real interest of the community.” In this chapter, I have attempted to suggest that focusing our lens of scrutiny on avowedly apolitical, civil society associations such as the Anjuman-e-Ulema-e- Bangla as well as the struggles that ensued within rural local chapters of the Anjuman-e-Islamia can provide clues to the manner in which the Muslim “community” was transformed in a way to become congruent with the conceptions of political sovereignty rooted in the “people” – a imagination predicated on horizontality.

## CHAPTER 3

### From Respect to Redistribution: The Hegemony of *Praja* Identity

#### *Early Praja Assertions*

The first expressions of *praja* assertion in rural Eastern Bengal often took the form of self-respect movements, and did not necessarily dwell on economic issues, as would later become the case. Zamindars addressed Muslim tenants in the second person singular “*tui*” or “*tumi*” instead of the more respectful “*apni*”, which were reserved for upper caste Hindu tenants. While their *svavarna* Hindu counterparts were allowed to sit inside the *kutcherry* (the zamindar’s office), the Muslim tenants were not allowed to occupy seats. These discriminatory social attitudes percolated down to the *amlas* and *failas* – the zamindar’s petty officials, to the priests, lawyers and doctors on the zamindar’s estates, as well as to the low-caste *talukdars* and moneylenders who emulated their social superiors.<sup>100</sup> For a whole generation of rural Muslim youth growing up in the 1910s and 1920s, these social attitudes rankled. To them, it was clear that such derogatory modes of address or the customary spatial positioning of bodies inside the zamindar’s office were not, as Abul Mansur put it, “the natural relationship between the *praja* and the zamindar”, but a specific relationship between the zamindar and the Muslim *praja*.<sup>101</sup> This was precisely why even as a nine-year old growing up in a village in Mymensingh district, when the *amlas* knocked on the door of his family home to intimate him that the zamindar, Jatindra Narayan Acharya Chowdhury, had summoned Abul Mansur to his

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<sup>100</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha Rajniti'r Panchash Bochor (Fifty Years of Politics As I Saw It)* (Dhaka: Nowroj Kitabitan, 1970), p. 163.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

*kutcherry* to furnish clarifications about rumors of his participating in a *praja* meeting and addressed him in the less respectful second person “*tui*” (often used to address children as well), he irately responded that unless appropriately addressed he would not visit the *kutcherry*. Mansur recounted that his own outburst was a result of intense shame and anger that rose incrementally each time he heard the zamindar’s officials and the village *chowkidars* (guards) address the elders in his family as “*tui*”.<sup>102</sup>

While still a schoolboy, Abul Mansur organized a *praja* meeting in 1909 in the Dhanikhola area of Mymensingh. Notices for the *praja sabha* (tenant meeting) were written in pencil on pages torn from a school exercise book and distributed to five mosques in the area. The meeting’s venue was carefully chosen – in a secluded spot on the riverbank, with no homestead within half a mile of the location. The village *hat* (bi-weekly market), though a more convenient meeting spot where cultivators would go not only to buy and sell but also to meet friends and hear news of the neighborhood and nearby towns, was deliberately avoided for fear of the zamindar’s officials forcefully breaking up the meeting upon hearing about it. Zahiruddin Tarafdar, a man well regarded in the five neighboring villages, was appointed as the meeting’s president. The resolutions passed at the meeting included that a demand be raised for allowing *prajas* to sit inside his *kutcherry* and that a stop be put on the levying of *abwabs* (surcharges) for the purposes of Kali puja. When the zamindar, who lived in the city, arrived in Dhanikhola during the annual survey of his estate, the demands of the Muslim tenants were placed before him, and a few of them were approved. Henceforth it was decided, inside the *kutcherry* ordinary tenants would be seated on mats and tenants who were also

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<sup>102</sup> Abul Manur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha Rajniti’r Panchash Bochor*, pp. 19-20.

village headmen would be seated on “*benchees*”, which stood at half the height of benches reserved for the zamindar’s officials.<sup>103</sup> Another *praja* conference in the area in 1911, which received publicity in *Mohammadi* and *Mihir o Sudhakar*, passed resolutions demanding that all the zamindar’s officials be recruited from among local people so as to generate employment opportunities as well as facilitate realization of rents due to the zamindar.<sup>104</sup>

That the *praja* movement first took root in areas where populations of Muslim tenant-cultivators were predominant is perhaps not surprising given the nature of these early demands, even though not a single demand was articulated in sectarian terms per se. But demands such as that of banning the practice of levying *abwabs* fed into distinctive religious dispositions cultivated since the mid-nineteenth century, particularly in areas of eastern Bengal, where cultivators had come under the influence of Faraidi leaders.

James Taylor’s account gives us a sense of the early spread of the Faraidi movement by 1841; he writes, “within the last 10 years a Mohammedan sect has sprung up in this part of the country and has spread with rapidity in ... Fureedpore, Backergunge and Mymensingh”. According to Taylor, by 1841, one-sixth of the population of these districts had already entered the Faraidi fold.<sup>105</sup> The Faraidi religious reformer, Haji Shariatullah, first forbade Muslim cultivators to pay *abwabs* to the *patnidars* of Ramnagar in 1837, on the ground that such surcharges extracted from the Muslim peasantry for purposes of conducting local Hindu festivals such as *Kali puja* and *Durga*

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<sup>103</sup> Abul Masur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha*, pp. 17-19.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>105</sup> James Taylor, *A Sketch of the Topography and Statistics of Dacca* (Calcutta: G. Hutmann Military Orphan Press, 1840), pp. 247-248.

*puja* were in contradistinction to the central Faraidi tenet of *tauhid* or the oneness of Allah and forced them to partake in *shirk* or the *gunah* of idolatry.<sup>106</sup> *Abwabs* were surcharges extracted from cultivators in order to raise revenues without undertaking the official procedures of raising rent. But *abwabs* or surcharges had been made illegal under Permanent Settlement since the East India Company viewed them as capricious and unconstitutional extractions of despotic governments. Yet, despite their illegal status, the custom of collecting *abwabs* continued well into the twentieth century in Bengal and coercive tactics were used when the cultivator refused to pay them. As Kevin Downey points out, some *abwabs* were temporary and situation-specific such as those relating to births, deaths, and marriages in the zamindar's family, to meet the expenses for building roads or markets; others were of a more permanent nature and were levied as expenses to cover the cost of rent collection or for the maintenance of *chowkidars* (guards) in an area.<sup>107</sup> For Haji Shariatullah, the payment of *abwabs* – particularly those made toward *Kalivritti* and *Durgavritti* – was one of the most troublesome aspects of Muslim life in Bengal, as such payments betrayed a lack of spiritual discipline on the part of the Muslim peasants. In 1837, when the issue of *abwab* in Ramnagar sparked resistance among the Muslim peasantry, it created an important precedent for Faraidi communities.

It is not surprising that for *praja* activists such as Abul Mansur who were from Faraidi families, distinctively Faraidi dispositions shaped their attitudes toward issues

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<sup>106</sup> Moin-ud Din Ahmad Khan, *History of the Farai'di Movement in Bengal, 1818-1906* (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1965), pp. xcii-xciv.

<sup>107</sup> Kevin R. Downey, *Religious Revival and Peasant Activism in Bengal: Agrarian Society and the Trajectory of the Fara'zi Movement, 1820-1947* (Unpublished Dissertation) (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2009), pp. 20-21.

such as the collection of *abwabs* for the zamindar's Kali *puja*. Mansur was born 1898. His earliest memories were of himself as a child singing a rhyme from a Faraidi *punthi*, which went like this:

If Allah wills, I will go to Lahore  
There I will wage *jihad* against the Sikhs  
If I emerge victorious, I will become a Ghazi  
If I die, I will become a *shahid* (martyr)  
Instead of my living body, *tauhid* will live.<sup>108</sup>

His uncle Samiruddin Faraidi was a man highly respected in Dhanikhola for his ability to recite Faraidi *punthis* in musical tones. Maulavis from far-flung areas would come to the village to conduct monologic *waz-mehfils* and stay at their house. Mansur's grandfather's older brother, who died in 1868, was still remembered in the area as "Ghazi sahib" or "brave warrior" who fought in the army of Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi and waged *jihad* against the Sikh "infidels".<sup>109</sup>

Barelwi's popularity in Bengal is well documented. When he returned from Mecca in 1823, he toured parts of India, including Bengal, to garner support for waging *jihad* against the Sikhs in Punjab. During his visit to Calcutta, Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi reportedly attracted such massive crowds of people desiring to become his disciples that rather than take the hand of each person to perform *baiyah*, he had to unroll his turban for the crowds to touch.<sup>110</sup> Another account from 1843 also indicates that many converts he made in Calcutta were so strict about avoiding incorrect religious practices that they

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<sup>108</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha*, p.7.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> W.W Hunter, *The Indian Musalmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel Against the Queen?* (Lahore: Premier Book House, Reprinted from the 1871 edition 1968), p. 5.



refused to eat with any but members of their own sect.<sup>111</sup> On hearing reports that Sikhs had prohibited the call to prayer (*azan*) for the Muslims in Punjab and had desecrated mosques within Ranjit Singh's territory, Barelwi gathered an army of *mujahidin* to fight the Sikhs from the northwestern frontiers. The *mujahidin* suffered a series of setbacks at the hands of the forces of Ranjit Singh. In 1831, in a full-scale battle at Balakot, the Sikh army defeated the *mujahidin* and killed their two major leaders – Sayyid Ahmed Barelwi and Mohammad Ismail. But even after the debacle at Balakot, many of Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi's supporters refused to believe that he was dead. In 1843, the Superintendent of Police in Bengal reported that many *maulavis*, including Inayat Ali, were preaching that Barelwi was still alive and leading the army against the Sikhs. Depositions from the Wahhabi trails reveal that some Muslim peasants from Bengal went to Afghanistan expecting to see Sayyid Ahmed Barelwi and fight under his leadership.<sup>112</sup> In another case, one Muhammad Qasim led followers from Bengal to fight under Sayyid Ahmad after hearing reports that he had not been killed, only to be disabused of the lie after he reached the frontier.<sup>113</sup> After the battle of Balakot, two major religious leaders from Patna – Wilayat Ali and his brother Inayat Ali, who had become Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi's *khalifahs* (lieutenants) attempted to intensify the frontier *jihad*. From Patna, as itinerant preachers dispersed to gather recruits and material support, Bengal proved an especially receptive area for these emissaries. In 1852, according to the minutes of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Lord Dalhousie, he had himself seen a "sort of ballad", 1000 copies

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<sup>111</sup> Edward Thornton, *The History of the British Empire in India*, Vol. 5 (London: W.H Allen & Co., 1843), p. 180.

<sup>112</sup> Harlan O. Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival in Nineteenth Century India: The Tariqah-I Muhammadiyah* (New Delhi: Yoda Press 2008), p. 49.

<sup>113</sup> James O Kinealy, 'The Wahhabis in India down to the Death of Sayyid Ahmed', *Calcutta Review*, 51 (Calcutta, 1870), pp. 189-190.

of which were printed and circulated in Calcutta, which appeared as a war cry invoking all true Muslims to join the standard of faith and rise against the infidels.<sup>114</sup> Depositions from the Wahhabi trials reveal that at one time in the 1860s, more than 900 recruits from Bengal alone were on the frontier. Many Muslim peasants in Bengal supported the frontier *jihad* by contributing a handful of rice to a common fund.<sup>115</sup> After the formal British annexation of Punjab in 1849, a dispute occurred between Wilayat Ali and Inayat Ali, which divided the *mujahidin* on the question of whether or not to confront British forces in the Punjab. But the dispute found a resolution after the death of Wilayat Ali at Sittana in 1852, which resulted in his brother Inayat Ali becoming the unquestioned leader of the *mujahidin* and deciding to attack the British border stations with the help of allies from the Pathan tribe.<sup>116</sup> The frontier *mujahidin* were finally decimated in 1863, when the British led the Ambeyla campaign, followed by prolonged state trials and investigations called the “Wahhabi trials” in official parlance, which continued through the decade and slowly eroded the recruit and supply networks of the frontier *jihadis*.

It is difficult to say if Abul Mansur’s *borodada* (grandfather’s brother), Ashequllah Faraidi, was fighting in the frontier under the leadership of Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi or his successors, Inayat Ali and Wilayat Ali, since the belief that Barelwi was not actually killed in Balakot retained traction in parts of eastern Bengal for decades after his death. It is possible that even though he actually fought under the brothers from Patna, local memory had associated Ashequllah’s frontier exploits to a time before he had

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<sup>114</sup> Harlan O. Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival*, p. 43.

<sup>115</sup> Moin-ud Din Ahmad Khan, *Selections from Bengal Government Records on Wahhabi Trials* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan), p. 10, p. 281.

<sup>116</sup> Harlan O. Pearson, *Islamic Reform and Revival*, p. 43.

actually reached the frontier. Many Bengal recruits of Inayat and Wilayat Ali from the rural areas, it has been noted, also nurtured the chiliastic belief that Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi was this Imam, who would soon reappear, and some even believed that he was the Imam Mahdi who would appear before the last day of judgment.<sup>117</sup> The spread of such chiliastic belief in many districts of Bengal shaped memory of the frontier *jihad* post-facto and survived in local legends; this makes it difficult to ascertain the veracity of whether a recruit, such as Abul Mansur's ancestor, actually fought during the lifetime of Sayyid Ahmad. In any case, as Mansur makes clear, Ashequllah Faraidi was under police surveillance up until the very last days of his life. According to village lore, Inayat Ali lived in Mansur's ancestral home when he visited Dhanikhola for the purpose of *tabligh*. Legends about Mansur's *borodada* were numerous and often fantastic – they celebrated his remarkable ability to train young boys in the village in *lathi*-wielding and swordsmanship; they transformed into stories about eggplants, which were propelled skyward from four corners, chopped up by the sword of Ashequllah Ghazi Sahib with astounding dexterity without letting a single eggplant hit the ground. Such legends about the Ghazi were passed down to the younger generation through family elders, *ulema*, *mullahs*, and *mulavis* in the area. Mansur speaks of a degree of social distinction enjoyed by his family among fellow co-religionists on account of being good Faraidis and, most importantly, being related to the Ghazi who was the stuff of local legends.<sup>118</sup> This sense of social distinction, which accrued from keeping up the pride of a Faraidi lineage in

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<sup>117</sup> Peter Robb, 'The Impact of British Rule on a Religious Community: Reflections on the Trial of Maulavi Ahmadullah of Patna in 1865' in Peter Robb (ed.) *Empire, Identity, and India: Liberalism, Modernity and the Nation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 170.

<sup>118</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha*, pp. 7-11.

maintaining strictures of religious life befitting to one who counts among his ancestors a legendary *jihadi ghazi*, contributed to a sense of self-worth that was wounded each time his family and community elders were addressed by the landlord's petty officials in a condescending manner. It is true that not all Muslim young men growing up in Dhanikhola, Mymensingh, at the turn of the twentieth century could boast a bloodline that could be traced back to a "*ghazi sahib*", but many such young men and boys belonged to Faraidi families, and grew up on lore that celebrated frontier-warriors who laid down their lives waging a war defending the principle of *tauhid*. Such local lore definitely contributed toward instilling a sense of self-esteem and social worth, which could be translated into demands that all tenants (including Muslims tenants) be treated with respect in the zamindar's *kutcherry*.

The collectivization of tenant-cultivators and the nature of *praja* demands in the early days reveal that such assertions were not based on economic issues such as the reduction of rent, amelioration of debt, occupancy rights and, the abolition of the zamindar's rights to *nazar* or *salami* on the transfer of occupancy holdings, which would be included in the charter of demands of the *praja* movement from 1914 onward.<sup>119</sup> Quite to the contrary, as the character of the Dhanikhola *praja* assertions indicates, the demand for the employment of local people in the zamindar's *kutcherry* was made in terms of generation of employment in the locality, but also justified in terms of such a measure facilitating the collection of rent if local officials instead of non-locals went around the business of rent collection. This appears to be a far cry from the no-rent mentality of the tenant-cultivators that would plague landlords in eastern Bengal in the 1930s -- a

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<sup>119</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha*, p. 21.

“mentality” conventionally attributed by historians to the intensification and spread of the *praja* movement, the institutionalization of the movement in the formation of the Krishak Praja Party (KPP), and KPP’s entry into the domain of formal provincial politics. The demand against illegal exaction of *abwabs* for Kali *puja* was not articulated in terms of the economic exploitation or distress of the tenants; it did not ask for a ban on *abwabs* per se – those relating to payments levied during events of births, marriages, or deaths in the zamindar’s family; to the construction of roads in the village or for the upkeep of a *chowkidari* force in the village – but only one specific kind of *abwab* that was deemed a threat to the maintenance of a specific kind of reformed spiritual discipline involved in protecting the tenet of *tauhid* (the Oneness of Allah). It is perhaps not surprising then, that at least two of the major leaders of the *praja* movement, Abul Mansur Ahmed, and the older Akram Khan, came from families who drew lines of descent from frontier *jihadis* who were locally revered as valiant warriors for the cause of *tauhid*. Akram Khan’s father, Maulana Abdul Bari, was also known to be part of the *mujahidin* of the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya founded by Barelwi.<sup>120</sup>

### ***Religious Legitimacy and Patronage of Raiyat Sabhas***

Akram Khan was one of the founder members of a more organized *praja* movement which started in earnest with the Kamariarchar Praja Conference in Jamalpur subdivision of Mymensingh district in 1914 which, for the first time, forged links between localized, fragmented, and sporadic movements of *praja* assertions and urban Muslim professionals. Fazlul Huq, a lawyer from Bakarganj, Akram Khan from Calcutta, and

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<sup>120</sup> Abul Kalam Muhammad Abdullah, *Bangali Muslim Dharmiya O Samskritic Jibone Maulana Akram Kha’r Abodan* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 2009), p. 4.

Maniruzzaman Islamabadi, a well-known editor of five reformist periodicals from Chittagong attended the conference.<sup>121</sup> The resolutions passed at the conference included the following demands: abolition of the zamindar's right to *nazar* and *salami*; reduction of rent; effective measures against illegal exactions by zamindars; occupancy right to tenants when the land is cultivated by them for 12 years, and the tenant's right to plant trees on his land. This conference received great publicity in the weekly newspaper, *Mohammadi*, edited by Akram Khan, and in *Muslim Hitaishi*, patronized by Pir Abu Bakr of Furfura.<sup>122</sup> That both Khan and the Pir of Furfura converged on the issue of supporting the cause of the tenant-cultivators is significant, since on several religious issues they did not see eye to eye. In fact, Akram Khan's weekly *Mohammadi* was singularly responsible for publicizing *fatwas* issued against the Pir of Furfura, declaring him as "an enemy of Islam". Khan was sympathetic to the Ahl-i Hadis variety of reformism, and had an acrimonious relationship with the Hanafi catholicism of Bakr. Abu Bakr was a hugely popular *pir* who wielded influence over 52 zillas in Bengal and Assam. He was associated with eighteen organizations throughout his life, including Anjuman-e Waizine Hanifiya, Anjuman e Islamia (Faridpur) and Anjumane Tabligh e Islam (Rangpur) in addition to having influence over twenty newspapers in Bengal. At his seat in a village called Furfura in Hooghly, *Isal-i-Sawab*, a festival of offering prayers for the dead, was celebrated over a duration of three days annually with great pomp; he spend lavishly on the festival at which lakhs of Muslims from all over Bengal converged.<sup>123</sup> The Ahl-i Hadis (also called Mohammadi) clerics were thoroughly opposed to practices such as

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<sup>121</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha*, p. 21.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth Century Bengal* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 88-89.

*Isal-i-Sawab*, which they deemed un-Islamic. Akram Khan's *Mohammadi* not only carried reports of debates between the Bakris and the Mohammadis, but also published *fatwas* issued by other reformist sects that were active in attempting to delegitimize the Pir of Furfura.

One such *fatwa* issued by a Jaunpuri cleric – a follower of Keramat Ali Jaunpuri – Maulana Mohammad Hamid, declared that Abu Bakr of Furfura had invented *kalimas* which were not in the Koran, that such *kalimas* were polytheistic, and thus to be a *murid* of Bakr was equivalent to being a *murid* of a *yogi* or a *sanyasi*. The *fatwa* also forbade dining with Furfuris, entering into relationships of marriage with them, and reading the *namaz* in a mosque while being seated next to them.<sup>124</sup> The *fatwa*, originally published in Urdu, was translated into Bengali and published in the weekly edited by Akram Khan.<sup>125</sup> The Jaunpuri clerics, who much like the Mohammadi ones, had fractious relationships with the Pir of Furfura, suffered from a disadvantage in Bengal since most of them wrote in Urdu, which was inaccessible to Muslim masses in the region.<sup>126</sup> Publications such as Akram Khan's *Mohammadi* performed the important function of translating and disseminating such anti-Bakr opinions. Bakr was also wealthy, and so were a lot of his followers, drawn as they were from *ashraf* landowning families from Hooghly. The Jaunpuris by contrast were not so well financed, their clerics poor and not connected to the English-educated Muslim intelligentsia quite in the manner that Bakr was.<sup>127</sup> An entire panoply of organizations and print media over which Bakr commanded influence

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<sup>124</sup> See Fakir Mohammad Hossein Bikrampuri, *Kalema Samasya* ( Dhaka: Munshi Khademol Khan, 1917).

<sup>125</sup> Fakir Mohammad Hossein Bikrampuri, *Kalema Samasya*, p. 8.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.* p 3.

via “beardless, English educated *maulavis* who were not sufficiently learned in religious matters” was a cause for great consternation among rival groups such as the Jaunpuri and the Mohammadi clerics.<sup>128</sup>

Given this general milieu of sectarian acrimony, that a newspaper such as the *Muslim Hitaishi* of the Bakr group (the Furfuris or the Bakris as they were called in popular tracts) would lend support to the cause of the tenant-cultivators by publicizing a meeting led by Akram Khan is not insignificant; it points to the necessity of tapping into the domain of *praja* grievances for the purpose of religious legitimacy. By the third decade of the twentieth century, contests over who represented “Islam” and battles over who was acting in the interests of the Muslim community could not be fought without linking the issue of religious legitimacy to upholding the interest of tenant-cultivators. *Raiyat samitis* and *Raiyat sabhas* (peasant tenant associations) mushroomed rapidly all over rural Bengal. By the mid-1920s there were *praja* and *raiya*t associations in virtually every district in eastern and northern Bengal.

Such *raiya*t and *praja samitis* were often locally pioneered by followers of charismatic religious figures. The followers were also engaged in the production of a huge bulk of printed ephemera in the Bengali language – pamphlets, tracts, songs, open letters to government officials, and poems. For instance, a tract titled *Deshar Katha* published in 1925 by the Jalangi Raiya Samiti of Murshidabad, announced that one Munshi Tariqullah, a disciple of Pir Abu Bakr of Furfura, had set up a *raiya*t association in the village of Jalangi. The tract, much in the manner of many improvement texts, is a

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.



long poem in colloquial Bengali.<sup>129</sup> It opens with “*Bismillah al Rahman al Rahim*” and then goes on to list the innumerable sufferings of peasants in the hands of the zamindar and his officials. In verse, the tract speaks of the burden of paying *nazar* even when the peasant’s crop is destroyed by floods; it speaks of the humiliation of being dragged through dust by the *naib*’s men in the dead of the night; and of blood dripping down the peasant’s back from being flogged for late payment of rent. “Where is the justice of British rule?” – the text poses a question. In the second section, the verse announces the “stirrings of a new age” (*navayug*) now that Munshi Tariqullah had started a *raiyat sabha*. Tariqullah is introduced as a truthful and committed man, a *haji*, and a friend of the impoverished. The *raiyat sabha* over which he presides is set up in opposition to the *kutcherry* of the zamindar. Unlike the zamindar who is surrounded by sycophants, who cannot see through the lies of his officials and is hard-hearted, Tariqullah, we are told, is “a strong man who is not swayed by sycophants”, “when he hears the oppressed weep, he is ready to lay down his life for them”, and his *sabha* is a place where truth is spoken and heard, and justice delivered. Tariqullah, the text proclaims, “has drowned our (sic) sorrows in the high tide of the Padma” and made the *naib* fearful. It tells us that Hindu *prajas* have also joined the *praja* collective and warns “if you have any shame, do not break up the *samiti*, if you are weaned by the sweet words of the zamindar now, there will be no remedy later.” *Deshher Katha* also warns the peasants against riding the *swadeshi* wave. Though the flags are flying high in all directions, Mahatma (Gandhi) is meditating, and Deshbandhu (C.R. Das) and the Ali brothers are busy popularizing the slogan of Swadeshi, the text warns, *prajas* are nothing but goats to be sacrificed on the

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<sup>129</sup> See *Deshher Katha* (Murshidabad: Jalangi Raiyat Samiti, 1925).

alter of *swadesh* (home rule). It further warns that if the *praja* issues are not taken seriously, most peasants will go back to being indigo coolies. The tone is loyalist. An entire section of the verse is dedicated to the British official, “Magistrate W.A.D Sahib”, who is seen as a force for good. He is applauded as a “defender of the *prajas*”, as someone who has put the zamindar’s officials in place. He is also praised for dismissing the policemen and *darogas* who routinely refused to register complaints against the excesses of the zamindar’s officials. The final section of the verse-tract links the chaos wrecked upon the lives of the *prajas* by illegal and oppressive practices of zamindars, *naibs*, and *darogas* to the chaos or the theological concept of *fitna* or chaos prevailing in society in general. Wives, we are told, are not obedient to their husbands, adultery (*zina*) and gambling have spread like disease, the world is a web of lies and deceit, and people do not know *haram* from *halal*. There is a sense in which Tariqullah – Pir Abu Bakr’s disciple – and his *raiyat sabha* is understood to have arrived on the scene to bring peace in the social lives of the peasants as well as restore moral order in the world. Figures such as Tariqullah were endowed with a certain charisma, surrounded in an aura of religio-moral worth; he was shown to have descended from a locally respected and virtuous lineage, and his charisma and moral worth were utilized in mobilizing peasants in the area to join the *raiyat sabha*.

Extant historical scholarship has typically portrayed the *praja* movement as a secularized rubric of peasant mobilization, which recruited an overwhelming number of Muslim peasants only because they happened to be numerous.<sup>130</sup> As readings of hitherto

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<sup>130</sup> P.K. Datta’s study is exemplary in this regard. He considers *raiyat sabhas* to be secular organizations where mobilization occurred under the rubric of class.

neglected cheaply printed ephemera produced by local *raiyat* associations reveal, this was far from the case. Links existed between *pirs* and *maulavis* who enjoyed popular following in wider circles and local village-level organizers of *raiyat* associations they patronized. The language of mobilization tied issues of social order and prosperity to the restoration of religio-moral order.

*Raiyat* association leaders and Furfuri clerics, who were spread far and wide, encouraged *praja*-cultivators to attend Bakr's *Isal-i-Sawab*. In 1924, at the *Isal-i-Sawab* organized by Bakr in Furfura, a resolution was passed opposing any form of Swaraj that would not be governed by Islamic laws. Curiously, at the *Isal-i-Sawab*, Bakr's status as a landlord was emphasized; his financial support of the festival was posited as an example of how a Muslim landlord could fruitfully deploy his wealth to create a community of Muslims occupying disparate class-positions. According to one account, an attendee of Bakr's *Isal-i-Sawab* repeatedly stressed on how, unlike other ostentatious *pirs*, Bakr was simple and austere in dress and habits, how his children mingled with ordinary children at the festival.<sup>131</sup> Interestingly, while it was in the name of personages such as Bakr that tenant-cultivators were being mobilized against landlords and organized in far-flung rural districts into *raiyat* associations, in a movement seemingly consolidating a class, or at least, a sectional interest, it was also under Bakr's patronage that a larger Muslim community was instantiated during festivals such as *Isal-i-Sawab*, where antagonistic relationships between sectional interests within Muslims could be contained and the Muslim landlord's wealth displayed in actively producing bonds of religious community.

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<sup>131</sup> See Abdul Bari, *Furfura Isal-i-Sawab Darshan* (Noakhali, 1924).

It was as an effect of the braiding of such contradictory vectors, often traceable to one key personality (such as Bakr), that fault lines within the Muslim community simultaneously tended to be produced and sutured, underscored and effaced. That *praja* assertions in the 1920s and 1930s more frequently lashed out against Hindu zamindars than Muslim ones was perhaps as a result of such an effect, rather than an active process of communalization that singled out the Hindu zamindar as an enemy any more than rivals belonging to different *madhabs*.

### ***Winning over the Bargadar and the Production of Bengali Muslim identity at a Grass-roots Level***

The term *praja* or tenant came to be commonly applied to all those who had property rights below the zamindars. It was, in a sense an umbrella term that included the intermediate tenure-holders, the *raiyats* and the under-*raiyats*. However, there were *prajas* without property rights such as the *bargadar*, the *adhiar*, *bhag-chashi*, *khetmajur* who were directly involved in production.<sup>132</sup> *Barga* was a system of sharecropping in which the *bargadar* paid 50 per cent of produce rent to the landowner or tenure-holder. The *bargadar* himself supplied cattle, plough, seeds, and manure, but had no rights in occupancy.<sup>133</sup> So in the building of the *praja* movement there were fault lines along the concept of property rights. How would the *bargadars*, for instance, be mobilized? What did they have to gain from joining the tenant associations, which were primarily demanding the strengthening of occupancy rights of peasants? How would they be recruited in protests and processions?

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<sup>132</sup> See Sachin Sen, *Banglar Raiyat O Zamindar* (Calcutta: Visva Bharati, 1944).

<sup>133</sup> Bipasha Raha, *The Plough and the Pen: Peasantry, Agriculture and the Literati in Colonial Bengal* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2012), p. 220.

*Praja* unity had become urgent especially after 1923. There was a consensus in the upper echelons of the government that an amendment to the existing Bengal Tenancy Act was long overdue. In 1919, the matter was formally opened in the Bengal Legislative Council. Bishvamadhav Das, an Assembly member, moved a resolution in 1921 for the appointment of a special committee. The resolution was passed and a special committee, presided over by John Kerr, formed to suggest what amendments were necessary to the existing piece of legislation. Raja Bahadur Ban Behari Kapur, Rai Bahadur Surendra Chandra Sen, and Sir Ashutosh Choudhury, a well-known High Court judge, comprised the other members on the committee. The Kerr Committee's report and a draft of the proposed Bill were published in the Calcutta Gazette in 1923 for public debate and deliberation.<sup>134</sup> The committee's recommendations spawned a massive controversy in the domain of print media and within the Assembly, with both landlords and pro-*raiyyat* supporters expressing dissatisfactions with different provisions recommended in the Kerr Committee's draft bill. Among other things, the Kerr Committee's report recommended, for the first time in the history of land-related legislation in Bengal, that a bona fide cultivator paying a share of the produce to a proprietor or tenure-holder or occupancy *raiyyat* be deemed a tenant, notwithstanding any future contracts to the contrary. A bona fide cultivator was defined as a person who himself supplied plough, cattle, and other implements of agriculture.<sup>135</sup> This suggested provision threatened the large tenure-holders and other occupancy *raiyyats* who often let out their lands on a *barga* (sharecropping) basis. Interestingly, the pamphlets issued by tenant associations, in calling for *praja* unity, did not exclude the *bargadars*, but included them in their address. In fact *praja*

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<sup>134</sup> Sir John Kerr Committee's Report as published in *Calcutta Gazette*, Jan 10, 1923.

<sup>135</sup> Sir John Kerr's Committee Report, p. 7.

*samiti* tracts from the 1920s reveal that a concerted effort was made by the *praja* leaders to convince the *bargadars* that the Kerr Committee's recommendations was actually against their interest. Below, I quote from one such *praja* pamphlet, published in 1923, which appeared hot in the heels of the Kerr committee's recommendations being put out in the public domain for deliberation. This pamphlet titled *Prajasattva Nuton Ain O Praja'r Kartavva*, published from Mymensingh, takes the form of a dialogue between a *jotedar* (Bhuiya sahib) and a *bargadar* (Garibullah) that occurs when the *bargadar* comes looking to get on *barga*:

*Jotedar*: Don't you know that land will not be let out for sharecropping anymore? A new legislation is on its way, according to which, *bargadars* will be given occupancy rights. Should I starve myself by allowing you to sharecrop on my land holding?

*Bargadar*: Bhuiya Sahib, I did not understand what this legislation is all about. Can you explain in greater detail?

*Jotedar*: This plot of land has two levels of property rights – the proprietor's and the occupancy *raiyat*'s, you know that. Starting this November, if I allow you to be a *bargadar* on my land holding, and, if you -- using your own plough, ox, and seeds -- grow crops on my land, then you will be deemed my *praja*. And I will not be able to get my land back from you. You will retain right to my land, and will be required to pay me rent ascertained by the courts of law – I will not be able to object to that. And Chandu Sheikh, my under-*raiyat* will have rights to my land as well. As in the past I cannot demand produce rent; I will be forced to accept rent in cash if he applies for commutation of produce rent to money, and if such an order is passed by the courts of law. Garibullah, do you understand?

*Bargadar*: I do. But tell me, if such a piece of legislation is passed, what will be the condition of the *bargadars*?

*Jotedar*: No one will be willing to give out land on *barga*. They will not be encouraged to settle *korfa prajas* on their lands. Since the Act stands to be amended, many have already wrested away their lands from *bargadars* and under-*raiyats*. If I do not find wage-laborers, I will let my land stand fallow, but I will never give out land on a sharecropping basis. I might employ you as a wage-laborer, but if you charge too much, I will be forced to replace you with coolies from Orissa. So either you will be forced to run away to the dense jungles of Assam, or be compelled to tie a noose around your neck and you family's. But you will not get land on *barga*.

*Bargadar:* I had another question. A few days back Fateh Ali died; he left behind two widows and four minor children. If the widows give out their land on *barga*, will they also lose rights to their land? What will be the way out for them?

*Jotedar:* The way out? The beggar's bowl! Or perhaps the noose or the river!<sup>136</sup>

According to the *praja* pamphlet, if the existing Act was amended along the lines recommended by the Kerr Committee, which proposed to endow all bona fide cultivators, including *bargadars* with occupancy rights, landowners, and other tenure-holders would be forced to replace *bargadars* with day laborers from outside the province to get their land cultivated. Local protagonists of the *praja* movement also played on the anxieties of widowed wives of *jotedars* and *raiyyats* who were often left in charge of feeding households with no able-bodied adult male and depended on letting out their land holdings to *bargadars* for cultivation. The *praja* leaders, in mobilizing against the recommendations of the Kerr committee report, deployed a devious language of protectionism. The *praja* movement was putatively necessary to protect lives of *bargadars*, widowed women and their minor children, which the proposed amendments had supposedly rendered precarious. And finally, in the pamphlet, the *bargadar* is won over; he is successfully recruited to the *praja* cause to protest against the proposed legislation:

*Bargadar:* Bhuiya Sahib, what are we to do now? What is the responsibility of the *praja*?

*Jotedar:* There is little time. The government has published a draft of the Act to seek our opinions. We have to hold protest meetings. We have two months to

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<sup>136</sup> See Abdul Samad, *Conference O Sabha Samiti-te Aloccho Bishoy Prajasattva Nuton Ain O Praja'r Kartavya* (Dhaka: Satrauja Islamia Press, 1923).

express our grievances. A mother does not feed her child unless it cries! Take the name of Allah and plunge into action.<sup>137</sup>

It is a clarion call for the *prajas* to collectivize, to stop paying illegal cesses (*abwabs*) to the zamindar, a wake up call for the Muslim cultivators to realize that “it is *haram* to lend financial support to zamindar’s *pujas*.” *Prajas* are encouraged to join meetings in large numbers, draft resolutions, write open letters to the government, and protest the suggested amendments to the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. In addition, they are encouraged to draft resolutions demanding free and compulsory primary education, reduction in rates of interest, and the right to cut trees on their land holdings.

In the proposed Bill, the Kerr committee also addressed the issue of transferability of occupancy rights and proposed to legalize the practice.<sup>138</sup> Transferability of occupancy rights had emerged as a thorny issue even in the past. Referring to the Tenancy Act X of 1859, through which occupancy rights were legally secured to the cultivators, who lived on a plot of land for a minimum duration of 12 years, the zamindars lobbied that the right of occupancy should not be transferred by mortgage, sale, gift or exchange, nor was the right saleable in the execution of a decree of money against them.<sup>139</sup> When the Tenancy Amendment Bill of 1883 proposed to confer the free right of transfer of tenant occupancies, the proposal was dropped in the face of opposition from zamindars who argued that such an unqualified right would lead to land holdings passing into the hands of non-resident and non-cultivating classes. In the end, the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885

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<sup>137</sup> See Abdul Samad, *Conference O Sabha Samiti-te Aloccho Bishoy Prajasattva Nuton Ain O Praja'r Kartavya* (Dhaka: Satrauja Islamia Press, 1923).

<sup>138</sup> John Kerr Committee's Report, p. 4-7.

<sup>139</sup> Krishnakali Mukeerji, 'The Transferability of Occupancy Holding' in *The Bengal Economic Journal*, vol 1 (3), 1917, p. 266



had left the question of land transfer open to local custom rather than to a prohibitive regulation.<sup>140</sup> But the Kerr Committee was in favor of legalizing such transfers by fixing a fee of 25 per cent of the consideration money payable to the zamindar, and by enabling the zamindar the right to pre-emption, i.e. by conferring on the zamindar the right to transfer the holding to himself on paying the consideration money and an additional 10 per cent as compensation, together with any sum which the transferee might have paid as rent or the landlord's fees.<sup>141</sup> Legalization of land transfer on these terms was anathema to the *raiyat* associations since fixing a salami amounting to 20 per cent of the sale price to the zamindar would, they feared, put an end to the flexibility of terms and modes of negotiations customarily practiced through, as a pamphlet states, "flattery, hospitality (*khatir andaz*) or simply tears" by which a smaller sum was often arrived at. The landowners' right to pre-emption made the *raiyat* associations equally anxious. In this specific clause, *raiyat* associations saw a golden opportunity for the zamindars to acquire occupancy land holdings and convert them into *khas mahal* lands, which were government lands allocated at low revenue rates and with special facilities in the deltaic region of eastern Bengal. It was said, with this piece of legislation, the zamindar would be "like a bear with a bunch of bananas in his hands" greedily buying off land holdings from actual cultivators, thus rendering them landless, and then letting land out to actual cultivators on a more profitable *barga* basis.<sup>142</sup> Indeed, as Iftekar Iqbal's study has revealed, this process was well underway by the 1920s, when the British government actively implemented policies of allocating *khas mahal* lands preferentially to members

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<sup>140</sup> Memorial of Landholders in the matter of the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1936, *Proceedings of Land Revenue Department* in National Archives Bangladesh

<sup>141</sup> See John Kerr Committee's Report.

<sup>142</sup> See Abdul Samad, *Conference O Sabha Samiti-te Aloccho Bhisoy*.

of the Hindu *bhadralok*, in part, to “enable persons who have abandoned terrorism to settle down to a life of productive citizenship” and in part, to contain possible resentment arising from high employment rates among educated *bhadralok* youth in the inter-war period.<sup>143</sup> The number of actual cultivators possessing occupancy rights had been undergoing a steady decrease. Between 1921 and 1931, there was an estimated 49 per cent increase in the number of landless laborers in Bengal.<sup>144</sup> A settlement officer from Chittagong noting this increasing trend in the seizure of actual occupancy *raiyat*’s long-accumulated rights and entitlements during the Depression era, remarked:

Formerly the term *chasi* (cultivator) used to stink in the nose of the cultivators themselves as being a term of opprobrium. But at the advent of the present century, the gradually increasing unemployment among middle class youths and the prevailing high prices of agricultural produce brought about a change in the outlook; as a member of middle class took to agriculture as the only available professions, others were tempted to lay out money or lands as a safe form of investment – this has accelerated the process of transfer of lands from the cultivators to the non-cultivators. The transfers count among themselves not only the moneylenders, but also landlords and pleaders, *muktiars* and service holders. A section of the transferees let out their lands on *bhag* or *barga* and take half the produce rent while they let out on rate of money rent.<sup>145</sup>

As more and more cultivators got reduced to the status of *bargadars*, the onslaught on the possibility of conferring any substantive rights on the *bargadars* intensified from all sides involved in the debate – the *praja* leaders, the zamindars, as well as the *bhadralok* neo-*raiyat*. In the debates that ensued in the legislative council when the Tenancy

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<sup>143</sup> Iftekhar Iqbal, ‘Return of the Bhadrakok: Ecology and Agrarian Relations in Eastern Bengal’ in *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 43 (6), pp. 1325-1353.

<sup>144</sup> Iftekhar Iqbal, *The Bengal Delta: Ecology, State and Social Change, 1840-1943* (Cambridge: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 107.

<sup>145</sup> As quoted in Iftekhar Iqbal, *The Bengal Delta: Ecology, State and Social Change, 1840-1943*, p. 105.

Amendment Bill came up for discussion in 1928, Akhil Chandra Datta of the Swarajist bloc, in defending status quo, declared that *bargadari* was:

*[T]he most equitable arrangement that one can conceive of between capital and labor... May I ask if there is any other industry where you can find a more just share given to labor than what is given, viz., half to the capital and half to the labor... If you want a Bolshevik legislation have it by all means. Let us improve the condition of the actual tiller of the soil, even by sacrificing all other people.*<sup>146</sup>

Particularly concerned with championing the interests of the *bhadralok neo-raiyats* who were supposed to be “returning” to agriculture, J.L Banerjee said:

Let us accept the plain fact that at present we cannot recognize the *bargadar* as a tenant... We are not legislating *in vacuo*: we are legislating upon a background of past history and custom: and we cannot leave public opinion out of the account. Under the existing condition the *bargadars* and *adhiars* [sharecroppers] are not recognized as tenants and the Government cannot give them the rights of tenants without flouting public opinion. *Is the only cultivator of the land the man who tills the land with his own hands? Has the bhadralok agriculturalist who invests money in land no place in economy of things? And should not his land be recognized as much as the right of the man who actually tills the soil?*<sup>147</sup>

Datta and Banerjee sought to posit the institution of *bargadari* (sharecropping) as a fair and equitable distribution between the owners of land and the owners of labor power. The presupposition underpinning such formulations was that the owners of land and the owners of labor met in the domain of exchange: both parties engaged in an economic activity where in an exchange of land and labor, both sides took home an equal share of value produced in and through such exchange. Here, economic activity in being determined by exchange was shown to occur, to use a spatial metaphor, on a planar surface. In an understanding of economic activity dominated by an idiom of exchange (of land and labor), the owners of capital were deemed to have contributed as much to the

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<sup>146</sup> Bengal Legislative Council Proceedings, 13, 3 (13<sup>th</sup> Session, 1928). The emphasis is my own.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*,

production of value as “the man who tills the land with his own hands”. Banerjee’s argument was not very carefully crafted, its logic weak and quite obviously flawed. By Banerjee’s own logic, the *bargadars* ought to have been granted rights on the land by virtue of being participants in the economic activity of exchange, but his formulation does not follow this logic to its end and instead, led the likes of Banerjee to completely disregard the rights of the *bargadars*, in upholding the rights of the owners of capital. Yet notwithstanding the relative strength or weakness of these arguments, they bring into sharp relief the manner in which the problem of granting rights (or not) in land was linked to conflicting concepts of the economic or, to use a Althusserian distinction, the theoretical presuppositions that underwrote the ‘economic’ not as an “object of the real”, but as an “object of knowledge”.<sup>148</sup>

Contra Banerjee, the champions of *praja* interests aggressively touted a very different concept of the economic. Unlike the pro-landlord lobby, which located value-producing economic activity in the site of exchange, the pro-peasant *praja* activists sought to displace an understanding of labor as commodity-in-exchange to give way to a profoundly powerful presupposition about labor in which labor becomes a producing/productive activity that is the source of value. If a pro-landlord understanding of labor as commodity made labor subject to price fluctuations, demand, and supply, in the *praja* movement’s understanding about labor it acquired the status of an ontology, which far from being effected by fluctuations in variables, was posited as the constant and reliable source of all value. In 1921, in an open letter to the Governor of Bengal,

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<sup>148</sup> Loius Althusser, ‘The Object of Capital’ in Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1979) pp. 71-198.

Lawrence John Lumbley Dundas, Earl of Ronaldshay, the Secretary of the Bengal Raiyat Association – Naziruddin Ahmed – pleaded the governor to make a tour of rural Bengal to witness the miserable plight of the *raiya*s, who were the “backbone of the nation”, the “real producers”, the motor which drove society, for on their labor rested “the *nawab*’s *nawabi*, the *babu*’s *babudom*, the *bradralok*’s genteel manners, the zamindar’s arrogance”.<sup>149</sup>

The 1920s *praja* pamphlet from Mymensingh written in the form of a dialogue between the *bargadar* and the *jotedar*, which I have discussed before, gave an account that was fairly typical of the widespread manner of narrating the history of accumulation of wealth in tracts issued by *praja* associations:

Not only is the *raiya* (tenant-cultivator) not the owner of wealth, as a matter of fact, in the eyes of law, he is not even the owner of land. Those that have accumulated wealth through deceit and force, those whose ancestors had endeared themselves to Lord Cornwallis’ Company agents and those who in broad daylight committed theft through usury are today the owners of land. But those poor creatures who turned their lifeblood to sweat – clearing dense jungles or by ceaseless toil, ploughed deeper and deeper into the earth to bring out ambrosia (*amrita*) – have no claims on the land today; they are merely hired hands.<sup>150</sup>

As per such accounts, capital was fundamentally theft and not simply a thing produced via a mutually beneficial exchange between the owners of land and the owners of labor power.

*Praja* pamphlets such as *Krishker Unnati* provided detailed guidelines on how *raiya* interests were to be organized. It recommended that *raiya samitis* at the village and district levels under the umbrella of a *Bangiya raiya samiti* (Bengal tenant’s

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<sup>149</sup> See Nazi-uddin Ahmed, *Khola Chithi* (Calcutta: Gobardhan Press, 1921).

<sup>150</sup> See Abdul Samad, *Conference O Sabha Samiti-te Aloccho Bishoy*.

association) – a well-linked network of organizations – be set in place so that “if one part is affected the entire body reacts”. *Praja* pamphlets also advised that in case of forceful eviction of a *raiyat* from his land by a zamindar, no other *raiyat* ought to come forward to buy the right of tenancy on such land, and when the *Bangiya raiyat samiti* declared a particular zamindar as an oppressor or the collector of illegal cesses (*abwab*), *raiya*s ought to collectively boycott such a zamindar by refraining from taking up employment as the zamindar’s doorman, or *paik* or *barkandaj*. Most importantly, such pamphlets lay down that in order to protect the interest of the *raiya*s, there could be no discrimination on the basis of localities, districts, or the religion of the affected *raiyat*.<sup>151</sup> Such non-sectarian call for unity was, however, at the expense of the *bargadars* who owned no rights on the land on which they cultivated. But given that improvements texts and *praja* pamphlets had already forged a regime of value that accorded primacy to the labor of cultivation, on what terms could a staunch resistance to conferring rights to the *bargadars* be justified by the *praja* movement?

In the Bengal Legislative Assembly, two pro-peasants councilors, Ekramuk Haq and Emdadul Huq, argued that where ordinary poor but respectable cultivating families made a living by letting out their holdings to the *bargadar*, conferring tenancy rights to *bargadars* would be extremely mischievous – it would foster strife and litigation. For fear of such strife and litigation, they claimed, many holdings would remain unploughed and those who tilled on *barga*, unable to make a living in their villages, would be forced to

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<sup>151</sup> Khademol Islam, *Krishaker Unnati* (Maulana Mohammad Moyejjuddin Hamidi, 1929).

make way to the hills and jungles of Assam, and perish there.<sup>152</sup> In demonstrating the ill effects of the proposed legislation, the *praja* tracts and pamphlets constantly played on an anxiety about the exodus of cultivators from Bengal to the wilderness of Assam. As an effect of the legislation, *bargadars*, they projected, would be driven to the unfriendly jungles of Assam because occupancy *raiyyats* would refuse to let out land on a sharecropping basis, and occupancy *raiyyats*, reduced to landless labor following the conversion of their holdings into *khas mahal* lands, would be forced into the tiger-infested jungles of Assam too. This anxiety of depeasantization was conveyed powerfully by activating an imagination of Bengal as a civilized realm of sedentary cultivation vis-à-vis its neighboring Assam, a supposedly inhospitable and “uncivilized” wilderness. Such pamphlets pleaded with the *prajas*: “Teach your children the name of Allah and Rasul. Even if you have a tiny plot of land left, do not go to Assam. Stay back in your *desh* and plough the land. If required work as a coolie, there’s no shame in that.”<sup>153</sup> Since the late nineteenth century the Bengali word *desh* operated on a rather fluid semantic terrain – it could refer to one’s ancestral village or place of “origin” but also mean country or nation. Even today, the word *desh* continues to be used in both these senses. The *praja* pamphlets played on this double semantic usage of *desh*. The discourse of the *praja* movement emphasized *desh* as a place to which affiliation was understood to be structured by ties of kinship, through land which the “son inherits from his forefathers”.<sup>154</sup> Yet, in *praja* discourse, one’s ties to one’s *desh* did not simply appear as a matter of inherited occupancy or proprietary rights, but as an affective relationship

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<sup>152</sup> *The Calcutta Gazette*, no. 29 of 1926, part IV, 22 July 1926, p. 59.

<sup>153</sup> See Abdul Samad, *Conference O Sabha Samiti-te Aloccho Bhishoy*.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.* Also, Khademol Islam, *Krishaker Unnati*.

that had to be maintained by continuing the activity of labor of cultivation. It was through the labor of cultivation that one's relationship to one's *desh*, as place, and to the province of Bengal could be rightfully maintained.

In introducing the new Tenancy Bill in the Bengal Legislative Council in 1928, Provash Chandra Mitter remarked, "if this house can settle the conflicting interests with justice and fairness to all, it will be laying the foundation of true nationalism in this Province."<sup>155</sup> If in Mitter's understanding, *desh* or nation was an agglomeration of different and conflicting sectional interests, and the forging of national unity required that no one sectional interest be ridden over roughshod, in *praja* literature, the interest of the cultivators did not make an appearance as a sectional interest but as an expression of national interest, since *prajas* were posited as the motor driving the entire nation of Bengal, the "life force of the nation":

The fact is that the government and a handful of our countrymen have been conspiring against the *prajas* who are the life force of Bengal... The Government has enslaved the educated *bhadralok* by bestowing upon them zamindaris and clerical jobs. The educated have spread their influence over the administrative institutions of the country. They come to represent their interest as the interest of the *desh*, politics is the politics of their interest, and the Congress and the Council are playgrounds for their moves.<sup>156</sup>

Therefore, the *praja* pamphlets asserted that the zamindars in reducing the actual cultivators of the soil to their present plight had in fact reduced the whole of Bengal, the "jannat-e-belat" ("heaven on earth") of the Mughal era to "a burial ground."<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>155</sup> Provash Chandra Mitter as quoted in *The Statesman*, 12 August, 1928.

<sup>156</sup> See Khademol Islam, *Krishaker Unnati*.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*



The *praja* movement's avowedly non-sectarian claims of protecting peasant interests irrespective of locality, district, and religion, however, rested on propagating acute xenophobia at another level, directed not only at the "Marwari moneylenders" and "upcountry Bhatias", but also at the wage laborers and coolies from Bihar and Orissa – the "*pashchima* coolies" as they were called in popular *praja* literature. The *bargadars* were advised to drive the "*pashchima* coolies" out of Bengal, and via the continuing act of the labor of cultivation claim their *desh* – both in the sense of a place to which one is attached through kinship ties and to the land of Bengal. As I have shown in the first chapter, improvement tracts posited cultivation as the highest form of *ibadat* (worship) to Allah, and reinforced an older idea of Adam as the first cultivator and cultivation as the foremost command of Allah, and in so doing created a religio-ethical vision of Muslim self and community rooted in linking the cultivation of the self to the act of cultivating the earth. The relationship between land and labor was posited as a religiously sanctioned one; to respect this relationship was the duty of a good Muslim and the proof of his Muslimness.

*Praja* pamphlets continued this discourse where the labor of cultivation was the source of all value, but also linked the act of cultivation to the land of Bengal. Popular *praja* literature including tracts and pamphlets that circulated in the Bengal countryside, thus went a long way in the production of Bengali Muslim identity at a grass-roots level.

In the historical context of Bengal, the setting up of a relationship of contiguity between land, labor, and Muslim-ness was significant. For as Rafiuddin Ahmed has noted, an interesting aspect of *ashraf* behavior in Bengal of the late nineteenth century was reflected in their attitude to physical labor. In general, any Muslim, with even the

barest claims to high social status, held such labor in great contempt.<sup>158</sup> In his work published in 1876, Carstairs noted that in the late nineteenth century, the repugnance for physical labor extended even to many of the less privileged groups, particularly in Eastern Bengal, so much so that the work force for public works generally had to be imported from outside.<sup>159</sup> Carstairs' observation was most certainly a gross exaggeration, for the bulk of Bengal's peasant-cultivators were Muslims. But what it points to was a tendency among Muslims in Bengal, which Ahmed identifies as *ashrafization*. The fear of being labeled "*atrap*" (derogatorily connoting a low-born peasant "convert" who was only nominally Muslim), led to a tendency of adopting "foreign" lineages and adopting names and manners of the "high-born" *ashraf* who claimed superior social status, mostly resided in urban centers and claimed to be of Persian, Arabic, Pathan or Mughal descent. As Ahmed points out, Islamic reform movements, as they surged through the Bengal countryside in the latter half of the nineteenth century had created a strong tendency among the Muslims in Bengal to make claims of racial purity by adopting fictitious ancestries of "extra-territorial" origins harking back to Arabia, Persia, or Afghanistan.<sup>160</sup> But by the second decade of the twentieth century, Muslim identity in Bengal had not only come to be structured by labor's relationship to land, where this relationship itself was represented as sanctioned by religion, but the relationship was also structured as a relationship between labor and the land of Bengal. Thus, as the basis of Bengali Muslim identity, assertions of belonging rooted in the land of Bengal emerged at this specific historical juncture. Precisely because this identity was forged in the improvement-*praja*

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<sup>158</sup> Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengali Muslims, 1871-1906: The Quest for Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981).

<sup>159</sup> R. Carstairs, *Human Nature in Rural India* (Edinburg and London, 1876), pp. 64-65.

<sup>160</sup> See Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengali Muslims*.

movement discursive terrain, the issue of Bengali identity played out most explicitly in the campaign of the Krishak Praja Party (KPP) before the 1937 elections, where the League Parliamentary Board's assertion of Muslim solidarity faced direct challenge from KPP leaders on account of the fact that the League was dominated by non-Bengali Muslims. Among the League Board's candidates there were as many as 10 members belonging to the Urdu-speaking Dhaka nawab family.<sup>161</sup>

The Dacca nawabs were prosperous hide merchants from Kashmir who had first moved to Delhi and then to Bengal in the eighteenth century. After the Permanent Settlement of 1793, the family invested in land, purchased from the profligate Nawabs of Bengal. In the years that followed, they married into local families who helped them strengthen their hold over new territory of Bengal. In 1835, they purchased a dilapidated French factory building, refurbished it in the style of old nawabs and christened it "Ahsan Manzil". This palatial residence on the banks of the river Padma became a hotbed of intrigue: in later times it was to become a headquarters of the Muslim League, not only for Dhaka but for the whole of Bengal. In 1875, the government gave Abdul Ghani the title of the "Nawab" in belated recognition for being conspicuously loyal during the 1857 revolt and the title was made hereditary two years later. The family prospered in the subsequent decades under the royal patronage of the British, to whom they remained unswervingly loyal until the Partition of Bengal was revoked in 1912. And although Nawab Salimullah died in 1916 disillusioned with his British patrons, his descendants adhered to the family tradition of loyalty to the Raj and kept away from the Khilafat

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<sup>161</sup> Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh: Bengali Muslim League and Muslim Politics, 1906-1947* (Dhaka: The University Press Ltd., 2003), p. 70.

agitation. In the twenties, the family rose to new heights. Khwaja Nazimuddin, a cousin of the Nawab, showed that the faithful could still expect handsome rewards from their British masters. Educated at Cambridge, Nazimuddin returned to become Chairman of the Dacca Municipality. In due course, Nazimuddin became Minister of Education in 1929, and finally in 1934, he was appointed to the Viceroy's Executive Council. His family stuck to their "Persian" pretensions, married into prominent north Indian Muslim families and spoke only in English and Urdu. By 1934, the family estates covered almost 200,000 acres and was spread over some seven districts in eastern Bengal together with property in Shillong, Assam and in rent roll of some 120,000 pounds a year. The treasurer of the new party was one of the wealthiest merchants in the province.<sup>162</sup> In the 1937 elections, League Parliamentary Board candidates from the Dhaka nawab family included Nawab Khawaja Habibullah, Nawabzadah Khwaja Nasrullah, Khwaja Shahabuddin, Farhat Shahabuddin, Khwaja Nooruddin, Syed Abdul Hafiz, Syed Abdus Salim, Syed Abdus Saheed, Khwaja Ismail and Khwaja Nazimuddin.<sup>163</sup> Drawing the attention of the electors to this phenomenon of non-Bengali influence within the Muslim League, Fazlul Haq, the chief of the KPP declared that the 1937 elections would determine whether there would be Bengali or non-Bengali raj in Bengal.<sup>164</sup> That candidates such as Khwaja Nazimuddin, in attempting to project a Pan-Indian Muslim image and influence, recruited

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<sup>162</sup> Kazi Ahmed Kamal, *Politicians and Inside Stories* (Dhaka: Kazi Giasuddin Ahmed, 1970), pp. 116-118.

<sup>163</sup> Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>164</sup> Kamruddin Ahmad, *Rise of the Middle Class of Bengal, Part I* (Dhaka: Zahiruddin Mahmud, 1975), pp 98-99

Muslim students from Punjab, UP, and NWFP to canvass for him in his constituency of Patuakhali – his zamindari estate – did him more harm than good in garnering votes.<sup>165</sup>

During the 1937 elections the League strategy was to discredit the KPP as a stooge of the Congress Party and harp on religious solidarity. With a view to creating paranoia among the Muslim electorate, the League campaigned that if the KPP won the election, “all *maktabs* and *madarsas* where the Quran is taught would be closed down.”<sup>166</sup> What occasioned such propaganda was probably the fact that even though the KPP was contesting elections from separate electorates reserved for the Muslims, not the general electorates, there was nothing in the Party’s manifesto that was sectarian per se, none of its promises addressed Muslims *qua* Muslims. In the 4<sup>th</sup> annual session of the KPP held in July 1936, where the 14 point election manifesto was adopted, the party’s aims included: abolition of zamindari without compensation; establishment of the proprietary rights of the cultivators in land; reduction of land rent for fixing a maximum rate for each class of land right; annulment of the landlord’s right to pre-emption; abolition of *nazar salami* and the criminal punishment of all illegal exactions or *abwabs*; the establishment of debt settlement boards and fixing of the rate of interest on long-term loans at 4 per cent as a solution to the problem of indebtedness of the cultivators; restriction of jute cultivation and fixing a minimum price for jute; resuscitation of dead and dying rivers and the improvement of agriculture, trade, commerce and sanitation; full self-government in Bengal; free and compulsory primary education; reducing the cost of

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<sup>165</sup> Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, p. 73.

<sup>166</sup> *Star of India*, 13<sup>th</sup> January, 1937, p 5.

administration; fixing minister's salary at Rs 1000; and, release of all political prisoners.<sup>167</sup>

But despite KPP's non-sectarianism in its election manifesto, which in any case was restricted to the literate audience, in its election campaign in the rural areas, no frontal attack on the League's line of communal solidarity was mounted.<sup>168</sup> Instead the line taken was that real Muslim unity had to be forged among the ninety-five per cent Muslim cultivators living in the villages of Bengal, and not in the courtyard of Ahsan Manzil – the residence of the Urdu-speaking Dhaka Nawabs.<sup>169</sup> In Mansur's own district of Mymensingh, in spite of the fact that Jinnah himself had undertaken a visit to the district to campaign for the League, the KPP emerged victorious.<sup>170</sup> The League campaigns in general were much better financed, in comparison to the KPP – which was not patronized by Muslim zamindars and Calcutta-based Muslim trading families to the extent that the League was.<sup>171</sup> It was not that the KPP did not enjoy the patronage of Muslim zamindars at all – Ismail Chowdhury of Chiramati, Abdul Latif of Ulania, Barisal, Ghyasuddin Chowdhury and Moham Mian of Faridpur, Ashrafuddin Chowdhury of Comilla and Nawabzada Hasan Ali from Tangail were KPP members and patrons.<sup>172</sup> Yet in comparison to the League, the KPP's campaign budget was modest, its meeting and rallies could not display the pomp and show of the League meetings; the KPP primarily depended on door-to-door canvassing. At the rural level, with a masterstroke as

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<sup>167</sup> Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, p. 56.

<sup>168</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha*, p. 127.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., pp. 126-129.

<sup>172</sup> Rashid, Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, p. 60.

it were, the KPP managed to turn its ill-financed campaign into an advantage, rather than an impediment. Deploying the rhetoric of frugality and austerity reminiscent of the Muslim improvement discourse (see chapter 1), the KPP chided the ostentatious rallies and meetings of the League as wasteful expenditures, which were essentially bleeding the Muslim community, and were also, implicitly, out of line with the Muslim improvement ethic. Instead, it proposed that joint meetings where both parties would debate each other face-to-face in the tradition of the *bahas* (theological debates between rival *madhabs*), familiar to rural Muslims from the nineteenth century onward, be popularized as a modality of pre-election campaign. That the League recoiled in the face of such proposition was, according to Abul Mansur, one of the major reasons leading to the undoing of its electoral fortunes in much of rural eastern Bengal.<sup>173</sup>

As far as KPP leaders were concerned, the real cause for worry was the defection of Akram Khan, Tamizuddin Khan, and Abdul Momin to the League before the 1937 elections, as these were senior KPP leaders who had been associated with the *praja* movement since its early days.<sup>174</sup> But the crisis cut both ways. The League too was forced to posit itself not only as the true Muslim party, but, indeed, as the “true *praja* party”. In addressing a meeting in Comilla, H.S. Suhrawardy claimed that the League Parliamentary Board was the “true *krishak dal*.”<sup>175</sup> *Maulavis* and *pirs* were recruited by the League to make statements against the KPP. In November 1936, Pir Abu Bakr of Furfura, the patron of several *raiyat* associations in the 1910s and 1920s, issued a *fatwa* stating that the League being the true Muslim party and the true *praja* party, anyone

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<sup>173</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha*, p. 128.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>175</sup> *Star of India*, Nov 14, 1936, p. 9.

casting a vote in favor of the KPP or any party subservient to the Hindu Congress would mean the destruction of the Muslim community.<sup>176</sup> Evidently, even in the domain of formal politics, *praja* identity had assumed a certain hegemonic status, which any party aspiring to be a serious contender from the electorates reserved for Muslims had to lay claim to.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to provide an account of how the hegemony of *praja* identity was forged in the domain of Muslim politics. By focusing on the early days of the *praja* movement, I have tried to demonstrate that early *praja* demands were not merely about the economically exploitative nature of the relationship between the zamindar and the *praja*, but pertained to the unjust and discriminatory nature *specific* to the relationship between the zamindar and the Muslim *praja*. As such discriminations were directed to Muslims *qua* Muslims, in its early days, assertions of self-respect were central to *praja* demands. The All Bengal Praja Samiti was formed in 1929. In 1931, the All Bengal Praja Samiti resolved to participate in government institutions, legislatures, municipalities, and union boards. From 1936, it came to be called the Krishak Parja Party (KPP). Even when it entered the domain of formal politics, and its demands and programs became more or less economic in nature, the early legacy of *praja* assertions that were responses to social discrimination was never entirely lost. This explains why the KPP enjoyed the robust support of young Muslim professionals – lawyers, doctors, journalists, and teachers – both at the level of leadership and sympathy. KPP leaders such

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<sup>176</sup> *Star of India*, Nov 14, 1936, p. 9.



as Shamshuddin Ahmed, Abul Mansur Ahmed, and Humayun Kabir were all members of professional classes who had made their journey to the metropolis of Calcutta from provincial towns and villages as young students to attend Presidency College, Bangabashi College, or Calcutta University. As Suchetana Chattopadhyay has noted, for Muslim students, accommodation in the city was a persistent problem as Hindu house-owners and mess-keepers refused to let out their premises to them. This shortage of accommodation sometimes forced Muslim students to give up their studies in Calcutta and return home.<sup>177</sup> Such experiences of discrimination faced as Muslim *qua* Muslim by young boys and men from provincial towns and the countryside trying to get an education in Calcutta led them to gravitate toward the *praja* cause as well, since it was only in the articulations of the *praja* movement that the problem of social discrimination of Muslims (not religio-communal unity) was nailed down.

Secondly, the early history of *praja* assertions points to the manner in which conceptions of spiritual discipline shaped by discourses of Islamic reformism popularized by the Faraidis and the Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya, which emphasized the principle of *tauhid*, were coded into *praja* demands. Again, ideas of spiritual discipline, rooted as they were in the everyday practices of frugality and austerity enjoined by the Muslim self-improvement discourse that emerged in the early twentieth century, were later mobilized by the KPP in countering the well-financed electoral campaigns of the League and delegitimizing big rallies and public meetings as wasteful expenditures (by implication a sign of a lack of spiritual discipline). As I have pointed out, the KPP,

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<sup>177</sup> Suchetana Chattopadhyay, 'War, Migration and Alienation in Colonial Calcutta: The Remaking of Muzaffar Ahmed', in *History Workshop*, Issue 64, 2007, pp. 219-220.

despite its secular manifesto, was endorsing election meetings reminiscent of forms of public associations centered on dialogic theological debates or *bahas*, which were popular in the Bengal countryside from the nineteenth century onward. Notwithstanding the secular nature of the KPP's aims and political programs, its strategies of political mobilization were not, strictly speaking, secularized. Its demands – of abolishing the practice of *abwabs*, for instance – secular though they were, resonated with distinctly reformist Islamic dispositions.

Thirdly, I have very schematically pointed to the curiously antinomian nature of *praja* patronage in the 1910s and 1920s, whereby potentially conflicting class interests between the Muslim zamindar and the Muslim *raiyat* were simultaneously produced and contained. Such contradictory double movements were effected by networks of patronage pivoted on popular religious figures (such as Pir Abu Bakr), who patronized *raiyat* associations in far-flung villages of Bengal, thus, accentuating fractures within Muslims along class lines while simultaneously financing religious festivals of the nature of *Isal-i-Sawab* that had the effect of displaying how the wealthy Muslim landowner could use his wealth in productive ways toward the building of a harmonious Muslim community. It is not surprising then, that the League would, in 1936, recruit a figure such as Bakr to legitimize its claim to being both the “true Muslim party” and “the real *praja* party”. This curious nature of patronage during the early days of the *praja* movement also made it possible for a Muslim zamindar such as Nawabzada Hasan Ali from Tangail to position

himself both as a representative of *praja* interests and their paternalistic patron in seeking election with a KPP ticket in 1937.<sup>178</sup>

Fourthly, the popular literature disseminated by local-level *raiyyat* associations, as I have shown in this chapter, played a key role in the production of Bengali Muslim identity at the grass-roots level. This was achieved by harping on the affective ties of the cultivator to the land on which he cultivated, and by a clever rhetorical maneuver, expanding the scale of representation to the land of Bengal, while propagating xenophobia directed to Marwari moneylenders, upcountry traders, Oriya wage laborers and Bihari coolies alike. The production of Bengali Muslim identity in this manner also led the *bargadars* to support the *praja* cause, against their own interests. At this level too, the *praja* movement had achieved hegemony, where Bengali Muslim became a *sine qua non* for the cultivators of Bengal, and *praja* became an all-encompassing term under which solidarity was sought, irrespective of the gradations of land-holdings or the lack of it. As the movement formalized into a party and entered the domain of formal politics, the *bargadars*, acting against their interests, also became the mass base of the party, although their support did not translate into votes as they were still disenfranchised in a time where voting depended on property qualifications.<sup>179</sup> The KPP's rhetoric of routing out the non-Bengali raj of a League, dominated by Urdu speaking candidates, certainly had an affective purchase that could enlist the support of *bargadars* who otherwise had little to gain from the KPP's program.

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<sup>178</sup> See Abul Mansur Ahmed's, *Amar Dekha*, for details of Nawabzada Hasan Ali's election campaign in 1937, pp. 128-132.

<sup>179</sup> Harun-or-Rashid, *The Foreshadowing of Bangladesh*, p. 61.

It is because Bengali Muslim identity was being forged at a grass-roots level via *praja* discourse that literary institutions such as the Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samity (Bengal Muslim Literary Association; henceforth BMSS), formed by the urban Muslim intelligentsia with the express agenda of building a Bengali language and literature for the Bengali Muslim community, drew on the political vocabulary of the *praja* movement to assert a distinctive Bengali Muslim identity. In the presidential address of an annual meeting of the Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti, S. Wajed Ali related the “backwardness” of the Bengali Muslim community to its neglect of the mother tongue. Every self-respecting community, he claimed, needed a *jatiyo sahitya* (national literature) of its own. He argued that until the Bengali Muslims could build a national literature of their own, they would remain objects of contempt, or at best, sympathy in the eyes of the Bengali Hindus and the Muslims from other parts of India. Modern Bengali literature, he remarked, had thus far been nurtured by the Hindus and shaped by the mental-world and ethical universe of Hinduism. To make Bengali literature fit for Bengali Muslim society and religion, he urged, the language and the content of literary works had to be shaped anew.<sup>180</sup> But how was literary language to be recast?

In 1919, at the third convention of the BMSS, Akram Khan, in his presidential address, responded to the problem of words that were too Hindu-ised to be used by Bengali Muslims in their literature. According to him, although Bengali was the mother tongue of the Muslims of Bengal, the Sanskritized Bengali, which had become the hallmark of Bengali literary production, was not something Bengali Muslims could claim

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<sup>180</sup> See S. Wajed Ali, *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti Pancham Barshik Adhibeshan-e Sabhapatir Abhibhashan*, 1925.

as their own, especially since words pertaining to religion were imbued with Hindu ideas and symbolism. For Bengali Muslim literary production, some Islamic words were fundamental and could not be substituted by more prevalent Bengali words. For example, according to Khan “*allah*” could never be replaced by “*Iswar*”; the Hindu connotations of *Iswar* meant that it smacked of polytheism and was thus not adequate to the (*tauhid*) monotheism of Islam. Similarly, according to him, *roza* could not be substituted by *upvas* – since *roza* was a specific kind of religious fasting, and *upvas* was fasting in a general sense and could even result from the husband refusing to eat his dinner in showing that he was upset with his wife. Akram Khan countered allegations that the Bengali Muslim Literary Association was trying to needlessly inject an excess of Perso-Arabic words into the Bengali language in order to stamp it with the mark of Muslim communal identity. According to him, greater currency of certain Perso-Arabic words was a necessity for Bengali Muslims and he was baffled by why that would upset the Bengali intelligentsia and literati at all. To quote Khan:

There are several naturally existing Arabic and Persian words in the Bengali language. Now, even certain English words have become naturalized in the language. If these can exist, why not a few other words? Adherence to certain words is crucial to our religious identity. In the upper echelons of the literary establishment it has been ascertained that only words that are in usage under the current arrangement (*haal bandobasto*) have the right to occupancy (*kayemi satva*). Why our authors would want to banish words such as *allah*, *rasul*, *namaz* and *roza* from the realm of the literary, I cannot fathom. In banishing such words, we (the Bengali Muslims) will give permanency (*sthayitto*) to a language that is not our own.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Akram Khan, ‘Presidential Address of the Third Bengali Muslim Literary Conference’, as reprinted in *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika*, Issue 3 (Feb 12, 1919), p. 309.

It is telling that Akram Khan in attempting to carve out a separate space for Bengali Muslim literature, used words such as “occupancy right” (*kayemi satva*), “permanency” (*sthayitto*), and “current arrangement” (*haal bandobasto*) that were staples of the political vocabulary of the *praja* (tenant-peasants’) movement which was gaining momentum in a fragmented fashion across large parts of eastern Bengal where Muslims were most populous. In using a political vocabulary that would resonate with the grievances of the tenant-peasants’ (*praja*) movement against zamindari and the Permanent Settlement (of land), he sought to merge the political affect that was being mobilized against the then current colonial arrangement of proprietorship in land with an affective response against the current arrangement (*haal bandobasto*) of Bengali literary language as well.

Since specifically Islamic dispositions coupled with reactions to widespread attitudes of social discrimination against Muslims had congealed in the articulations of *praja* grievances and assertions, they provided apt analogies for speaking of discrimination in the domain of culture as well. Thus when Akram Khan in addressing the Bengali Muslim Literary conference drew on the political vocabulary that had come to be identified with the *praja* movement in order to make an argument for a distinctive vocabulary for Bengali Muslim literature, he was exploiting this widespread perception of the *praja* issue as a Muslim issue. In effect, he was implying that just as the arrangement in proprietorship in land was tilted against *praja*/Muslim interests, similarly the current arrangement of Bengali as a formalized, literary language was tilted against the Muslims, and thus, required unsettling.

One of the most remarkable features of the Pakistan demand, as it emerged in Bengal in the 1940s, was the intensity of literary activism surrounding it. This is a topic I

have dealt at length in a subsequent chapter. But here, suffice it to say that for the pro-Pakistan literary activists, Pakistan was a demand for “cultural autonomy” or “*tammaduni azadi*”. In 1944, Abul Mansur Ahmed, who by then had joined the Muslim League, in delivering his presidential address at the East Pakistan Renaissance Society asserted that both religion and culture accounted for the distinctiveness of Bengali Muslim identity. Culture’s relationship to religion, he argued, was analogous to that of a tree and a seed: while religion, in the manner of a seed, could traverse geographical boundaries, culture, like a tree, even as it sprouted from the seed (religion), remained firmly rooted in the land on which it flourished. Ahmed’s botanical metaphors chalked out a space of cultural autonomy for the Bengali Muslims, vis-à-vis Bengali Hindus as well as Muslims in other parts of India. He contended that the creation of Pakistan was imperative for the realization of this cultural autonomy of Pak-Bangla where its distinctive literature and language could flourish and words integral to the speech of Bengali Muslims such as “*allah-khuda, haj-zakat, ibadat-bandagi, wazu-goshol, khana-pani*” would not be shunned by *littérateurs* and universities as “foreign”. Pak-Bangla literature’s relationship to Bengali literature was, for him, structurally the same as the relationship between Irish literature and English literature – in short, the former could not realize itself without asserting its independence against the oppression of the later.<sup>182</sup> Clearly, Pak-Bangla literary activism was drawing on ideas already popularized by institutions such as Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti, which in turn had drawn its energies from the political affect generated by the *praja* movement at a grass-roots level.

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<sup>182</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed, ‘Mul Sabhapatir Abhibhashan’, as reproduced in Sardar Fazlul Karim (ed.) *Pakistan Andolan O Muslim Sahitya* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1968), pp 137-152.

Even in the domain of party politics, following Mansur Ahmed's defection to the Muslim League in 1944 there was a slew of defections from the Praja Party, which included Abdullahel Baqi, Hasan Ali, Shamshuddin Ahmed, former Praja Party Secretary and its former assistant secretary, Nurul Islam Chowdhury.<sup>183</sup> Ahead of the crucial 1946 elections, where success would establish the Muslim League as the sole spokesperson of the Muslims in Bengal, Abul Mansur Ahmed was appointed the publicity secretary of the Bengal Provincial Muslim League. Under his supervision, from the Central Election Committee office in Calcutta posters were printed with slogans that had emerged in the crucible of the *praja* movement in Bengal, which read: "the land belongs to the tiller", "abolition of permanent settlement without compensation", "the worker is the owner", "People's Pakistan", "Pakistan belongs to peasants and workers".<sup>184</sup> These posters were sent out to far-flung mofussil towns and villages. In areas with a history of strong *praja* movements such slogans readily gained in popularity, and contributed to the overwhelming electoral success of the League in 1946.

Faisal Devji has argued that Jinnah's idea of Pakistan as a Muslim nation was a "pure abstraction" that worked for a thorough erasure of religion as it was lived in "nature and history". For Jinnah and the Muslim League, according to Devji, "Muslim" remained a juridical rather than a phenomenological category. In other words, the demand for a Muslim nation was a matter of the "right" of the Muslims and not how they inhabited their religion, because the business of inhabiting religion was itself tricky, and, ultimately, ridden with energies that were potentially more divisive and differentiated

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<sup>183</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchash Bochor*, pp. 242-243.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.



than with the unifying forces needed to build a constituency.<sup>185</sup> Contra Devji, in this chapter, I have attempted to show that the success of the League in the 1946 elections which established it as a credible mouthpiece of Bengali Muslims were due, at least in part, to phenomenological densities that had accumulated in colonial Bengal's Muslim society via practices and ideas popularized by the *praja* movement, which coded specifically Islamic dispositions to spiritual discipline alongside experiences of discrimination faced as Muslim *qua* Muslim in secular, non-sectarian terms, thus shaping ideas of Bengali Muslim self and community in relation to specific pressures exerted by colonialism. I hypothesize that such an approach is fruitful in showing the manner in which the territorial nation, not as a thing but as a relationship between the nation-state and the individual citizen, far from being an outcome of abstract juridical conceptions of an individual (Muslim) citizen-subject rightfully inhabiting a (Muslim) nation, was historically an outcome of concrete practices of religio-cultural and political assertions through which regionally specific colonial conditions were negotiated and inhabited.

Yet the figure of the individual abstracted from social bonds, as it were, coming together to demand a nation would indeed become a claim quite central to the cultural politics of Pakistanism in Bengal; such claim would be raised primarily by literary organizations committed to articulating the demand for Pakistan such as East Pakistan Renaissance Society and Purba Pakistan Sahitya Samsad that were developing in the 1940s. This praxis of abstraction was hardly an invention of such organizations, which were essentially drawing their energies from literary and religious discourses, and

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<sup>185</sup> See Faisal Devji's 'The Minority as a Political Form' in Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rochona Majumdar & Andrew Sartori (eds.) *From the Colonial to the Postcolonial: India and Pakistan in Transition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007).

institutions developing since the 1920s. My point however is quite simple: the praxis of abstraction – whose nature will be explored in greater detail in the following chapter – had to acquire phenomenological density, i.e., it had to be *inhabited*. In the next chapter, I delve into how this habitation became possible.

## CHAPTER 4

### **The Cultural Politics of the Pakistan Demand: Islam, Egalitarianism and the Individual in Bengali Muslim Literary Praxis**

The Pakistan movement in Bengal has been typically understood in terms of the failure of class mobilization in the 1920s and the subsequent triumph of religious-communal consciousness among the Bengali Muslims. Existing historical scholarship has viewed the demand for Pakistan as a parochial and communal demand.<sup>186</sup> But archives bearing records of the literary-cultural activism of Bengali Pakistanism bring to light a completely different picture – the demand for Pakistan was hailed as a revolutionary movement, a people’s movement which, far from being parochial, sectional, or communal, was seen to be a blow to imperialist tendencies that inhered within nationalism. Indeed, for Bengali Muslim cultural activists and littérateurs, the idea of Pakistan implied a more robust variety of nationalism – one committed to diversity, redistributive justice, and conducive to the flowering of myriad forms of self-expression. This chapter attempts to show how a subjectivity that could inhabit the Pakistan movement as a non-sectarian, “people’s movement” in the 1940s was historically instantiated.

#### **Literary Separatism and Non-sectarian Nationalism: A paradox of Bengali Muslim Culture**

The fifth meeting of the Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Sammelan (Bengali Muslim Literary Conference) was held in Albert Hall, Calcutta in 1932. It was a three-day long affair

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<sup>186</sup> See the scholarship of Taj-ul Islam Hashmi, *Pakistan as a Peasant’s Utopia: Communalization of Class in Bengal, 1920-1947* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992) and the final chapter of Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengali Muslims, 1871-1906: The Quest for Identity* (London: Oxford University Press, 1988).

featuring most of the prominent Bengali Muslim litterateurs, journalists, and intellectuals, as well as aspiring writers and educationists from far-flung mofussil towns. In 1932, for the first time in the history of the Bengali Muslim Literary Conference, the presence of key members of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad (Bengal's Literary Association) was noticeable. One reason for this could be the fact that the 1932 meet was happening in Calcutta, the home city of the Parishad, whereas earlier such meetings were held in places such as Chattagram in Eastern Bengal, and Bashirhat in North 24 Parganas. But the enthusiasm of the Parishad members cannot be adequately explained by the proximity of the conference venue alone, for Bengali Muslim Literary Conferences were held in Calcutta twice before – for the first time in 1914, and then once again in 1925.

In providing a very brief gloss on the Parishad, suffice it to say that in 1872 John Beams had proposed the institution of a Bengali Academy of Literature in order to consolidate the Bengali language into a “literary language” to make it at par with “other European languages”. The academy was set up in 1893 and renamed Bangiya Sahitya Parishad in 1894.<sup>187</sup> The Parishad was committed to the project of forging a coherent national/linguistic identity. An avowed purpose of the Parishad was to reconstruct a history for the Bengalis through the building of a Bengali literary canon by recovering texts, archiving them, and disseminating them through publications. The importance of this institution cannot be overstated, for not only did it quickly evolve into a key site that

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<sup>187</sup> Gautam Bhadra and Deepa De, ‘Chintar Chalachitra: Bangiya Sahitya Parishat (BS1300-1330)’, *Sahitya Parisat Patrika* (BS 1401-2), reprinted *Ababhas*, 2, (April, 2002), pp. 41- 43.

mediated the emergence of national consciousness in Bengal,<sup>188</sup> it was the model after which, in 1911, the Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti (Bengali Muslim Literary Association) was established with the express agenda of “cultivating learning and debate about Bangla literature among the Muslims of Bengal”, “translating important historical and religious texts from Arabic, Persian, and Urdu into Bengali”, “recovering and archiving the history of literary production by Muslims in Bengal”, “publishing periodicals suitable for the Bengali Muslim society”, “the fostering of communal amity between Hindus and Muslims in the sphere of literature” and “encouraging all the key literary figures of Bengal to become its members”.<sup>189</sup>

To return to the year 1932, the day after the fifth meet of the Bengali Muslim Literary Conference ended, its chairs and organizers were invited by the Parishad members to visit the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Bhavan, which they did, and were warmly greeted at the door. Abul Kalam Shamsuddin, a journalist, recounts how they were escorted to the hall on the second floor of the Bhavan along a staircase on both sides of which hung large, impressive oil paintings of writers and poets from the past and present who were supposed to have shaped the course of Bengali literature. Shamsuddin also recounts the pain of having noticed only one Muslim litterateur displayed in the Parishad’s stairway gallery – that of Mir Mosharaff Hossain, the author of the novel *Bishad Sindhu* (*Sea of Sorrows*). Abul Kalam Shamsuddin tells us how the Parishad members began with showering great praise for the Bengali Muslim Literary Conference

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<sup>188</sup> See Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>189</sup> See S. Wajed Ali, *Sabhapatir Abhibhasana* (Presidential Address at the fifth annual meeting of the Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti), 1925.

and then, ultimately, pleaded the conference organizers and members to co-operate with the endeavors of the Bangiya Sahitya Parisad (Bengal's Literary Association) and join the institution, at which point Abul Hussain – a professor of Dhaka University, a founder of the Muslim Sahitya Samaj, (Muslim Literary Society) a prolific writer, polemicist, and public intellectual of sorts – made a speech in response, defending the need for a separate space for the development of Bengali Muslim literature.<sup>190</sup> The text of this speech was published in the journal *Navya Bharat* in 1933 under the heading “*Sahitye Swatantra*” or “Autonomy in Literature”.

The proposal to merge with the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad was first raised in the Bengali Muslim Literary Conference by the chemist, academic, and entrepreneur, P.C Ray, and later seconded by other Parishad members. Responding to implicit charges of separatism in the sphere of literary activities, couched though they were in the language of invitation and harmony, Abul Hussain furnished several arguments for the Bengali Muslim community's need to maintain a separate space for the development of Bengali literature. What made this defense of Bengali Muslim autonomy, or “separatism”, in the sphere of literary or broadly cultural productions striking was that Hussain had, in the previous year (1931), forcefully argued against the institution of separate electorates (self-contained electoral constituencies) for Muslims in the political sphere. At a gathering of Bengali Muslim intellectuals at Dhaka University's Muslim Sahitya Samaj, Abul Hussain denounced the protectionism inherent in separate electorates as essentially enervating the Muslim community, making it dependent on institutional concessions won

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<sup>190</sup> Mohammed Mehfoozullah (ed.) *Abul Kalam Shamshuddin Rachanabali*, Vol. 2 (Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1994), pp. 113-120.

from the British. He allayed fears of Hindu majoritarianism at an all-India level by stating that the power to govern was not a function of numbers, but a matter of intellect, knowledge, and strength of character by which one could govern oneself. According to him, since modernity privileged *ganashakti* or “people’s power” as the life of the state, sovereignty had been parceled out to individuals. He wrote:

The state is an expression of *the people*, and thus government is accountable to them and has to heed their advice on how to govern, and in this regime of power, since the people are participants in their own governance, the ‘greater personality of the individual’ (*brihattara bektitva*) is realized.<sup>191</sup>

Joint electorates, he argued, would routinely create situations where candidates would have to seek votes from the people, not from Muslims or Hindus, and the voter would learn to exercise his judgment on what is good or bad and in so doing he would train and develop his own intellect and personality. This development of the voter’s individuality, he claimed, “is the most instructive part of elections.”<sup>192</sup>

And yet, if joint electorates were, in Hussain’s assessment, desirable and worthy of welcome, why was he so quick to decline the Parishad’s overtures of a shared literary institution? According to him:

There are some community-specific problems, for instance, the state of madrasa education, the mode of transmitting Koran and Hadith, as well as sundry other social problems. Hindus would not venture to take a public stand on these matters. Our young (Muslim) writers are engaged in vigorous discussions on the issue. ... Literature is a matter of feelings. In a specific kind of environment feelings (*anubhuti*) can be concentrated. By channelizing those feelings, our community’s

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<sup>191</sup> Abul Hussain, ‘Amader Rajniti’, in Abdul Quadir (ed.) *Abul Hussain-er Rachanabali*, Vol. 1 (Tajul Islam, Barnamicchil, Dhaka, 1979), p 180. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 187.

problems could be solved. So we need a specific kind of environment, a separate institution. If we merge with you, our feelings will not be activated.<sup>193</sup>

What we see emerging is a vision of the individual as a locus of feelings (*anubhuti*), in that sense, for Abul Hussain, the argument for separateness in literary activity was an argument in favor of training individuality, just as voting in joint electorates was. But this individuality, as an active literary cultivation of the self, required a specific environment – a sense of being embedded in a culture. Where *ganashakti* or “people’s power” was the touchstone of political sovereignty, “people” was defined by the ineffable and abstractly equal capacity of each individual for autonomy or free choice. The “people” thus represented an ideal, a vision of individual autonomy, rationality, and choice that stood apart from the social bonds that constituted “society”. In this scheme of things, separate electorates as state-given concessions marked precisely those social bonds that prevented the exercise of autonomy, rationality and free choice. But the real training ground for the ‘enchanted self’ – the fount of rationality, autonomy and free choice – was seen to be in the cultivation of literature and culture, or more precisely it was in forging a subjectivity that inhabited “Muslim culture” in the best sense of the phrase, as he understood it. Hussain wrote several treatises on Muslim culture – notable among these were essays titled “*Muslim Kalcar*” (Muslim Culture), “*Muslim Kalcar’er Dhara*” (The Path of Muslim Kalcar), and “*Muslim Kalcar O Tar Darshanic Bhatti*” (The Philosophical Foundation of Muslim Culture). In “*Muslim Kalcar*” he writes, “modern Europe is indebted to Islam for its cultural achievements. Enlightened Europe did not gain much

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<sup>193</sup> Abul Hussain, ‘Shahitye Swatantra’ in Abdul Quadir (ed.) *Abul Hussain-er Rachanabali*, Vol.1, p. 320.



from the church. In the hands of the church, the learned were oppressed, tortured, and burnt at the stakes”. Also, for him it is telling that:

Western nations expanded their mental horizons by divorcing themselves from religion. But for the Muslims, the reverse is true. In shunning religion they became blind and superstitious. The truth is that prior to the advent of Islam, openness (*oaudarjo*) was never preached as an essential part of religion.<sup>194</sup>

In the manner of Hussain, several Bengali Muslim writers from the 1920s onward tried to forge a representation of Muslim culture that was inherently rational, open, and devoted to redistributive justice.

Interestingly, while in the sphere of political and social activism figures such as Akram Khan, Muzaffar Ahmed, Nazrul Islam, Abul Hussain were of vastly differing stripes ranging from the religious reformist-Muslim Leaguer (Akram Khan) to the avowed communist-Communist Party of India founder member (Muzaffar Ahmed), with varying and often conflicting views on social and political questions, all of them converged on the need for a separate literary space (in terms of associations and institutions) for Bengali Muslims. And collectively they redefined Muslim culture in ways that could be made congruous with current ideas about political sovereignty whose source was the “people”.

Joya Chatterjee’s work has shown how in the context of reacting to what was seen as the unfair arrangement put forth by the Communal Award (1932) in which of the 250 seats in the proposed Bengal Legislative Assembly, 80 seats were given to Hindus and 119 to Muslims, *bhadraloks*’s (the Hindu genteel class’s) self-perception of being a

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<sup>194</sup> Abul Hussain, *Muslim Kalcar*, (Modern Library, Dhaka, 1928), p. 70.

cultured elite acquired new significance.<sup>195</sup> Among many such memorials submitted to the Government, one widely read memorial forwarded by the Raja of Burdwan and signed by the good and great of Bengal including Rabindranath Tagore, the novelist Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, the philosopher Brajendranath Seal, and the chemist-entrepreneur academic P.C Roy (who in 1932 had proposed the merger of the Bengali Muslim Literary Association with the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad) drew Governor Zetland's attention to:

The enormous predominant part (the Hindus of Bengal) ... have played under the British in the intellectual, the cultural, the political, the professional, and the commercial life of the province ... The Hindus of Bengal, though numerically a minority, are overwhelmingly superior culturally, constituting as much as 64 per cent of the literate population ... while their economic preponderance is equally manifest in the spheres of independent professions.<sup>196</sup>

The memorialists to Lord Zetland also “begged leave” to make the claim that “the Hindus of Bengal, though numerically a minority, are overwhelmingly culturally superior”. The argument was that the cultural superiority of the Hindus more than outweighed the numerical majority of the “backward” Muslims and entitled Hindus to a share of power in the Provincial Assembly far in excess of their numbers. Thus putative cultural superiority was the central idiom of *bhadralok* communalism, which ostensibly justified the demands of a minority elite for political power in an era of expanding mass franchise and majority rule. Not only was this argument an explicit rejection of democratic principles, it bore a striking resemblance to British legitimations of colonialism, which argued that racial superiority made Britons more “fit” to rule India than Indians themselves. Thus,

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<sup>195</sup> Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 18-54.

<sup>196</sup> Letter to Lord Zetland, June 4, 1936, quoted in Joya Chatterjee, *Bengal Divided*, p. 28.

beginning in the 1920s, Hindu discontent with the Bengal Pact, proposed by C.R Das, arose from the perception that Muslims were being massively over-represented in the Provincial Council (under dyarchy) as well as in government employment, and the intensification of this discontent in the post-Communal Award phase in the 1930s, were expressed as arguments for greater share in political power in ways which constantly veered away from ideas of popular sovereignty, people's mandate, democratic principles. These were arguments in favor of making political power a function of superiority in the sphere of culture, intellect, and acumen for commercial activity. In some ways, this was a throwback to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century presuppositions about political representation as evinced in the thought and writings of the likes of prominent Muslim public personalities such as Ameer Ali and Nawab Abdul Latif (discussed in chapter 2). But within the Bengali Muslim community, by the 1920s, such premises were becoming increasingly untenable as legitimate prerequisites for political representation.

Bengali Muslim literary production from the 1920s on, increasingly enabled the creation of subjectivities that could inhabit the enchanted idea of “the people” with great vigor. The idea of the “people” as it came to be instantiated in Bengali Muslim imagination can be seen as an effect of two broadly defined strands of thought operating within society – one, the Ahl-i Hadis style normative reformist tradition, exemplified by influential figures such as Akram Khan who emphasized going back to the Koran and the hadith – the “original text” – and doing away with mediation of commentaries, exegesis and hand-holding *pirs* (spiritual guides). In his essay “Back to the Koran”, he stated in no uncertain terms that it was heart-rending that to become a *maulavi* did not require a thorough study of the Koran, and even those who considered themselves learned in

Islamic theology, were more familiar with texts such as *Jaygun Hanifa* (an eighteenth century Bengali romance) than with the Koran. “In our society” he asked, “how many *maulavis* are able to say with sincerity that their study of the Koran is a tenth of their study of jurisprudence... and the principles of the jurisprudence?”<sup>197</sup> Cutting out mediation (of *pirs* or *fiqh*) presupposed an individual with the capacity to read and understand, thereby extricating the individual from the social within which he/she was embedded, and empowering the individual with an ineffable essence via which one could get to truth by protecting reason from the corrupting influence of “society”. The other strand was relatively novel, that of apocalyptic poetry and prose combining the trope of revolution with unfettered individualism in Nazrul Islam’s avant-garde literary experiments of the early 1920s. This image of revolution was inspired by socialism, emerging hot in the heels of the Bolshevik revolution, but it also pointed, no less fundamentally, to a personal liberation of the individual. In some ways, Nazrul remained a liminal figure around whom contrary camps formed amongst the Bengali Muslim literati and reading public. Yet, the debates which took place about the value of Nazrul’s work can be read for the visions of “Muslim culture” that were at stake. I will discuss his works, the debates they spawned and his dwellings on the fringes of leftist politics as well as Muslim society in the subsequent section to trace a long history of subjectivity that materialized as the effect of his kind of literary practice. It is the argument of this chapter that Nazrul’s literary practice inaugurated a subjectivity among the Bengali Muslim literati that could inhabit Pakistan as a revolutionary movement, a people’s movement,

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<sup>197</sup> Akram Khan, ‘Back to the Koran’ (1929) as quoted in Sufia M. Uddin, *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), p. 109.

and thus combat allegations of communalism, parochialism, and separatism. In effect, left-minded intellectuals were drawn to the movement and spoke in its favor. What made this possible, I argue, was the specific way in which Islam, individualism, and communism/socialism/egalitarianism were conjoined in Nazrul's literary oeuvre, which spanned the two decades that preceded the Pakistan movement.

In 1943, Abul Mansur Ahmed, the *praja* (tenant movement) activist, writer, and at the time a Muslim Leaguer, a key mouthpiece of the Pakistan demand in the 1940s published an essay titled "*Pakistan-er Biplobi Bhumika*" or "Pakistan's Revolutionary Role" in the journal *Mohammadi*. This essay is telling in the way in which communism and individualism are made reconcilable, a maneuver that was key to articulating claims of Pakistan as a revolutionary, anti-imperialist movement, but a revolution compatible with liberal democracy style popular mandate. Abul Mansur is a particularly interesting character because for a long time he remained skeptical of the Pakistan movement, viewing it as communal, and was suspicious of the Muslim League and especially of Jinnah. This in spite of the fact that the leftist M.N Roy had already expressed his sympathy for the cause of Pakistan, visited the gatherings of the East Pakistan Renaissance Society (EPRS) (an organization set up as a cultural wing of the Pakistan movement in Bengal), and other non-Muslim communists such as Bankim Mukherjee, Somnath Sarkar, Gopal Halder and Anil Kanjilal followed suit in establishing relationships of camaraderie with the EPRS.<sup>198</sup> When two founder members of the EPRS, Mujibur Rahman and Abul Kalam Shamsuddin, visited Abul Mansur in his Calcutta

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<sup>198</sup> Mohammed Mehrezullah (ed.) *Abul Kalam Shamsuddin Rachanabali*, Vol 2 (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1994), p. 364.

residence to discuss the possibility of his joining the EPRS, he politely turned them away. But soon enough he was there at the EPRS office.<sup>199</sup> Abul Mansur's essay "Pakistan's Revolutionary Role" is possibly a good entry point into working out the reason for this change of heart, as it were.

In the essay Abul Mansur made an important analytical distinction between the *origins* of the Pakistan movement and its *potential*. The origin, he averred, was from "a clash of *bhadralok* Hindus and *bhadralok* Muslims" that stemmed from their inability to agree on a satisfactory power-sharing arrangement. In that sense, the origin was "reactionary", lowly – essentially a "conflict of ruling interests". Yet notwithstanding the origins, he emphasized, the conflict had the potential to unsettle status quo and "lead us (*sic*) along the revolutionary road". According to him, socialist elements within the Congress Party had completely failed to challenge the imperialist-fascist tendencies that inhered within the idea of "*Akhanda Bharat*" or "Undivided India" which the Congress bandied about as synonymous with "nationalism". Only the idea of Pakistan had successfully shaken up the foundations of that imperialism. The idea of "*Akhanda Bharat*" was fascist in the same way as the colonizers and dictators were, in that it demanded the creation of individuals who were uniform, not individuals who were *equal but different*. To quote him:

Are the expressions of individuality uniform or multiform? That is the conflict between fascism and democracy. This is also the difference between the all-powerful Allah and the all-powerful dictator. Allah has not created uniformity, but a strange, beautiful world and variegated humankind (*adam jati*). The dictator

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<sup>199</sup> Mohammed Mehfuzullah (ed.) *Abul Kalam Shamsuddin Rachanabali*, Vol 2, p. 364. Mansur Ahmed's meeting with Mujibur Rahman and Abul Kalam Shamsuddin are described from pp. 368-377.

wants to break this multiform-ness and cast the world in monochrome. The dictator wants to recast the world in his own image, in the image of his liking. Thus, this uniformity is only external, a superficial thing. The difference is between “like me” and “equal to me” – there’s a big difference between the two. The aim of the dictator is not equality but uniformity – in short, an institution of copies, which is another name for an institution of *ghulami* (slavery).

Like the creation of Allah, democracy allows multiform individualism to flourish. In this variety, it seeks to build unity, equality, and brotherhood. Lack of democracy has affected both the material and spiritual dimensions of humanity. So we see that the dictator or the imperialists have not merely seized the lands of people, but also tried to destroy the homes of their minds. They steal material goods and thought commodities (*bhav panno*) brought on the ship called “civilization” and sold as “education”. This process has ensured that imperialism has not only destroyed artisanal skills but also destroyed culture or *tamaddun*. The greater the spread of imperialism, the more it destroys the multiform, the heterogeneous, and the varied forms of Khuda’s creations. Possibilities of self-creation and self-expression have been constricted.<sup>200</sup>

For Abul Mansur, the idea of Pakistan was a challenge to the fascist drive toward uniformity that killed self-expression and individual fulfillment. According to him, the idea of Pakistan not only had the potential to restore the natural order of variegated splendor with which Allah had endowed the world, it also resembled the ultimate aim of communism, which contrary to what its detractors believed, was actually the flowering of multiform and variegated self-expressions by ensuring that the pre-requisite for self-fulfillment was the equality of wealth. He insisted that Marxists such as Lenin and Stalin had made the concept of patriotism – a Congress boogie – useless. Stalin, who Mansur Ahmed addressed as “comrade” had, in his opinion, build a huge conglomerate comprising parts of both Asia and Europe within which every culture had a right to self-expression. The Pakistan movement, he declared, was revolutionary in that it was a hammer that struck hard at the heart of imperialist tendencies inherent within the idea of

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<sup>200</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed, ‘Pakistan-er Biplobi Bhumika’ (Pakistan’s Revolutionary Role) in Sardar Fazlul Karim (ed.) *Pakistan Andolan O Muslim Sahitya* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1968), pp. 72-73.

“*Akhanda Bharat*” (Undivided India), and would ensure that *Bharatvarsha* emerged as a federated socialist conglomerate. In his own words:

It (Pakistan) *is not a communal demand* of 10 crore Muslims – it is a national demand of religious, cultural, and geographical minorities (a minority co-operative). It has raised hopes of self-determination in the hearts of the neglected and the oppressed, by giving them the slogan of *azadi*. In relation to revolution, this is Pakistan – it is not a revolutionary state, but a revolution in thought. The outcome of this revolution has to be beautiful. On the remains of Akhanda Bharat, will be born a Bharat of new aspirations and heterogeneity. In this bouquet will thrive many- colored cultures, civilizations, and literatures.<sup>201</sup>

Well before Abul Mansur had joined the East Pakistan Renaissance Society (EPRS), the Society’s manifesto had declared that one of its primary aims was to counter

“reactionary, and fascist anti-Pakistan trends in literature”. In addition, the manifesto

mentioned the need to create a literature that could bring about Hindu-Muslim harmony

via an internationalist perspective, even though the precise meaning and context of that

internationalism remained unexplained.<sup>202</sup> EPRS spoke in a language that was

“progressive” and “non-sectarian”, and in its second major conference hosted at Islamia

College Hall, Calcutta, in 1944, the sessions on Political Science and Folk Literature

were chaired by non-Muslims, Professor Sushobhan Sarkar and Manoranjan

Bhattacharya, respectively. For the cultural program of the conference, the organizers

toured remote villages in the districts of Sylhet, Rangpur, Mymensingh, Comilla, and

Chattagram scouting for folk performers who could showcase their talent through

performances of *jari gan*, *shari gan*, *bhatiyali*, *bhavaiyya*, *marfati* and *punthi path*.<sup>203</sup> The

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<sup>201</sup> Sardar Fazlul Karim (ed.) *Pakistan Andolan O Muslim Sahitya* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1968), p. 78.

<sup>202</sup> Mohammed Mehfoozullah (ed.) *Abul Kalam Shamsuddin Rachanabali*, Vol. 2 (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1994), p. 363.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 373.



literary-cultural energies for East Pakistan would not be marshaled from the city-based literati alone, but also from the myriad folk-oral traditions that were well and alive in the countryside, or so was the claim.

In every way “*tamaddun*” (an Urdu word which the EPRS and Abul Mansur consciously employed to designate “culture”) was made congruous with the idea of “the people”, with “democracy”, and “*samyavad*” (used loosely to designate egalitarianism, communism, and socialism). Individuals who were committed to the ideology of Pakistanism – whether Muslim or not – were welcome to associate and exchange views. In a crucial sense, their individuality was abstracted from social groups as it were - of “caste”, “religion”, “village”, etc - that the British saw as the organizing principles of Indian polity. Very importantly, this association of individuals coming together as a “people” was made to closely approximate the natural order decreed by Allah. Thus the literati’s demand for Pakistan as “*tamadduni azadi*” or “cultural freedom” was put forth as a universal vision, not a sectional, particular, or narrowly partisan one.

What was unique though about the literary-cultural activism devoted to the ideology of Pakistanism in Bengal was that this universal vision was arrived at through a dialectical process, at the interplay of two quite distinct understandings of the universal – the first, where individuals abstracted from their moorings in social particularities could come together as a nation through their commitment to an idea – namely, Pakistan, and the second, where a commitment to universality – a vision of Pakistan where members of all communities would be accorded equal dignity and rights – was rooted in the particularity of the “spirit of Islam”, and did not, in principal, require the erasure of this particularity but a realization of its nature. Abul Mansur, in a widely publicized address,

delivered in the EPRS in 1944, stated in no uncertain terms that the spirit of Islam was “*Huq-Insaf*” (truth and justice), “*adhikar o samya*” (rights and equality).<sup>204</sup> Thus for him, “(Pakistan) (*was*) *not a communal demand* of 10 crore Muslims – it (was) a national demand of religious, cultural, and geographical minorities (a minority co-operative).”

At the peak of the Pakistan movement, the East Pakistan Renaissance Society declared Nazrul Islam as its cultural icon, the “national poet” of the soon-to-be-attained East Pakistan, and the first modern poet whose works, in capturing this distinctive Islamic sensibility oriented to rights and redistributive justice, resonated with the Muslims of Bengal in a way the “highly developed literature” of Tagore could not.<sup>205</sup> According to the literary figures associated with the EPRS, Tagore’s vision was essentially other-worldly, devotional, and renunciatory, born as it were from the “essence” of Hindu dharma which valued “*bairagya*”, “*tyaga*”, and “*bhaktivad*”, while the “spirit of Islam” was this-worldly, action-oriented, and committed to social justice. The credo “art for art’s sake” was firmly rejected by the EPRS; art, it was asserted, was for society. To explain what society and justice-oriented literature precisely meant, the figure of the woman was taken up as an instructive example. Bengali Hindu literature, it was claimed, was populated with images of women who were either celebrated as exemplary devotees (for instance, the figure of Radha) or imagined as mysterious cities (*rahasyapuri*) whose ways and wiles the poet could never discover. Bengali literature, driven as it was by a Hindu aesthetic impulse, it was said, worshipped the widow as a *sati*

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<sup>204</sup> Abul Mansur Ahmed, ‘Mul Sabhapatir Abhibhashan’ delivered in 1944 as reproduced in Sardar Fazlul Karim (ed.) *Pakistan Andolan O Muslim Sahitya* (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1968), p. 147.

<sup>205</sup> See Sardar Fazlul Karim (ed.) *Pakistan Andolan O Muslim Sahitya*.

and a *devi*. But in the literature of East Pakistan, the woman would not be worshipped as a *devi* (goddess) but represented as a *manabi* (a female human), the widow would not be revered as a *sati*, but respected as a human being whose property rights had to be secured, and the woman's heart (*nari mon*) was not to be won by navigating her wily and mysterious ways but by ensuring equality that was rightfully due to her.<sup>206</sup>

Although Nazrul Islam was held up as the literary icon of cultural autonomy (*tamadduni azadi*), which was the key demand of the literary-cultural politics of the Pakistan movement, in the 1920s when the maverick author-poet-singer shot to fame and notoriety, he was a deeply divisive figure. He evoked vastly contradictory responses from the Bengali Muslim literati and reading public – embraced as a “Mussalman” (Muslim) by some and denounced as a “Shaitan” (Satan) by others. He was known as the rebel poet, the iconoclast, and remained the object of suspicion for the British government. As late as 1941, a secret file of the Government of Bengal noted that his book *Yugavani*,

Breathes bitter racial hatred directly against the British, preaches revolt against the existing administration in the country and abuses in very strong language ‘the slave-minded Indians’ who uphold the administration. Three articles – “Memorial to Dyer”, “Who was responsible for the massacre?” and “Shooting the Black Men” are especially objectionable. I don’t think it would be advisable to remove the ban on this book in the present crisis. On the whole it is a dangerous book, forceful and vindictive.<sup>207</sup>

But in 1942, the very year that the East Pakistan Renaissance Society was instituted, Nazrul had begun to show severe signs of physical affliction. He lost his mental balance, his voice, and slipped rapidly into amnesia. His condition was diagnosed as “advanced

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<sup>206</sup> Sardar Fazlul Karim (ed.) *Pakistan Andolan O Muslim Sahitya*, pp. 147-148.

<sup>207</sup> As cited in Arun Kumar Basu's *Nazrul Jeevani*, (Calcutta, 2000), p. 437.

organic dementia, with loss of speech, agitation, and uncontrolled personal habits.”<sup>208</sup>

Henceforth, he would completely disappear from public life. During the time that the Pakistan movement peaked in Bengal, he was languishing in a mental asylum, somewhat forgotten and unattended. Later in post-colonial East Pakistan, during Ayub Khan’s regime, the government set up a Nazrul Academy in Dhaka whose objective was to present Nazrul as a “Muslim nationalist” who had worked to promote the “culture and integrity of Pakistan on the basis of Islamic traditions and heritage.” In 1970, Yahya Khan was invited by the Academy to preside over Nazrul’s birth anniversary where he sought to establish Nazrul as the father of Pakistani nationalism in East Pakistan. Bengali Marxists of erstwhile East Pakistan led by Badruddin Umar reacted sharply to such efforts of appropriating Nazrul to narrow, state-sponsored ends, much in the manner in which they had along with such intellectuals such as Abul Mansur opposed the ban on the broadcast of Tagore’s songs from Radio Pakistan that followed in the wake of the Indo-Pak war of 1965.<sup>209</sup>

It is not that Nazrul – an iconoclast, whose very self-fashioning was a rebellion (*bidhroho*) against bigotry and political orthodoxies of all sorts – was the literary progenitor of the Pakistan movement in some narrow sectarian sense. Far from it, his poetry gave expression to an energetic, unfettered individualism that refused to be bound up under neat little labels. In his own words:

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<sup>208</sup> As cited in Arun Kumar Basu’s *Nazrul Jeevani*, (Calcutta, 2000), pp. 522-523. Medical Report.

<sup>209</sup> Sajal Nag, ‘Two Nations and a Dead Body: Mortuarial Rights and Post-colonial Modes of Nation-Making in South Asia’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 41, no. 50, Dec 16-22, 2006), p. 5188.

New troops of “non-violents”, “non-cos” are cross with me  
 “Violin of violence” – its radical they feel.  
 “Moderate” - extremists say the *charkha* song give it away  
 The pious find me agnostic, Confucian rest decree!  
 Swarajis feel I oppose them, the others too feel uneasy!  
 Men believe I close on women, women accuse of misogyny!  
 “Been to *billet* ? Never?” the friend abroad is aghast with me!  
 New Age Rabi, devotees say!  
 Age or rage, poet of the day  
 I stretch my lungs and think, well,  
 That sure becomes me!  
 Slept with my glasses on, much longer, more soundly.<sup>210</sup>

In the following section, I shall argue that he pioneered and *made available* a literary sensibility that combined individualism with socialism, personal liberation with an egalitarian ethos, which in *effect* created a subjectivity, a mode of being that could be inhabited by cultural activists and writers who were cultural spokespersons of the Pakistan demand in Bengal. And this sensibility, in turn, was crucial to making the claim that Pakistan -- far from being sectarian, communal, or separatist - was indeed a “people’s” movement.

### **The Poetics of Samyavad and the Politics of Self-expression**

Nazrul’s short story “*Byathar Daan*” (“The Gift of Pain”), published in the tri-monthly periodical *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika* in 1919, was most likely his first piece of writing to appear in print. At the time of its publication, Nazrul, a *havildar* in the 49<sup>th</sup> Bengal Regiment was posted in Karachi, where his life in the army lasted roughly a year and a half – from the end of 1917 to March 1920. All the way from Karachi he had mailed his story to Muzaffar Ahmed, the assistant editor of the *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika* (Bengali Muslim Literary Magazine) who would later, upon Nazrul’s

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<sup>210</sup> Nazrul as translated by Rajarshree Dasgupta in ‘Rhyming Revolution: Marxism and Culture in Colonial Bengal’, in *Studies in History*, vol 21, no. 1 (2005), pp. 83-84.

return to Calcutta after the disbanding of the regiment, become his close friend, roommate, co-editor and interlocutor.

Although the manuscript of “*Byathar Daan*” reached the periodical’s office in 1918, the story would not see light of day in print until the following year. Since the periodical did not have a fixed press, the editorial board decided that it would print the December issue (in which Nazrul’s short story was to be carried) from India Press located in Middle Road, Entally, which also printed a journal titled *Grihasta* run by the well-known nationalist, Benoy Kumar Sarkar. With the manuscript of the issue, Muzaffar Ahmed met with Ramrakhal Ghose, the owner of India Press. At the time, it was customary for a press to minutely scrutinize the contents of the entire manuscript before agreeing to print it, primarily to ensure that the press was not endangering its own existence in any way by printing what in government parlance would be classified “seditious material”. After combing the contents of the manuscript, which Ahmed had submitted for printing, the owner of the press politely returned it, congratulating the young assistant editor of the *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika* (BMSP) on the energetic patriotism of the short story “*Byathar Daan*” but declining the request to print it on the pretext of police surveillance on his press for its association with the revolutionary terrorist, Benoy Kumar Sarkar’s journal. Yet Ahmed, convinced of the merit of Nazrul’s writing would remain persistent in his efforts at getting it published.<sup>211</sup>

Ahmed’s persistence would finally be rewarded, but not before he had made a critical editorial decision, imposed a censorship of sorts, made an elision that would stick

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<sup>211</sup> See Muzaffar Ahmed, *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Smritikatha* (Calcutta, 1965).

stubbornly to “*Byathar Daan*” through its life in many reprints - in anthologies, collected works, and omnibuses. After a good forty-nine years from the time it first appeared in print, Ahmed in his book *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Smritikatha* (1965) – part reminiscence of his friendship with Nazrul, and in part his own assessment of the socio-historical import of the poet’s life and works – made clean breast of the editorial censorship he had imposed upon the story. He urged subsequent editors and publishers to return to “*Byathar Daan*” the two words from Nazrul’s original manuscript that he had made disappear with a proverbial scratch of the editorial pen. The words were “Lal Fauj” or “Red Army”. In the story, Ahmed had changed Lal Fauj to Mukti Sevak Sainna Dal (Army in Service of Freedom).

Yet the work is not centrally about the Red Army or incitement to revolutionary activity; far from it, “*Byathar Daan*” is ostensibly a love story with a pair of pining lovers, circumstances that tear them apart, their all-consuming desire to be reunited, the pain of separation, the heroine’s self-perceived sense of moral failing at having “cheated” on her lover, lyrical laments bordering on the maudlin, and the failure of union when the opportunity presents itself. It is a collage of first person narratives from three different voices – the protagonist Dara, who wanders half-crazed across Balochistan and Afghanistan looking for his lost lover; his ladylove Bedaura, who in waiting for Dara falters, as it were, and overtaken by sexual urges succumbs to the advances of one Saiful Mulk; and finally, Saiful who on witnessing the sufferings and moral dilemmas he has inflicted on the lovers, upon Dara’s return, is struck with great remorse and regret. Pangs of conscience lead Saiful to wander off to a far off place where he joins the Mukti Sevak Sainna Dal (The Army in Service of Freedom; the Red Army/Lal Fauj in Nazrul’s

original manuscript). He is at once amazed by how they embrace a foreigner like him and filled with admiration at the ways in which “ their great selfless desire is shoring up strength in the recesses of the universe”.<sup>212</sup> In recognizing the army’s unbeatable will “to fight for the oppressed”, he becomes “one in a great collective of individuals (*byektisangha*)” – an act which assuages his personal guilt.<sup>213</sup> Soon he discovers that Dara, pained by the Bedaura’s inconstancy, has also driven himself to this distant land and joined the Mukti Sevaks. He has been fighting courageously, if somewhat recklessly, with guns, grenades, and bombs, without sparing a thought for his own safety. His recklessness, ultimately, results in blindness when splinters from a grenade enter his eyes. Finally, he has to retire from the army. In bidding farewell to the valiant Dara, the commander-in-chief of the Mukti Sevaks says, “Khuda is great and good deeds shall be rewarded!” – this is a saying from your very own Koran. O valiant soldier, perhaps in the depth of your physical blindness sleeps a restful peace. May peace be upon you!”<sup>214</sup> The blind Dara returns to Gulistan where Bedaura still awaits him. In his blindness, he has achieved the gift of forgiveness – toward both Saiful Mulk and Bedaura. In his loss of sight, Dara has achieved a vision – a vision of love that is unselfish, beyond the body. Unsurprisingly, he expresses this newfound vision in the text with song lines of Tagore’s composition:

If you love another, if you do not return,  
Still, may all you desire be granted to you,  
May a world of sorrows be granted to me!

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<sup>212</sup> *Kazi Nazrul Islam Rachanasamagra*, Vol. 1 (Kolkata: Pashchimbanga Bangla Academy, 2005), p. 258.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 259.



For you are who I desire, you are all I have in this world.<sup>215</sup>

He returns to Gulistan to tell Bedaura that he is convinced of the purity of her love – a purity untouched by all outward action – but refuses union with her, choosing to retire to the other side of the waterfall by which she lives. On another side, Bedaura carries on with her life, bearing their separation as a gift of pain (*byathar daan*) from Dara.

“*Byathar Daan*” was a particularly significant work of Bengali Muslim literary modernity primarily because it inaugurated the practice of effecting abstraction in a manner that would transmit itself into a distinctly new mode of politics, and become the hallmark of the literary-cultural politics of Bengali Pakistanism as espoused by institutions such as the East Pakistan Literary Society in the 1940s. In “*Byathar Daan*”, at the heart of Dara’s judgment of the purity of Bedaura’s love, despite her outward actions, lay a conceptualization of personhood whose meaning and worth derived from intentions and feelings located firmly in the internal realm, and abstracted, as it were, from the social in which she/he operates. In being represented thus, that this interiority gave the woman a degree of autonomy vis-à-vis society was not unimportant. Its legacy would impact the literary-cultural activism of the Pakistan movement in Bengal by creating the conditions of possibility for upholding the “*manabi*” (the female human) as an equal claimant to the nation of East Pakistan.

Now to return to the curious life of *Byathar Daan* in print: though the appearance of the Mukti Sevaks occurs somewhat briefly in the story and features in rather general terms without specifying where the battle is happening or against what kind of

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<sup>215</sup> *Kazi Nazrul Islam Rachanasamagra*, Vol. 1, p. 260.

oppressors, it is hardly surprising that Muzaffar Ahmed would anticipate the extent of alarm which a mention of “*Lal Fauj*” (Red Army) in print would raise in government circles. In the colonial Indian state, anti-Bolshevik surveillance networks were already in place by the 1919, and their institution could be traced back to the closing years of the First World War, even though it was not until 1921 that the Bolsheviks were actually trying to send back *ex-muhajirs* and other emissaries into India to organize and establish contacts with networks sympathetic to communist ideas. As Suchetana Chattopadhyay has pointed out, high-powered inter-departmental committees were put in place in India, British Conservatives as a whole, and Churchill in particular ensured that significant financial resources were mobilized to combat the “Bolshevik Menace” in the British Empire. In Bengal, P.C Bramford was appointed to the new post of the “Anti-Bolshevik Officer” created to monitor suspicious activities at a provincial level. He ordered special surveillance in the industrial suburbs of Calcutta, and his query on methods of keeping watch were circulated in the districts of Hooghly, 24 Parganas and Howrah to Superintendents of Police in charge of district intelligence. Muzaffar Ahmed was obviously aware of these developments.<sup>216</sup> He wrote:

After the October Revolution, the Indian government revamped its intelligence departments. The provincial branches became more active in acting according to the orders of the Central Intelligence Department. They did not want any news of the October Revolution to reach India. Yet we know that news of the October Revolution and the Red Army had reached the army camps in Karachi.

During the publication of “*Byathar Daan*”, I made the editorial decision of replacing the words “Red Army” with “Mukti Sevak Sainna Dal”. The police of our country, even in fiction, would not tolerate the idea of an Indian joining the

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<sup>216</sup> Suchetana Chattopadhyay, ‘The Bolshevik Menace: Colonial Surveillance and the Origins of Socialist Politics in Calcutta’, *South Asia Research*, vol. 26 (2) (Sage: New Delhi, 2006), pp. 165-179.

Red Army. Moreover, Nazrul was then a soldier in the 49<sup>th</sup> Bengali Regiment; the army would not tolerate it either.<sup>217</sup>

As mentioned before, at the time of publication and for a long period of time thereafter, Nazrul's mention of the Bolshevik revolution in "*Byathar Daan*" remained unknown to his readers. But it is interesting to note that in the author's own imagination, as the story reveals, there was no contradiction between the principles of Islam and the practitioners of communism. Thus the commander-in-chief of the Red Army, to his mind, could credibly bid farewell to Dara by iterating sayings from the Koran.

Elsewhere, however, the assertion that Islam had no conflict with socialist principles had to be defended with arguments, and could not simply be assumed or stated. In dispelling the idea that socialism was atheistic and an enemy of Islam, an idea that seemed to have currency among some Muslims, *Langal (The Plough)*, the journal co-edited by Nazrul and Muzaffar Ahmed, reprinted a summary of the speech made by the poet and journalist Hazrat Mohani at a conference on socialism.<sup>218</sup> In his speech, Hazrat Mohani set out to debunk three myths about socialism – first, that the path to socialism was always a violent one; second, that socialists were against personal property, and, finally, that socialism or *samyavad* was the enemy of Islam. He countered allegations that violence necessarily preceded a socialist revolution by stating that the path to socialism was not always a violent one, although according to communist understandings, Gandhian non-violence was not the only legitimate path either. In dispelling fears of abolition of personal property, he made a distinction between "personal" and "private",

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<sup>217</sup> See Muzaffar Ahmed, *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Smritikatha* (Calcutta, 1965).

<sup>218</sup> Hazrat Mohani, 'Samyavad ki', *Langal*, vol. 1, issue 5, Jan 26, 1926, as reproduced in Sunil Kanti De (ed.) *Nazruler 'Langal' Patrika-e Krishak Sramik Prasanga* (Dhaka: Nazrul Institute, 2010), pp. 90-92.

arguing that communists and socialists were against “private” property, not “personal” property, thus they are against the private ownership of everything that was a *daan* (gift) from God – air, water, and most significantly, land. With regard to the alleged contradiction between Islam and Communism, Mohani remarked:

Some Muslim leaders have alleged that *Samyavad* is the enemy of Islam. Quiet to the contrary, it is only Islam that is a greater oppositional force to *dhaniktantra* (Plutocracy) than *samyavad*...According to Islam, even if a single soul remains hungry, the wealthy have no right to accumulate wealth. This is the reason *zakat* has been made mandatory. In the Koran, *zakat* occupies a position second only to the duty of *namaz*. The first Caliph declared *jihad* against those that refused to give *zakat*.<sup>219</sup>

Islam was posited squarely as the religion of redistributive justice – not merely compatible with socialism (*samyavad*), but indeed as a greater and older force for the destruction of plutocracy in the world.

In Nazrul’s poem *Samyavadi*, first published in 1925, the rich were shown to be indebted to the poor – indebted to their labor, which build mansions and roads, ran trains and steamships; the rich had to repay their debt through the realization of an apocalyptic vision of the universality of man. This apocalyptic vision was artistically conveyed in imageries of excess – of an energetic unhinging of doors of the heart, of ripping off blindfold and outward skin, of exposing oneself to unruly winds from the sky:

Tell, whose gift this is! Your mansion/is brick-red with whose blood? Tear off that blindfold and read their names scripted on the bricks/You still do not know, but every speck of dust on the streets do/the meaning of these highways, the ships, the trains, the mansions.

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<sup>219</sup> Sunil Kanti De (ed) *Nazruler “Langal” Patrika-e Krishak Sramik Prasanga* (Dhaka: Nazrul Institute, 2010), pp. 91-92.

The big day is fast approaching/ by the day your debt increases, you'll have to repay!... You sleep upstairs as we toil downstairs/ and still call you the "Lord", that's a false trust you keep/ Those whose minds and bodies are moist with affections of the earth/this world-boat's ors shall remain with them/... Break open the rusty-hinged doors of your heart/ take off that dress of painted skin!/ the winds from the sky that have coagulated into a thick blue/ let them in as they rush pell-mell through the unhinged doors of your heart/... Stand in this estuary and listen to that song of union/the humiliation of one man/ is shame brought upon universal man and mankind!/ the universal man rises/ as God smiles from above and the *shaitan* trembles beneath!<sup>220</sup>

Interestingly, Nazrul's revolutionary vision was all encompassing – it included the awakening of the consciousness in the builder of mansions and steam-ships to the worth of their labor, but equally included the realization of the worth of labor in the usurpers being. Since both the haves and the have-nots were agentive (in terms of an awakening of consciousness) in Nazrul's artistic universe, the vision was not sectional, but universal. Socialism was imagined as a post-apocalyptic moment steeped in an egalitarian ethos arrived at through the vision of the rise of "universal man". But socialism, in Nazrul's poetic universe, was also an un-secularized moment invoking the Islamic imagery of the trembling "*shaitan*" (Satan).

In *Dhumketu*, the journal Nazrul edited in the early 1920s, he wrote fiery editorials, which appeared as clarion calls for class revolution. In the third issue of *Dhumketu* (The Comet), his editorial titled "*Rudra Mangal*" (Song of Destruction) was addressed to what he saw as the productive force of the nation – namely, workers and peasants. He advocated a vision of national liberation through the uprising of this productive force. He urged them to bring down the palaces of the oppressors, to strike at oppression with their hammers and ploughs. Interestingly, this apocalyptic vision of

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<sup>220</sup> See Kazi Nazrul Islam, *Samyavadi* (Bengal Publishing House: Kolkata, 1925).

revolutionary tumult conflated class revolution with national liberation, the violent upsurge of workers and peasants with the tour de force of anti-colonial struggle. The iconography of the nation as a mother, encapsulated in the slogan “*Bande Mataram*” (worship the mother) and made popular by the Swadeshi movement at the turn of the twentieth century, was invoked by Nazrul to channelize affect. Class revolution and national liberation were posited as matters of saving the honor of Mother India. To quote from this editorial:

Look at a population of 33 crores Indian languishing in deep darkness while their mother, naked and helpless, is being dragged through the streets and whipped. Rise O People (*jago janashakti*)! O my neglected, and walked-on peasant, O laboring brothers, may the plough in your hand shine with rage and blaze in the sky. Let it upturn this world of oppression! Bring your hammer – break down the palace of the oppressor! Let the head of the bloodsucker roll in dust! Strike the hammer and move the plough! Raise high the red flag that has been reddened with the blood of your breast! Those that have forced you under their feet, bring them under yours! Drown their arrogance in their tears. Bring them to your feet. Drag them down by their hair. Their walls are made of the blood, flesh and marrow of your ancestors; their grace comes from the tears of your *grihalakshmi* (wife) and wringing at the heart of your infant. Burn down their graces and appearances with the poison of your curse. My oppressed brothers and sisters, say:

*Jai Vaibhav, jai shankar*

*jai jai pralayankar.*<sup>221</sup>

Nazrul’s editorial was audacious not only in calling for a class/anti-colonial revolution but also in the Hindu imagery and Sanskritized words he used without regard for the ways in which the Bengali language had become politicized during this time. Nazrul indiscriminately used Sanskritized words and Hindu imagery – “Shankar” is another name of the Hindu god Shiva, “Vaibhav” a Sanskrit word for prosperity, and “*pralanyankar*”, a Sankritized form meaning the god of destruction.

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<sup>221</sup> See ‘Dhumketu’, Issue 3 (August 18, 1922) as reproduced in S.M Lutfur Rahman (ed.) *Dhumketu O Tar Sharathi* (Bangla Academy: Dhaka, 2005).

Noted reformers such as Akram Khan and sections of the Muslim clergy wrote treatises and issued *fatwas* about words and ideas that they deemed un-Islamic and advocated that such words be shunned from the Bengali Muslim literary corpus and, even, political sloganeering. Anxieties about language were curiously at its peak among the *ulema* (clergy) in the early 1920s when Hindu-Muslim unity was both a political necessity and a political reality in Bengal during the Khilafat movement, and political action spilled over from the realm of formal politics to the level of a mass movement engulfing mofussil towns and distant villages alike. Gandhi's support of the cause of the Khilafat had, in part, made this unity possible. *Khilafat Andolan Paddhati* (The Procedures of the Khilafat Movement, 1921) by Emdad Ali, an *alem* (cleric) from the a Barisal *madarsa*, was professedly a compilation of the views of Abu Bakr Siddiqui of Furfura, an influential Muslim preacher in Bengal, and Maulana Shah Sufi Haji Nesaruddin Ahmad of Barisal (in eastern Bengal) on the *jaiz* (permissible) methods of conducting the Khilafat movement. The text written in the form typical of *fatwas* was in a question and answer format. One of the questions asked of the *ulema* is strikingly revealing of the anxieties concerning the use of language for Muslims partaking in the Khilafat movement, since the issue of language was also related to if a practice (in this case the practice of specific kinds of sloganeering) was Islamic or not<sup>222</sup>:

Q: Hajur! In seeking to protect the Caliphate, many Muslims chant *Gandhiji ki jai* and *Mohammed Ali ki jai* after chanting the *Bande Mataram*. Is this *jaiz* (permissible)?

A: Son! "*Bande Mataram*", means worship (*Bande*) the Mother (*Mataram*). To utter this is *shirk* (unlawful innovation) and *kaferi* (behavior of the infidels). In the Koran, Allah has instructed, "Worship me, do not include any other. To include

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<sup>222</sup> See Emdad Ali, *Khilafat Andolan Paddhati* (Barisal, 1921).

another in worship is *gunaah* (sin).” Thus Muslims should never say *Bande Mataram*. During the (Khilafat) movement, while uniting with Hindus, they should say “*Allah hu Akbar*”.<sup>223</sup>

In light of such widespread anxieties among Bengali Muslims about the use of vocabulary in forging a Bengali language they could call their own mother tongue, the self-assured quality of Nazrul’s fiery prose and his indiscriminate use of Hindu imagery and Sanskrit words would appear all the more striking.

Although Akram Khan vehemently opposed the style of Nazrul’s writings, in the conviction that literary endeavor should be married to aspirations of redistributive justice, figures as divergent as Khan and Nazrul were in fact on the same page. Khan stated the overall aim of the kind of literature the *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti* (Bengali Muslim Literary Society) attempted to forge in non-sectarian, universal terms. In the presidential address of the 1918 conference he said:

“*Samyavad* (egalitarianism) and the redistribution of wealth are inextricably linked to Islam. To secure the right of every individual in this world is the Islamic way of running society (*samajtantravad*). Service to humanity is the removal of all oppressive forces from the minds and bodies of universal man (*vishwamanab*). This is the kind of literature we want – one attentive to patriotism and the story of the service to universal man.”<sup>224</sup>

Not only was Islam equated with redistributive justice, in Khan’s formulation, a truly Islamic way of ordering society entailed the “securing the rights of every individual in this world”, and a literature directed to the building of such society was deemed to be the aim of the *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Samiti*. Here again the vision was universal, not

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<sup>223</sup> See Emdad Ali, *Khilafat Andolan Paddhati* (Barisal, 1921).

<sup>224</sup> See Akram Khan, ‘Presidential Address of the Third Bengali Muslim Literary Conference’ delivered in 1918 and published in *Bangiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika*, Issue 3, (February 12, 1919).



sectional/communitarian. But the universality was rooted in the particularity of Islam, in the realization of its redistributive ethic.

Khan was not alone in denouncing Nazrul's poetry. Among the Bengali Muslims, Nazrul's literary style had as many detractors as it had admirers. There were vigorous debates about the implications of his writings on religious identity, literary merit, and the art of criticism in several Bengali Muslim journals. *Mohammadi* (edited by Akram Khan), *Islam Darshan* and *Moslem Darpan* carried the most inflammatory articles against Nazrul, where he was labeled an infidel and a *shaitan* (devil). In an issue of *Islam Darshan*, an editorial dated 1925, Sheik Mohammad Idris Ali, a well-regarded writer who wrote under the pen name Abu Nur, expressed outrage at Nazrul's audacity in comparing the politician C.R Das with Hazrat Ibrahim, and Bibi Maryam with prostitutes in the poem "*Indrapatan*".<sup>225</sup> Referring to another image from the poem, the writer of the editorial, which appeared in *Moslem Darpan* in August 1925, noted how blasphemous Nazrul's writing was:

Allah's holy light, which even Hazard Musa could not bear to look at, according to the poet, is being reflected in the eyes of C.R Das. Who can be so blind to religion?

These insults to religion mean that Nazrul Islam is guilty in the eyes of the entire Muslim community. It is the duty of society to warn him to rein in his writings and refrain from insulting Islam. It would not be inappropriate to mention here that if he does not mend his ways, it will be necessary to take him to the court of law. We hope that Nazrul will educate himself in the basic principles of Islam and work within the confines of the boundaries set forth by religion, and thereby establish his reputation as a poet and bring glory to the community.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>225</sup> See Abu Nur, 'Bangiya Musalman Shaittyo O Shahittik', *Islam Darshan* (1925).

<sup>226</sup> See 'Islam Boiri Muslim Kabi' in *Moslem Darpan*, 1925.

Another piece by Munshi Mohammad Reyazzudin Ahmad, which appeared in *Islam Darshan* in 1922, expressed regret that although Nazrul appeared “like a comet in the sky of the Muslim world”, it soon became apparent that the poet’s sensibility was thoroughly Hinduized and he was an utter disgrace to the community. He alleged that Nazrul’s writings often evinced an un-Islamic belief in rebirth and his poetry described Allah in anthropomorphic terms, thus compromising the basic principles of Islam.<sup>227</sup>

Nazrul’s admirers, on the other hand, never failed to put up a spirited defense. Writing in *Saugat*, in 1926, Abul Mansur, the left-minded intellectual, writer and *praja* movement activist who would later emphasize the revolutionary dimensions of the Pakistan movement and join the East Pakistan Renaissance Society at the behest of Abul Kalam Shamsuddin, unequivocally celebrated the appearance of Nazrul on the Bengali literary stage. He wrote:

Not too many Muslims have been practitioners of Bengali literature. Only very recently has Nazrul appeared on the literary stage. When Bengal’s lyric poetry had almost died from the fatigue of celebrating alcohol, women and paradise, just then Nazrul arrived with his musical instruments to shake up the hearts of the Bengalis. Their languor of love has left them. New doors have opened up for Bengali lyric poetry.<sup>228</sup>

Abul Kalam Shamsuddin, a well-regarded literary critic, who was a founding member of the East Pakistan Renaissance Society, described Nazrul as an epoch-making poet in a *Saugat* issue of 1927, and hailed him as the national poet of Bengal. Shamsuddin sought to silence Nazrul’s critics by pointing out that:

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<sup>227</sup> See Munshi Mohammad Reyazzudin Ahmad, ‘Lok-ta Musلمان na Shaitan?’, *Islam Darshan*, 1922.

<sup>228</sup> See Abul Mansur Ahmed, *Saugat*, 1926.

Most Muslim litterateurs do not have the ability to evaluate where the greatness of good literature lies. Even today, most critics are of the opinion that kavya (poetry) is a bunch of religious sayings in rhyme. They do not realize that the objective of poetry is autonomous from instruction. If we do not understand this, we won't develop the ability to be critics. Without understanding that the principal aim of poetry is the creation of beauty, we appraise bad poetry as good, and good poetry as bad. Most evaluate poetry in terms of religion. They have no concern for the poeticity of poetry.<sup>229</sup>

The premise of Shamsuddin's dismissal of the detractors of Nazrul's works is surprisingly similar to Abul Hussain's argument against separate electorates in the sphere of politics, which I have summarized earlier in this chapter. In the manner in which Hussain argued that separate Muslim electorates hindered the development of the "greater personality of the individual" because in such electorates choices were constrained by social bonds (of religious community), which prevented the flowering of individual autonomy and personality, Shamsuddin argued that literary criticism when constrained by social strictures (of religious community) prevented the flowering of the critic's ability to judge literature on its own terms, and therefore hindered aesthetic education. Yet both Abul Hussain and Abul Kalam Shamsuddin spoke as Muslims to a Muslim audience. Both emphasized the need for the development of individuality (premised on autonomy from society) as the path to the Muslim community's progress. Nazrul's literary practice was exemplary of such individualism, marked, as it were, by a lack of regard for societal norms in any conventional sense. In Abul Mansur's evaluation, Nazrul's literary tour de force not only put the Bengali Muslim litterateur on the map but rejuvenated Bengali poetry as a whole.

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<sup>229</sup> See Abul Kalam Shamsuddin, *Saugat*, 1927.

It was not the detractors of Nazrul, but his admirers who would go on to become key cultural activists in the Pakistan movement. Both Abul Mansur and Abul Kalam Shamshuddin were important figures in the East Pakistan Renaissance Society. For Abul Mansur, as I have mentioned earlier, the idea of Pakistan was a challenge to the fascist drive toward uniformity that killed self-expression and individual fulfillment. Nazrul was a figure whose literary style resisted sameness – he resisted the dominant Hindu literary mode of writing and disregarded the strictures placed on the use of literary language placed by his own community. As Ahmed Kamruddin wrote in 1924:

I believe that Nazrul who can break the bones and ribs of the Bengali language that have stilted and ossified with time. He can give the Bengali language new appearance, life, and body. Most Bengalis are Musalmans. But the *sadhu* (*sanskritized*) Bengali is not conducive to the expression of the thought-world of the Muslims. Thus it was needed for a man of great daring appear on the literary stage with a hammer. Kazi showed the promise of being such a figure of daring.<sup>230</sup>

This “figure of daring” expressed his distinctive individualism not only in stylistics and use of language, but also in content. In the first issue of the journal *Dhumketu* (August 11, 1922), which he edited, his very first editorial was a clarion call to reject blind obedience to religion, custom, and society’s good and the great. He equated unquestioning obedience with slavery. He declared that the day “people” broke away from all relationships of dependency, would be the day when Bharat would be truly free:

I am the oarsman of myself. My truth will show me the way. The fear of the state, the fear of society cannot misdirect me. I believe if you know yourself, you can know others. This knowing oneself, privileging one’s own truth, directing oneself, this is not neither empty pride nor arrogance. Even so, pride is better than fake humility...If passivity and earnest reverence for the great could save the country, then a country of 33 crore deities would not be *paradhin* (unfree) for so long...Dhumketu seeks to wipe out the enemies of the country – the liar, the

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<sup>230</sup> See A.D Kamruddin, ‘Kabi Nazrul Islam’, *Soltan* (April 11, 1921).

fraudulent, the artificial...Dhumketu has no *guru* (spiritual guide) or *devata* (lord). Dhumketu will not take anyone's words as *Vedavakya*, unless they resonate with in his heart. Dhumketu is completely free from slavery. This is not a communal (*sampradayik*) paper. Humanism is the greatest religion of all.<sup>231</sup>

Even though he spoke of revolution, his writings never addressed the issue of how to organize a class-for-itself. Every call to revolution was, ultimately, a call for self-expression, a celebration of individualism. Muzaffar Ahmed, a founding member of the Communist Party of India and a long-time friend of Nazrul, speaks in his memoir about the late November night in 1921 when the decision to found the CPI was taken in a rented house at Taratolla Lane, Calcutta, where he and Nazrul lived as roommates. But as Ahmed mentions, though the poet remained sympathetic to the organization, he never became a member of the party.<sup>232</sup>

Yet the 1920s was an intensely political period of the Nazrul's life. He was arrested in November 1922 from Comilla and imprisoned for a year for publishing two articles – “*AnandamayeeerAgamane*” and “*Bidrohira Kaifiyat*” – which the colonial government had proscribed as “seditious matter”.<sup>233</sup> While doing his time in jail, he started a hunger strike against the ill treatment of political prisoners. Morhul Mohammad Moddabber mentions how in 1926, in a secret meeting in J.C Gupta's house in Park Circus in Calcutta, Subhash Bose and Nazrul Islam arrived with the proposal of creating an all-India level revolutionary party, called the Hindustan Republican Army. At the meeting, Bose and Nazrul expressed dissatisfaction with the Congress, which according

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<sup>231</sup> See Nazrul Islam, *Dhumketu*, August 11, 1922.

<sup>232</sup> See Muzaffar Ahmed, *Kazi Nazrul Islam: Smritikatha* (Calcutta, 1965).

<sup>233</sup> As reported in *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, Jan 17, 1923.

to them “could not bring freedom to our (sic) country”.<sup>234</sup> They produced a manifesto of the new party, composed by Nazrul and read out to the gathering by Bose. Moddabber described the manner in which Nazrul elicited each member’s pledge to the manifesto and the party: “The poet insisted that we sign the manifesto with our blood, by making a cut on our fingers. Bose and Nazrul were among the first to sign on – with their own blood.”<sup>235</sup> This gesture of signing a political manifesto with one’s own blood signaled the arrival of a specifically modern mode of politics – where politics was seen as the expression of some “authentic”, “inner” self, a matter of an individual’s inner conviction and commitment. Marcus Daeschel has termed this mode of conducting politics as the “politics of self-expression”.<sup>236</sup> According to Daeschel, this “politics of self-expression” was in sharp contradistinction to the “politics of interest”, which was essentially about managing social relationships, negotiating hierarchies and navigating patronage networks, and not centrally about the expression of an “inner self”.<sup>237</sup> Nazrul’s literary and political praxis exemplified the “politics of self-expression”. Debates that raged in the Bengali Muslim public domain about his literary works and occasionally his life choices (such as his decision of marrying a Hindu woman) publicized a new mode of being political, which was essentially about the integrity of the self, interiority, about

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<sup>234</sup> Morhul Mohammad Moddabber’s account of this meeting with Nazrul appeared in *Dainik Bangla*, 5<sup>th</sup> September, 1976; as quoted in *Dhumketu O tar Sharathi*, by M.S Lutfur Rahman (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 2005) pp. 157-158.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> Marcus Daeschel, *Politics of Self Expression: The Urdu Middle Class Milieu in Mid-Twentieth Century India and Pakistan* (New York: Routledge, 2006) pp. 18-58.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid. Daeschel’s work shows how the political culture of “self-expression” assumed prominence among middle class activists in Uttar Pradesh and Punjab in the 1930s and 1950s. But as this chapter reveals, such self-expressionist modes enter Bengal Muslim politics via the literary praxis and popularity of Nazrul Islam in the 1920S, and is ultimately, taken up by the cultural activists of the Pakistan movement in Bengal.

“inner” convictions, and individual choice whose exercise was predicated on maintaining a degree of autonomy from “society”.

Ironically, for a man so vigorously committed to the politics of self-expression, when he contested elections from east Bengal for the upper house of the Central Legislative Council in 1926, on an independent ticket, Badshah Pir (a religious leader), grandson and spiritual successor of the Faraidi leader Dudu Miya, canvassed on behalf of Nazrul and urged his disciples (*muridan*) to vote for the poet.<sup>238</sup> Tapping into Farazi constituency via a decree of its highest spiritual leader entailed being “sullied” by that very “politics of interest” which Nazrul sought to constantly escape. The Faraizis were religious reformists, a community of believers whose aim was to reinforce the proper practices of Islam. Muslim cultivators in eastern Bengal comprised the overwhelming bulk of the Faraidis. The religious leadership of the Faraidis were instituted in a strictly hierarchical structure with the chief spiritual leader (the *ustad*) at the apex, his advisors called the *uparastha khalifas* (top-rung deputies) on the next rung, followed by the *gird khalifas* who looked after a cluster of villages, and finally the *gaon khalifas* who looked after the well-being of a single village. The *khalifas* performed both *siyasi* (political) and *dini* (religious) functions. In carrying out their religious functions, they imparted Islamic education to the men of families, and maintained guesthouses for public prayers, religious instructions and Sufi mediation. To meet the expenses necessary for such activities, they would collect 1/40<sup>th</sup> peasant’s income – the rate of tax set by *shariah* law. As part of their *siyasi* (political) functions, the *khalifas* would train clubmen to maintain the security of

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<sup>238</sup> “The message of Badsah Pir” as reproduced in Mustafa Nurul Islam’s *Smakale Nazrul Islam* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, 1983), p. 72.

the villages under their influence, and put in place espionage systems to identify the enemies of Faraidis.<sup>239</sup> Both espionage and the training of clubmen were absolutely critical to the Faraidis whose followers were mostly cultivators who had occupied *char* lands which emerged from the rivers and were *khas* lands (under direct government control, and without intermediaries such as zamindars or *jotedars*/wealthy tenants). Settling on government-owned *khas-mahal* lands, where there were no rentiers mediating between the cultivators and the government, was in line with Faraidi religious belief as well, since their *ustad* (spiritual master) preached that rent was unlawful because land belonged to God, but tribute – that was paid directly to the government – was lawful. But *char* lands that occasionally rose from the rivers were highly contested spaces, zamindars wanted to grab *char* lands and profit from creating sub-tenures from new property, rich *jotedars* seeking to climb the social ladder and accumulate property also had interest and resources to compete with the zamindars for these *char* lands. The Faraidi clubmen were trained footmen, who pushed back the men sent by zamindars and *jotedars* to occupy the land in hand-to-hand combat and thus protected the Faraidi cultivators.<sup>240</sup> Politics here was a politics of protection in return for the religious allegiances of the cultivators to a Faraidi way of life. Often Muslim *jotedars* (large tenants) entered into relationships with the Faraidis by exchanging promises of reduced rent for the security of Faraidi protection. Colonial records tell of an instance in Char Manika, where a government assessor who had arrived to impose income taxes on the *jotedars* was driven away by Faraidi

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<sup>239</sup> Kevin R. Downey, *Religious Revival and Peasant Activism in Bengal: Agrarian Society and the trajectory of the Faraizi Movement, 1820-1947* (Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2009), pp. 103-110.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.



clubmen.<sup>241</sup> It was a mutually beneficial relationship where *jotedars* gained experienced Faraidi cultivators to work their lands, and the Faraidis gained patronage and reduced rent. Badshah Pir in canvassing to his constituency of disciples on behalf of Nazrul was exploiting such socially embedded relationships of spiritual hierarchies and Faraidi patronage networks.

## **Conclusion**

It is not the argument of this chapter that a certain kind of Bengali Muslim literary activity that combined egalitarianism with individualism, as exemplified by Nazrul, completely displaced the “politics of interest” with the “politics of self-expression”. As the Badshah Pir episode illustrates, this was far from the case – realpolitik still very much involved exploiting patronage networks and managing social relationships and hierarchies. But when the literary praxis of figures as different as Nazrul and Akram Khan converged on creating an emphasis on the individual as the fount of meaningful action, this curious convergence in Bengali Muslim literary culture helped engender the politics of self-expression that would become the hallmark of the cultural activists of the Pakistan movement in Bengal. Nazrul’s unfettered individualism, without regard for societal mores, reveling in an apocalyptic revolutionary moment and bringing down the existing status-quo was one expression of this political mode. Akram Khan’s reformist vision which placed premium on the capacity for individual judgment, separated from the

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<sup>241</sup> Report of F.B Simpson, Commissioner of the Dacca Division to the Secretary of the Government of Bengal, No. 249 (Sep 24, 1869), *Bengal Judicial Proceedings*, October, 1869, Nos 102-103 as quoted in Nurul Hasan Chowdhury, *Peasant Radicalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal: The Faraizis, Indigo and Pabna Movements* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2001), p. 69.

spiritual-material hierarchies of society (in which the likes of Pir Badshah Mia were engaged), and rooted in an internal realm, influenced by scriptures, validated a less flamboyant, but equally individuated and interiorized mode of being.<sup>242</sup> This figure of the enchanted individual as the fount of political and religious meaning, the source of commitment and judgment, endowed with an interiority and abstracted from society, that was produced in the Bengali Muslim literary domain in the two decades preceding the Pakistan movement would deeply impact the cultural politics of the Pakistan movement in Bengal.

For the cultural activists of the East Pakistan Renaissance Society (EPRS), the idea of the “people” as the touchstone of political sovereignty was envisaged as a collective formed by the abstractly equal capacity of each individual for autonomy and free choice. Thus the EPRS was welcoming of all members irrespective of caste, creed, and religion. For them, membership to the EPRS, and in a larger sense, investment in the Pakistan movement, were matters of inner commitment and autonomous choice, abstracted from society and its constraints.

Again, both Nazrul and Khan (as figures at two ends of the literary spectrum) stressed egalitarianism, and in their writings, forged relationships of affinity between Islam and the politics of redistributive justice. It was this heady mix of Islam, individualism, and egalitarianism forged, as it were, in the literary crucible during the early decades of the twentieth century that made possible an assessment of the Pakistan

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<sup>242</sup> In his influential work *Moslem Bangla'r Samajik Itihash*, Akram Khan attributed the degeneration of Muslim society in Bengal to the corrupting influence of *pirism*. In my chapter on debt, I have already mentioned how Akram Khan emphasized the tradition of *ijtihad* or independent judgment.

movement as a revolutionary one. Thus Abul Mansur in his address to the EPRS, not only proposed an understanding of the Pakistan movement in terms of its potential to restore the natural order of variegated splendor with which Allah had endowed the world; he simultaneously equated the aim of the movement with the ultimate aim of communism which was, according to him, the flowering of variegated self-expressions by ensuring that the pre-requisite for self-fulfillment was the equality of wealth. The unique cultural politics of Bengali Pakistanism cannot be adequately understood without attending to the emergence of the figure of the individual in Bengali Muslim literary culture. Also, it cannot be understood without attending to the connection between egalitarianism and Islam that had been forged by litterateurs over two decades that preceded the movement.

## CONCLUSION

According to David Gilmartin:

Punjab witnessed in 1947 the almost complete collapse of a mediatory political framework previously linking local communities culturally to a sense of regional collectivity. If there was a provincial “party of the soil” in the Punjab before partition, grounding communities and leaders in a provincial vision of territorial collectivity, it was the Unionist Party. Openly “Punjabi” in its cultural (if not linguistic) orientation, the Unionist Party had also seen itself as the provincial protector of local and “tribal” identities and influence. But the Unionist Party – and the principles it stood for – were anathematized by the Muslim League in the mid-1940s, and Punjabi identity (including the regional “tribal” and *biradari* associations that helped to produce it) discredited as yet another form of amoral particularism.<sup>243</sup>

In contrast to Punjab, the Pakistan movement in Bengal could not discredit provincial visions of self and community quite in the same way. In this dissertation I have tried to show why this was the case:

Influential *pirs* were important to political parties vying to represent the Muslims in the electoral arena of Bengal. As the case of Pir Abu Bakr illustrates, since the 1920s, the sphere of influence of such *pirs* themselves came to be connected to their patronage of local, village-level tenant associations, which increasingly became staunch critics of landlordism. In stark contrast to the role of the landed *pirs* of Punjab, through whom rural hierarchy was maintained, in Bengal, many of the *pirs* even though they were patronized by the landed Muslim *ashraf* class, got linked to counter-hierarchical, anti-landlordist tendencies of rural society. Such counter-hierarchical tendencies were intensified by transformations in the composition, agenda, and rhetoric of the rural *anjumans*, which were key to disseminating visions of Muslim community where the display of rank,

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<sup>243</sup> David Gilmartin, ‘Pakistan, Partition, and South Asian History: In Search of a Narrative’, *Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 57, no. 4, (Nov, 1998), p. 1087.

wealth, and influence were seen as corruptions of Islamic community, and not the basis on which the community could be adequately represented, as had earlier been the case.

At another level, I have tried to show how a Muslim “improvement” ideology circulating in rural Bengal, in linking a notion of cultivation of Islamic moral community to the cultivation (tilling) of land, and the literature generated by the *praja* movement – which in latching on to the ethical impulses of the “improvement” discourse, expanded its meaning by tying conceptions of cultivating an Islamic self and community anchored in the value of labor to the soil of Bengal – created claims of ethnic belonging rooted in a regionalism, thereby forging Bengali Muslim identity at a grassroots level. This identity, forged in the crucible of the *praja* movement with a counter-hierarchical edge, made its way into the domain of provincial electoral politics in the 1930s; it came to be seen as the authentic basis of representing the Muslim community.

Such claims of ethnic belonging were also taken up and consolidated by the Muslim urban intelligentsia and littérateurs striving to carve out a space of literary-cultural autonomy and Muslim modernism in order to remedy the problem of Muslim cultural “backwardness”. A prominent ideological strand operating in this literary-cultural domain from the 1920s onward, as it engaged in the project of ushering in a Muslim modernism in Bengal, developed a conception of “Muslim culture” as inherently open, democratic, socialistic, redistributive, and committed to securing the interests of labor and individual self-expression. The cultural politics of Bengali Pakistanism, as it emerged in the early 1940s, was deeply impacted by this ideological strand. At one level, this enabled articulations of the Pakistan movement as a revolutionary people’s movement committed to the realization of a state to be founded on supposed Islamic

values of redistribution. At another level, the demand for Pakistan was put forth as an aspiration for the realization of Bengali Muslim cultural autonomy and likened to movements such as the Irish Literary Revival. Since from their very early days, literary institutions centered in cities, such as the Bangiya Musalman Shahitya Samiti, involved in promoting this idea of Bengali Muslim cultural autonomy were engaged in validating it by merging the political affect mobilized against the then current colonial arrangement of proprietorship in land (Permanent Settlement) generated by the religiosity-infused *praja* movement with an affective response against the arrangement (*haal bandobasto*) of Bengali literary language, the articulations of Pakistan as a state committed to redistributive justice rooted in Islamic universalism as well as an idea of cultural self-determination rooted in regional particularity could co-exist seamlessly.

It is not that a style of self-expressionist politics – defining itself through an emphasis on the individual and a stress on anti-societalism – that was so central to the ideology of the Pakistan movement in Punjab and UP, as noted by Gilmartin and Daeschel, was entirely absent in Bengal. Here, this self-expressionist politics developed through the somewhat opposed currents of Islamic reformism, on the one hand, and the unorthodox literary praxis of Nazrul Islam, on the other. While Nazrul's unfettered individualism, without regard for religious or societal strictures, reveling in an anti-status quoist, revolutionary moment was one expression of this political mode, Islamic reformist visions which placed premium on the capacity for individual judgment, separated from the spiritual-material hierarchies of society and rooted in an internal realm, influenced by scriptures, validated a less flamboyant, but equally individuated and

interiorized mode of being. Despite their differences, both the Islamic reformists and the likes of Nazrul Islam were united in their commitment to redistributive justice.

This figure of the enchanted individual as the fount of political and religious meaning, the source of commitment and judgment, endowed with an interiority and abstracted from society, that was produced in the course of the two decades preceding the Pakistan movement deeply impacted the urban cultural politics of the Pakistan movement in Bengal. Thus in the articulations of the urban cultural activists of the movement in Bengal, Pakistan was envisioned as a state where individuals abstracted from their moorings in social particularities of class, religion, and sect could come together as a nation through their commitment to an idea of a state rooted in redistributive justice. This enabled forging links with several non-Muslim communists (such as M.N Roy) in the sphere of cultural activism. This also explains why several left-minded members within the League continued to have friendly relations with Hindu leaders of the Communist Party in Bengal, even at the peak of the movement.<sup>244</sup> As Abul Hashim, the General Secretary of the Muslim League in 1944, recounts, before the 1946 legislative elections, the League attempted to convince such Communist Party leaders to refrain from contesting the Muslim League in any of the Muslim constituencies.<sup>245</sup> Even though such an arrangement did not ultimately work out, that this was seen as a distinct possibility by Leaguers such as Hashim and Abul Mansur point to how strong the idea of Pakistan as a coming together of individuals, abstracted from socially generated identities and committed to redistributive justice was. At the same time, for activists like Mansur and

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<sup>244</sup> Abul Hashim, *In Retrospection* (Dhaka: Mowla Brothers, 1974), p. 101.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

Hashim, a commitment to universal justice and democracy – a vision of Pakistan where all individuals and communities would be accorded equal dignity and rights build on the redistribution of wealth – was rooted in the particularity of the “spirit of Islam”, and did not, in principal, require the erasure of this particularity but a realization of its nature. Yet this connection between Islam and socialism, which historically emerged through the urban intelligentsia’s appropriation of the specific labor-centric spin given to the Islamic theological discourse on *riba* by the improvement discourse circulating in the countryside, points to how the energies of the “prepolitical” Muslim rural social domain continued to inflect the urban cultural politics of Bengali Pakistanism, as it validated itself as a non-parochial, non-communal, revolutionary people’s movement committed to fighting imperialist tendencies and establishing a state founded on redistributive justice.



## GLOSSARY:

<i>ahwab</i>	traditional arbitrary exaction in addition to formal rent levied by zamindars and other public officers
<i>adhiar</i>	a person sharing half the crop with the landlord
<i>alim</i>	man trained in religious sciences
<i>amla</i>	a petty official
<i>anjuman</i>	society, committee, association
<i>ashraf</i>	a Muslim of respectable status
<i>azadi</i>	freedom
<i>bahas</i>	religious debate
<i>bandobast</i>	settlement
<i>barga</i>	sharecropping
<i>bhadralok</i>	literally 'respectable' but used in historical discourse as an analytical category to imply a status group in Bengal who came from the upper caste; were economically dependent on landed rents and professional and clerical employment and kept a distance from the masses
<i>bhag-chashi</i>	sharecropper
<i>bidat</i>	innovation that goes against the Koran and the hadith
<i>bigha</i>	a measure of land, 1/3 of an acre
<i>biradari</i>	brotherhood, a community based on the model of common descent
<i>char</i>	alleviated land, typically alluvial deposits created by the fluvial action of rivers
<i>chaukidar</i>	guard; village police
<i>kutcherry</i>	office of a zamindar
<i>daroga</i>	chief policeman

<i>din/deen</i>	faith, the Islamic religion
<i>duniya</i>	world
<i>fatwa</i>	generally written opinion on a point of Islamic law given by theologians or religious leaders
<i>goshol</i>	ablutions
<i>gunah</i>	sin
<i>hadis</i>	traditions of the prophet
<i>hajj</i>	pilgrimage to Mecca
<i>halal</i>	lawful, with religious sanction; (an animal) slaughtered as prescribed by Islamic law
<i>ibadat</i>	worship
<i>imam</i>	leader in prayers
<i>iman</i>	faith
<i>jihad</i>	striving; an Islamic war against unbelief, whether external or internal
<i>kafir</i>	unbeliever, non-Muslim
<i>khas mahal</i>	personal demesne land
<i>khet majur</i>	agricultural landless labor
<i>khuda</i>	God
<i>madarsa</i>	a higher school or college teaching Islamic laws and jurisprudence as primary subjects
<i>mahajan</i>	moneylender
<i>maulavi</i>	a Muslim doctor of law or a Muslim learned man
<i>mofussil</i>	interior of a district, away from the town or city
<i>murid</i>	disciple of a <i>pir</i>
<i>naib</i>	a senior official in a zamindar's estate office

<i>nawab</i>	a title or rank conferred like peerage on Muslim gentlemen of distinction and good service
<i>nazr</i>	present / tribute
<i>paik</i>	armed retainer
<i>pir</i>	sufi guide
<i>praja</i>	tenant
<i>qazi</i>	Islamic judge
<i>raiyat</i>	peasant, cultivator, tenant
<i>raiyati</i>	belonging to a tenant
<i>sabha</i>	association
<i>sajjada nishin</i>	literally one who sits on the prayer carpet; successor to the authority of a sufi saint at his shrine, usually a lineal descendant of the saint
<i>sanyasi</i>	ascetic
<i>salami</i>	traditional fee paid to the landlord on purchase of land or on obtaining tenancy
<i>shariat</i>	Islamic law
<i>shirk</i>	associating false gods with the one, true God
<i>sufi</i>	Muslim mystic, one connected to the sufi orders
<i>swavarna</i>	high caste
<i>tabligh</i>	proselytization
<i>tammaduni</i>	cultural
<i>tauhid</i>	unity of God
<i>ulema</i>	plural of <i>alim</i>
<i>urs</i>	celebration of the death day of a sufi saint; major annual festival at many sufi shrines

<i>zakat</i>	compulsory Islamic charity
<i>zamindar</i>	holder of a property in land who paid revenue to the government under the Permanent Settlement of 1793
<i>zilla</i>	district

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