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Conflict between Conservatives and Liberals: Bengali Muslim society in the first half of the 20th century

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ABSTRACT

A furious controversy about what to do or not to do about the socioreligious life of the Muslims of Bengal has developed many synthetic
tendencies. The discussion becomes more academic and intellectual
than theological. The new initiative in social and religious action came
from their distinct groups- first, the Orthodox, second, the radicals and
third, the moderate revisionists. Different sections of the Muslim
Intellectuals view these problems from their angles of Bengal such as
the orthodox, the progressive, and the liberal. The tone of internal
conflict that most often occurred in Muslim society centered around
religious sentiments and beliefs, along with reform and orthodoxy. The
literary community among Muslims attempted to focus on these social
and community problems rationally and progressively. The writers
extensively on public affairs and their writings reflect different aspects
of the Muslims' socio-religious cultural and political life.

Many people converted to Bengal due to Islam's egalitarian appeal, but the sectarian divide is hidden within the Muslim society. Muslim society is mainly divided into two major sects, 'Shiya' and 'Sunni'. Many sects and doctrines exist among Bengali Muslims. The 'Shiya' do not accept the existence of three caliphs before Caliph Ali. In terms of religion and theory, there are two schools of 'Shariat' and 'Marifat' among the 'Sunnis'. The 'Shariat' followers consider the 'Hadith' as the only perspective and follow religious practices accordingly. The 'Marifat' followers conduct their spiritualism through love and devotion. Mainly Sunni rulers established empires for Muslims in the world, resulting in the Hadith-



based rules for their consumerist lives that were not supported by the Qur'an. There are two main sects of Sufis namely 'Hanafi' and 'Mohammadi'. Hanafis follow the teachings of four Imams: ' Hanafi', 'Shafi', 'Maliki', and 'Hambali'. The 'Mohammadi' believes the instructions of the Quran and Hadith to be the highest, they are in favour of following the Quran and Hadith exclusively, their other name is 'Ahle Hadith'. Although Hanafis are disciples of Imam Abu Hanifa, there are different doctrines and sects among them namely- 1. 'Pirbadi' of Sufi genre 2. 'Ahle-Hadith' 3. 'La-Majhabi' 4. 'Wahhabi' 5. 'Ghaib Makallid' or 'La-Mazhabis'. At one stage of disagreement, conflict, and conflict between the 'Hanafis' and the 'Ahle Hadiths', the 'Hanafis' called the 'Ahle Hadiths' as 'La-Mazhabis' or the irreligious community. There was a dispute between the two communities over spices in some religious matters. Naeemuddin's book 'Akheri Zohar' discusses the controversy between the 'Hanafis' and the 'La-Madhhabs' Moniruzzaman wrote in an editorial entitled 'Hanafi-Mohammadi' in the Islamist newspaper 'Sultan', "There are various disputes between 'Hanafis' and 'Mohammedans' in Bengal. One group used to give fatwas to the other group as infidels. No one prayed behind others, even in some mosques, one group did not allow another group to pray. Since Islam was propagated in Bengal by 'Pir-Dervesh', and 'Oli-Auliya', there is considerable influence of 'Sufi' thought here.

The conflict between **conservatives and Liberals** in Bengali Muslim society was a conflict between logic and faith. This conflict in thought and action was organized around the search for and direction of effective ways in Muslim society. More specifically debate and polemics regarding the socio-religious life of Muslims henceforth were couched in different terms. The discussion becomes more academic and intellectual than theological. The new initiative in social and religious action came from their distinct groups- first, Orthodox, clinging to the basic form of ulema-ridden Islam, second, the radicals who, overall, give a noble and most fascinating connotation to Islam and third, the moderate revisionists, trying to create modus vivendi between orthodox ideology and a radical position. Along with Islamic ideals, many Western ideas like nationalism, liberalism, rationalism, Marxism, and feminism greatly influenced modern-educated Muslims from the beginning of the twentieth century. Writings of Mahommed Huq, Ismail Hossain Siraji, Mir Mosharraf Hossain, Syed Emdad Ali, etc cultivated secular ideas and Hindu-Muslim unity among the Muslims. In creative writing, Muhammad Shahidullah, Kazi Abdul Wadud, and Kazi Nazrul Islam emphasized on mother tongue Bengali. Almost at the same time appearance of Kazi Nazrul Islam brought a new tide in this direction. With the establishment of 'Bangiya Sahitya Samiti' in 1911, they ushered in a new era of Bengaliness by throwing away Urdu and



cultivating a distinctive form of Bengali literature.⁷ Secular views have been published in Islam Darshan,⁸ Masik Mohammadi, Moslem Darpan, Saugat^{9,} Shikha¹⁰, Dhumketu, Samyavadi and Langal periodicals. However, the next generation further nourishes the seed planted by this liberal secular group. In this way, they came forward to emancipate the Muslim mind from the folds of obscurantism and religious fundamentalism.

When the awakening started in Muslim society at the end of the 19th century, the conflict between the conservative fundamentalists and the rational progressives was widely known in Muslim-edited newspapers. The tone of internal conflict that most often occurred in Muslim society centered around religious sentiments and beliefs, along with reform and orthodoxy. The conflict escalated in the 1920s with both Calcutta and Dhaka followed by other cities and some villages in Mafswal. 11 At the end of the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century, the Munshis, Maulvis, etc. of Bengali Muslims were afraid of the activities of the Christian and Brahmbha preachers and started a movement to protect their religion. Mohammad Reazuddin Ahmed and Munsi Meherullah played a leading role in the campaign against the Christian missionaries. Mohammad Reazuddin Ahmed was involved in Bengali Muslim journalism in the 1890s.12 Determined to fully Islamize the Muslims of Bengal, he emphasized the five obligatory rituals of faith, prayer, fasting, zakat, and Hajj along with the local Islamic tradition. But they did not use Urdu as the vehicle of Islam among the Muslims of rural Bengal, but Bengali, the mother tongue. He declared Bengali as the mother tongue of Bengali Muslims. 13 They focused on publishing Bengali pamphlets and periodicals to acquaint Bengali Muslims with Islam tradition and culture.¹⁴ They tried to bring change in Bengali Muslim society through their works in the Bengali language. Along with the mainstream of Bengali language and literature, they also wanted to highlight their religious-cultural aspect.

Interestingly, a few contemporary magazines and periodicals functioned as mouthpieces of different groups. For example, while 'Islam Procharok', 'Islam Darshan', 'Ahle-Hadith', 'Din Duniya', 'Sharia't, 'Masjid' and the like presented the orthodox viewpoint, 'Mohammadi' champion the moderate opinion. 'Sikha', 'Jagoran', 'Muslim Bharat', and 'Saugat' preached radical ideas in support of a more rational outlook. These different categories of opinions formed intra-sectional squabbles, allegations, and counter-allegations on theology, Islamic norms and social behaviour became distinctive features of their movement. The process was known as the 'Emancipation of the Intellect' movement. However, the theory of 'emancipation of the intellect 'got a distinct literary form through the writings of several litterateurs. At the same time, divergent opinions simultaneously came to raise the issues relating to



communitarian interest under Akram Khan.¹⁶ His writings greatly influenced society's socio-religious and ideological aspects during the third decades of the twentieth century. In this way, these two rival ideologies confused to shape the socio-political culture and failed to find out a clear path to follow collectively. Such conflicting natures of thoughts largely influenced cultural life and the political spheres.

Some of them served as various social, political, and literary mouthpieces. 'Islam Darshan', Anjuman Warezibe Bengali, 'Bengiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika' (1918), Bengali Musalman Sahitya of the Samity, 'Saymavadi' (1923), Anjuman Tarakkiye Qaum, 'Langal' (1925), Sramik Praja Swaraj Dal, 'Ganabani' (1926), Bengali Peasant Sramik Dal, Shikha' (1926), Muslim Sahitya Samaj, 'Moazzin' '(1928), of Khademul Enchan Samiti, 'Mohammadi'(1937), acted as spokesperson of Muslim League. Some dailies took a stand for political organizations. Krishak Praja Party, originally the political party of Fazlul Hague propagated ideas. The English newspapers 'Star of India' (1932) and 'Morning News' were mouthpieces of the Muslim League. Islam preached conservative ideals in 'Akhbare Islamia' (1884), 'Islam Pracharak' (1891, 99), 'Nur al-Iman' (1900), 'Al-Eshlam' (1918), 'Islam Darshan' (1920), 'Taghlib'. (1927), 'Al-Moslem' (1928) and 'Maktab' (1930). Newspapers of that time were mostly published for religious purposes. Believers of different doctrines of Islam used the newspaper as a vehicle to propagate their respective doctrines. They published periodicals like 'Hanafi' (1903), 'Ahle Hadith' (1915), 'Al-Bashra' (1921), 'Shariat' (1924), 'Ahmadi' (1925), as spokespersons of Muslim religious groups. is Analysing the character of these newspapers and magazines, Mohammad Nasiruddin, the editor of Saugat newspaper, commented, "Most of them were published to spread Islam. The writers were bound by various restrictions. It was dangerous to spread independent thoughts or doctrines in that dark age. 17 'Ahle-Hadith' monthly magazine expressing the Orthodox viewpoint made a trenchant attack on the editor of 'Mohammadi' for publishing an advertisement depicting a bicycle rider. 18 The famous poet Mohammad Kazeem Al-Qureshi Kaikobad was taken to task for his work 'Mahashmasshan', which according to Munshi Reazuddin Ahmed and Syed Emmdad Ali, Editor, 'Nabanoor' contained ideas and words highly objectionable to Islamic belief.19 Even S Wajed Ali was warned by the editor of 'Islam Darshan', Abdul Hakim, not to violate Sharia laws, in a story titled Tara, which was published in 'Islam Darshan'.²⁰

'Islam Pracharak' was a monthly magazine on religion, society, and history. Its purpose was to publish, propagate, and practice scriptures in the Bengali language. Among the writers and literary



figures who emerged around the Islamic preacher were Maulvi Alauddin Ahmed, Munshi Zamiruddin, Osman Ali B.A, Nowsher Ali Khan Yusufji, Sheikh Fazlul Karim, Mohammad Ismail Hossain Shirazi, Mohammad Najibul Rahman, poet Mozammel Haque, Syed Emdad. Ali, Moniruzzaman Islamabadi and others. The writer and director of 'Islam Pracharak' showed considerable appeal to the Bengali language and their literary consideration was all about reviving the sense of religion. Under the patronage and spirit of the Islamic preacher, the educational and semi-political organization 'Bengiya Muslim Shiksha Samiti' was formed.²¹ The view of proselvtizing in literary practice like 'Islam Pracharak' did not appear in 'Mihir' magazine edited by Sheikh Abdur Rahim. The main writers of the 'Mihir' newspaper were Sheikh Abdur Rahim, Pandit Reazuddin Mashhadi, Yusuf Ali Mirza, poet Mozammel Haque, Habibur Rahman, etc.²² Like 'Mihir', 'Hafez' was published to awaken the Muslims of Bengal without being ambitious in terms of literary practice. Chief among those who wrote in 'Hafez' were Mir Mosharraf Hussain, poet Mozammel Haque, poet Kaykobad, Maulvi Mohammad Yakub and others. From the first issue of 'Hafez', the Bengali translation of the Persian book 'Hakikat Musalman-e-Bangla' by Khandkar Fazle Rabbi Khan was published. 23In 1897, in an issue of 'Hafez', Mir Mosharraf Hossain wrote a poem under the pseudonym 'Udasin Pathik', focusing on the reasons for the decline of Muslim society. 'Lahri', a poetry magazine published by Mozammel Haque, a resident of Nadia, was the first magazine published by a Bengali Muslim. Most of the writers of this 'Lahri' magazine were Hindus, as the number of Muslim poets was very few during this period. The aim of the editors of all the Muslim periodicals published in the nineteenth century was to advance the backward Bengali Muslims through literary practice. About a hundred years later than the Bengali Hindu society, the Bengali Muslim society devoted itself to the practice of literature and journalism.

But some newspapers show an admirable liberality in social reform and thought. Some of these magazines functioned as various social, political, and literary mouthpieces. 'Islam Dorshon', Anjumane Warjibe Bengali, 'Bengiya Musalman Sahitya Patrika' (1918), Bengali Muslim Literary Society, 'Saymavadi' (1923), Anjumane Tarakkiye Qaum, 'Langal' (1925), Sramik Praja Swaraj Dal, 'Ganabani' (1926), worked as spokesperson of Bengali Krishak Sramik Dal, 'Shikha'(1926), Muslim Sahitya Samaj, 'Moazzin'(1928), Khademul Enchan Samiti, 'Mohammadi'(1937), Muslim League. Some dailies took sides in favour of political organizations. 'Azad' (1936), the Muslim League, 'Navyug' (1946), and the Krishak Praja Party, mainly propagated the political ideas of Fazlul Haque. The English newspapers 'Star of India' (1932) and 'Morning News' were mouthpieces of the Muslim League.24 The magazine 'Islam Pracharak' was first published in 1891 as a monthly magazine. The next stage was published for



the second time in 1899. The editor of the newspaper was Riazuddin Ahmad and the patron was Nawab Faizunnessa Choudhurani. Although the newspaper expressed conservative views on social and cultural issues, they were supporters of Bengali as a mother tongue. 'Mihir and Sudhakar' were first published in 1895 as weekly magazines. The editors of the newspaper were Sheikh Abdur Rahim, Mohammad Reazuddin Ahmed, Matiar Rahman and Syed Osman Ali. Nawab Ali Chowdhury and Nawab Salimullah were patrons of the magazine. This liberal magazine on education and society was alive till 1911.

Between the weekly Saugat and the monthly Mohammadi, there was a sharp disagreement on the question of the influence of mullahs and clerics on Bengali Muslim society. In the article 'Influence of the Mullahs and the Learned Society' in Saugat, the news states that the mullahs and maulvis accepted ancient interpretations of the Qur'an and Hadith as true. The new questions posed by modern art, logic, and philosophy, require a scientific interpretation of the Our'an-Hadith to clear all doubts about religion and Islam in particular. 25 Several articles against the mullahs were published in the weekly and monthly Saugat.²⁶ The articles appealed to educated Bengali Muslims not to believe in the prevailing notion that no one but Mullah Maulavi had the authority to interpret the scriptures. Attacking the Bengali ulema, the weekly Saugat wrote that self-indulgence seems more prominent than pure Islam to those who cover true Islam with their superstitions and self-delusions. ²⁷ The weekly offering in the monthly Mohammadi is called anti-religious for serving such statements. ²⁸ Saugat and the Monthly Mohammadi dispute came to a head when Saugat was able to create a stir among the emerging young Bengali society by initiating the reception of Nazrul Islam as the national poet.²⁹ Monthly Mohammadi accused Nazrul Islam of being heretical and anti-Prophet. To preserve Bengali culture and heritage, S. Wazed Ali, in his article in Saugat newspaper, was the first to take the initiative to form a self-governing Bengal by Bengali Hindu-Muslim joint venture. 30 But Saugat could not lead the new way of thinking for long. Due to the communal atmosphere of the time and pressure from conservative Muslims, the newspaper refrained from publishing Kazi Abdul Wadud's articles.

The fundamental elements present in Abdul Wadud's thought are based on humanism and liberalism. While a kind of social dynamism had been breaking the century-long stagnation of thought and taboos among the Bengal Muslims. He published a collection of articles called 'Nana Paryaya', in which the most controversial one was 'Sammohito Mussulman'. Abdul Wadud was joined in his battle against those moderate revisionists, whom he termed as 'Rational Shariatist'. To establish the truth of inevitable social change among the Muslims thought process of rationalism. This attitude was expressed



in several highly critical articles published in 'Soltan' and 'Mohammadi' hurling abuses.³³ Abdul Wadud gave a fitting reply to all these invectives. He published a letter in 'Dainik Soltan'.³⁴ He pointed out that it was the prime error of the Moderates that they ignored the basic human qualities of the Prophet Muhammad, placed him in a superhuman position, and idolized him.³⁵ He reminded them that the period of unimaginative and irrational thinking is over. Abdul Wadud implored the entire Muslim society to be rationalistic and to judge all the socio-religious problems with the aid of this sign and to raise a protest against clericalism. Abul Hussain echoed Wadud's voice by publishing three very important articles named 'Nishedher Birambana', 'Adesher Nigraha', and 'Fikha Phobea'. In a fitting reply to Akram Khan's critique, Abul Hussain soon published an article 'Sab-Janta', and attacked the moderate revisionists. He stressed the utility of reason and freedom in exploring the depth of the social problems of the Bengal Muslims. He admitted that the reason that the Muslims, especially those of Bengal, had failed to come out of the charmed circle of the Qur'an and Hadith. The basic fact is that the Islamic religion should be subject to changes by social transformations. He wanted the Bengali Muslims to evaluate the Qur'an in a new light and shed their dogmatism. Their viewpoint was soon challenged by the Moderates who thought that they patronised licentiousness in the name of reform.

Mohammad Akram Khan challenged Abdul Wadud's basic ideas in 'Mohammadi', The serial indicted Wadud and his co-thinkers of insisting that English-educated Muslim youth held views opposed to traditional ideas and ceremonies. 42 He freed the 'Sikha group' of all charges of impiety and irreligiousness since they accepted the authority of the Qur'an and Hadith. 43 Akram Khan made halfhearted attempts to reform Islam by making a show of protest against the exclusion of dance, music, and painting from their cultural life in the name of keeping religious sanctity. Another protector of faith Moulvi Mujirbur Rahaman, editor of the 'Mussalman' had to charge hurled against 'Sikha group' was the perpetuation of dogmatism. They should remember that the Bengal Muslim society had been undergoing a new renaissance which the so-called 'Atheists' of Dhaka had initiated. As an epistemologist, Wajed Ali had accepted the truth of 'Muslehatul Wakt' or necessities of time, and never failed to appreciate the urgency of the need for changes in socio-religious norms to make them more accommodative to social mobility. 44 He gave direction to the Anti-Mollah campaign of the Dhaka intellectuals not only by condemning them but by patronizing the Muslim youths taking part in cultural activities on which Mollah Maulvi had imposed bans but by distinctly pointing out their mockery and weakness leading to the erosion of their influence on the society. 45 Waied Ali attacked those Mollahs for their opposition to everything that went against the fundamental concept of Islam.



The change in the social scene, when the nineteenth Century rolled into the twentieth century, was marked by the emergence of an educated middle class who, apart from taking control of the social regeneration movement, added a new dimension and intellectual favour to the controversy. The novelty of the approach among the doctrine of emancipation with favour and traced its origin to the basic flok culture of Bengal. The Muslims of Bengal had been more influenced by the Catholicity of the folk culture and philosophy of Bengal than by the Islamic scriptures. 46 It would be futile to try to train the Muslim masses of Bengal in Shariah while ignoring the element of folk culture enriched by Baul, Sufi, and Vaishnav philosophy among the illiterate Bengali Muslims. In the first half of the twentieth century, the Muslim community of Bengal had been faced many problems. A different section of the Muslim Society of Bengal such as the orthodox, the progressive, and the liberal, view these problems from their angles. The literary community among Muslims attempted to focus on these social and community problems rationally and progressively. The radicals, on the other hand, drew inspiration from the celebrated 'Mutazilities'. 47 This legacy of 'Mutazila' thought was carried on by the twentieth century Bengal thinkers like Kazi Imdadul Haque, Kazi Abdul Wadud, and Abul Hossain to a logical conclusion, making the breach with the Orthodox and Moderates thorough and complete. 49 During the second half of the twentieth century, Bengal witnessed the phenomenon of Bengal Muslim intellectuals giving different interpretations to Islam to turn it into a socially dynamic force. This intellectual and cultural growth is well reflected in the writings of Bengali Muslim literati of this period and the period witnessed an intense consciousness and tremendous urge on the part of a section of writers for community uplift. The writers extensively on public affairs and their writings reflect different aspects of the Muslims' socio-religious cultural and political life.

Endnote

¹ In the census of 1881, it was found that among the Muslims living in Bengal, except 1.2 percent of Shiyas, all the rest belonged to the Sunni community.

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⁴ Pracāraka', caitra māsa, 1307 BS.

⁵ Mohammed Naimuddin, 'Akheri Zohar', Tangail, 1897, p. 58.



- 6 'Sultan'. 21 Ashar, 1330 BS.
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- 18 Mohammad Efajuddin, Alam Samaj, Ahle Hadith, 2nd year, 9th issue, Jaistha, 1324 BS, p. 407.
- 19 Munshi Reazuddin Ahmed, Mahasmashar Kobbyer Bhumikay Islamer Abamanana, Islam Darshan, 1st year, 6th issue, Aswin, 1327 BS, pp. 272-73.
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- 21 Wakil Ahmed, 'Nineteenth Century Bengali Muslim Thought and Consciousness', Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1969, p. 180
- 22 Kazi Abdul Mannan, 'Muslim Sadhana in Modern Bengali Literature', Dhaka, 1969, p. 292.
- 23 Emran Jahan, 'Struggle for Independence of Bangladesh: History and Newspaper', Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 2008, p. 154.
- 24 Ibrd, Mustafa Nurul Islam.
- 25 Saugat, Jaushta, 1335 Bengal, pp. 939-43.
- 26 Weekly Saugat, 4th Jaustha, 1335 BS, pp. 3-4/11th Jaushta, 1135 BS pp. 39-80/24th Falgun, 1335 BS, pp. 1-2/Ashwin, 1336 BS, pp. 107-119.
- 27 Saugat, Ashad, 1334 BS, p. 3.
- 28 Masik Mohammadi, July issue, 1928, p. 1.
- 29 Saugat, Paush, 1333 BS, p. 502.
- 30 Saugat, Agrahay, 1336 BS.



- 31 Kazi Abdul Wadud, 'Swaswata Banga', op.cit., 'Sammohita Mussalman', pp. 394-401.
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- 38 'Fikha Phobea', Abul Hussain, Saogat, 6th yr, 2nd issue, Bhadra, 1335 BS.
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- 45 S. Wajed Ali, Bhabiswater Bangali, Calcutta, 1344 BS/ Premer Dharma, Bharatbarsha, 1st pt. 31st yr, 4th issue, Aswin, 1353, pp. 87-97.
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