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## Syed Warish Ali: An Unknown English Educated Genius of First Generation in 19<sup>th</sup> Century's Colonial Bengal

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### ABSTRACT

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This article explores the life, career, and contributions of Syed Warish Ali, situating him within the early development of English education among Bengali Muslims in nineteenth-century colonial Bengal. It argues that Warish Ali was a pioneering yet understudied figure of the first generation of Western-educated Muslims who played a crucial role in initiating intellectual and socio-educational transformation within a predominantly conservative Muslim society. The paper contextualizes his achievements against the broader backdrop of Muslim reluctance toward English education, shaped by socio-economic decline, the erosion of traditional patronage systems, and resistance from religious orthodoxy. It highlights the institutional role of Calcutta Madrasa College and Hooghly Mohsin College in introducing Anglo-Arabic and Anglo-Persian education, which created the earliest avenues for Muslim engagement with Western learning. Drawing on his educational excellence and early teaching career, the study demonstrates how Warish Ali contributed to fostering interest in English education among Muslim students. His subsequent appointment as Deputy Magistrate and Deputy Collector following the Indian Rebellion of 1857 marked a significant milestone in Muslim participation in colonial administration. The study further emphasizes his influence on contemporaries, particularly Syed Ameer Ali, and argues that Warish Ali functioned as a bridge between traditional

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Islamic scholarship and modern Western education. Ultimately, it positions him as a key transitional figure in the early phase of Muslim engagement with modernity and colonial state structures in colonial Bengal.

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### Introduction:

Syed Warish Ali (1837/38–1873) was one of the earliest pioneers among Muslim students of colonial Bengal who showed a keen interest to acquiring Western and English education. He successfully passed both the junior section and senior section with distinction and scholarship from Hooghly Mohsin College, thereby emerging as a prominent figure in the early trajectory of modern Western education among Bengali Muslims. It is mentionable that until the mid-nineteenth century, the elite and middle-class Muslim society of British Bengal displayed limited interest in the adoption of modern Western education. In contrast, from the beginning of the first half of the nineteenth century, the neighboring Hindu elite and middle classes of colonial Bengal increasingly canoodle English education and the opportunities it offered. But for the several reasons, the Muslim community of colonial Bengal were remain keep distances from the influence of British and English education.

It is crucial to underscore that in the pre-colonial period, the condition of Muslim education was, on the whole, satisfactory. There existed a considerable inclination among the Muslim elite and middle classes toward the pursuit of knowledge. Through the traditional madrasa education system, they engaged in scholarly studies in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. Alongside Islamic theology, they also accessed knowledge of Greek and Latin literature, philosophy, arts, and sciences through these languages. Through the works of Ibn Sina, they became acquainted with Western knowledge and science. However, with the establishment of British rule in India, the traditional Muslim educational system began to go down, and intellectual engagement gradually declined.<sup>(1)</sup> Several factors contributed to this transformation; the decline of the Muslim aristocracy under colonial rule after the permanent settlement; the exclusion and state appropriation of *lakhiraj* (rent-free) lands; the departure of financial support for the traditional educational institutions; and the adverse effects of new land revenue settlements, which led to the breakdown of the Muslim landed elite. Simultaneously, the growing impoverishment of the agrarian Muslim population further undermined educational participation. Moreover, until 1835, Persian language remained the official language of the colonial administration, and even until 1866, aptitude in Persian and Urdu continued to hold significance for employment in land and judicial services. Consequently, the Muslim elite did not feel an immediate need to acquire English education. In addition, economic



adversity, political denial, and a deep-seated bitterness toward British rule contributed to a broader reluctance within the Muslim community to embrace English education. This lack of enthusiasm was further reinforced by conservative religious leaders, who actively opposed Western education. Owing to the influence of missionary activities, English education was often perceived as alien and religiously suspect. Reformist and revivalist movements such as the Wahhabi Movement in India and the Faraizi Movement also played a role in distancing conservative Muslim society from English education. Under such circumstances, the Muslim community of Bengal continued to maintain a largely conventional system of madrasa education, rooted in conservative intellectual practices. While the Hindu community in Bengal had already advanced toward modernity through the acceptance of Western education by the first half of the nineteenth century, the Muslim community, in contrast, fell significantly behind in the sphere of education and socio-economical condition.<sup>(2)</sup>

However, from the third decade of the nineteenth century, a small section of the *ashraf* Muslim community of colonial Bengal, those who particularly came into close personal contact with the British administrators they began to recognize the necessity of imparting English education to their children in response to the changing political and social circumstances of the contemporary time. The Muslim authorities of Calcutta Madrasa College (commonly known as the Hastings Madrasa College, founded in 1781 CE) also came to appreciate the importance of introducing English language instruction for their students. Around 1826 CE, an initiative was undertaken to establish an Anglo-Arabic department, and by 1829, an Anglo-Arabic section was formally introduced in this institution. Subsequently, in 1854, an Arabic-Persian department was also established to facilitate higher education for the Muslim youth of the Hastings Madrasa College. On the other hand, in the mean time there established the Hooghly Mohsin College in 1836 CE by the financial support of Hazi Muhasin Endowment fund and an English Department as well as an Anglo-Persian department were introduced there. In fact, from the mid-1820s, the first real opportunities for Muslims to receive English education emerged primarily through the Anglo-Arabic and Anglo-Persian Department of Calcutta Hastings Madrasa College, and from the mid-1830s through the Anglo-Persian department of Hooghly Mohsin College. This two prominent Muslim Educational institution provided the first institutional avenues for Muslims students of colonial Bengal to access English and Western education. During the 1840s and 1850s, the sons of elite Muslim families and middle class in Bengal presidency began to take the new opportunities, pursuing English education within these two traditional cum modern based higher educational institutions while retaining their religious identity. At the earliest opportunity, only a minute number of the first generation Muslim



students from Hooghly Mohsin College showed a great interest in acquiring English education and achieved success; among them, Musa Ali and Syed Warish Ali were prominent. <sup>(3)</sup>

Syed Warish Ali was one of the most distinguished western educated Muslim personalities of the first generation in nineteenth-century colonial Bengal. He was the pioneer, showing a new path of progress in such a Muslim society that remained backward in the sphere of modern Western education. Indeed he was an inspiration to acquiring English and western education for those students of the first generation of the Muslim society. He was the first Muslim student of the Anglo-Persian Department of Hooghly Mohsin College to be appointed by the British colonial government of India as Deputy Collector and Deputy Magistrate at Patna, marking a significant milestone in the socio-educational advancement of Bengali Muslims. <sup>(4)</sup>

### **Birth and lineage:**

Syed Warish Ali was born around 1837 CE in Cuttack, in the province of Orissa under the Bengal Presidency, at a middle-class, devoted Shia Muslim family. However, no exact or fully reliable record of the accurate year of his birth is available. His mother was the daughter of a distinguished Shia Muslim of Sambalpur namely Shamsuddin Khan. His father Syed Saadat Ali was a expert of unani medicine and a prominent Islamic scholar. By paternal lineage, Syed Warish Ali belonged to the *Sayyid* family, claiming descent from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fatimah and son-in-law Ali. This distinguished lineage was further associated with the line of the eighth Shia Imam, Ali al-Ridha (c. 770–818), whose descendants had historically resided in Mashhad in Iran. Warish Ali's great-great-grandfather was Ahmad Afzal Khan, a prominent commander in the Khurasani army of Nadir Shah. Ahmad Afzal Khan came to India during Nadir Shah's invasion in 1739 and, at the invitation of the Mughal emperor Muhammad Shah, became integrated into the Mughal aristocracy. The family initially settled in Delhi and later moved to Mohan in Awadh. Afzal Khan's son, Muhammad Tahir Khan, was among the Mughal commanders who participated in the Third Battle of Panipat. Tahir Khan's son, Syed Manowar Ali, was the father of Syed Saadat Ali and the grandfather of Syed Warish Ali. Notably, Syed Ameer Ali, who later became a distinguished jurist, was one of Warish Ali's younger brothers. During the period of East India Company rule, Syed Saadat Ali moved to Cuttack and subsequently to Calcutta. After a brief stay there, he finally settled permanently in Chinsurah in Hooghly. Syed Saadat Ali was a learned scholar of Arabic and Persian literature, as well as an accomplished practitioner of Unani medicine, and a recognized authority in Islamic theology. Significantly, his grounding in traditional Islamic education, he held a deep



regard for English education; an outlook that, in the context of his time, clearly reflects his progressive intellectual disposition. <sup>(5)</sup>

### **Educational Life:**

Like many others children of contemporary *ashraf* Muslim families, Syed Warish Ali began his early education at home under the supervision of his parents, receiving instruction in traditional Arabic and Urdu. It is noteworthy that his father, Syed Saadat Ali, was a distinguished scholar of Arabic and Persian languages, Islamic theology and philosophy, as well as Arab history. He was also an accomplished practitioner of Unani medicine (*hakim*). From an early age, Warish Ali exhibited remarkable intellectual ability and a strong inclination toward learning. In the context of the prevailing political and socio-economic conditions of the time, Syed Saadat Ali departed from conservative conventions and came to recognize the importance of imparting modern English education to his children. During his residence in Cuttack, he developed close associations with prominent British officials and educationists, including Dr. William Mowatt, the then Director of Public Instruction (D.P.I.) of Bengal, and Justice Mallet of Orissa. Their influence profoundly inspired Saadat Ali toward Western education. Both Dr. Mowatt and Justice Mallet advised him to provide his sons with a modern English education. Consequently, with the objective of ensuring Western education for his children, Saadat Ali came to Calcutta with his family and soon he enrolled his three sons including his eldest, Syed Warish Ali at the prestigious Calcutta Hesting Madrasa College which was then regarded as one of the foremost centers of learning Anglo Farsi Education. At the Calcutta Madrasa, Warish Ali commenced his first formal institutional education in the Anglo-Arabic department. Alongside his formal schooling, he continued to receive instruction from a private tutor (*maulvi*), under whom he studied Urdu, Persian, and Islamic religious subjects, thereby maintaining a synthesis between traditional and modern modes of learning. <sup>(6)</sup>

It is noteworthy that, in order to encourage Muslim students trained in Arabic and Persian to develop an interest in English and medical education, an Anglo-Arabic department was introduced at the Calcutta Madrasa in 1829. However, Syed Warish Ali pursued his studies at the institution only for a few years. Shortly thereafter, his father relocated from Calcutta and settled with his family in Chinsurah in Hooghly. It may be noted that in 1836, the Hooghly Mohsin College (initially established as the Mohsin Collegiate School) was founded, where both an English department and an Anglo-Persian department were introduced. From its beginning, the Anglo-Persian department, alongside the English department, attained considerable distinction. Consequently, Syed Saadat Ali transferred his eldest and second sons from the Calcutta Madrasa to Hooghly Mohsin College, enrolling them in the English



department.<sup>(7)</sup> Perhaps in 1846 CE Warish Ali enrolled his name at the Hoogly Mohsin College. Syed Warish Ali distinguished himself as one of the most talented among the small number of Muslim students in the Anglo-Persian department. Owing to his exceptional proficiency in English language and literature, he soon attracted the attention of the college principal, Robert Thoytes. Warish Ali was widely recognized as an outstanding student with a strong command of English, and contemporary records described him as “the most accomplished Muslim student.” He was one of the first two Muslim students of the Anglo-Persian department at Hooghly Mohsin College to successfully pass the Junior Division examination (equivalent to the upper primary level) in 1851, thereby securing a Junior Scholarship. His classmate, Musa Ali, achieved this distinction alongside him. Subsequently, in 1853, Warish Ali passed the Senior Division (equivalent to matriculation) with distinction. Notably, he was the only Mahomedan student in Colonial Bengal who has completed successfully the Senior Scholarship in a government college for the first time.<sup>(8)</sup>

**Career:**

Immediately after passing the Senior Division of the English Department at Hooghly Mohsin College, Syed Warish Ali was appointed in October 1853 by the college authorities as a temporary teacher in the Anglo-Persian Department of the same institution. In fact, he was appointed with the specific objective of encouraging Muslim students of the Anglo-Persian Department to take a greater interest in English education. As a teacher, he made sincere and sustained efforts to promote enthusiasm among the students of this department toward the study of English. He served there efficiently for nearly four years. It is mentionable that Warish Ali was the first English educated teacher of the Anglo-Persian Department of the Mohsin Collegiate School. However, shortly thereafter, he left the teaching profession and was permanently appointed to a position in the administrative service under the colonial government of Bengal.<sup>(9)</sup>

It is noteworthy in this context that the utilitarian Governor-General Lord William Bentinck, under the provisions of the Charter Act of 1833, for the first time adopted the policy of appointing educated Indians to governmental post in the British administration, irrespective of caste, creed, or religion. Subsequently, during the tenure of Lord Dalhousie (1848–1856), from around 1850 onwards, English-educated Indian students began to be recruited into comparatively lower ranks of the colonial administration. These included civil posts such as Deputy Collector and Deputy Magistrate, as well as certain military positions like in charge of Police station (Havildar). In the initial phase, for the purpose of appointing qualified Indian candidates to these important administrative posts, the British authorities sought recommendation



letters from the principals of higher educational institutions, requesting them to nominate suitable candidates. In fact, in this period Indian students were appointed to these prestigious administrative posts under the colonial rule on the basis of recommendations. It was observed that in 1850 CE, when the Principal of Hooghly Mohsin College proposed names to the District Magistrate for the appointment of Indians to the post of *daroga* (police officer), he recommended the Muslim students of the Anglo-Persian Department. He justified this by stating that they are physically stronger than students of other communities and are more suited to the active duties of a police officer. On the other hand, Hindu students generally preferred clerical positions in government offices and relatively sedentary professions, even though such posts offered much lower salaries”.<sup>(10)</sup>

However, Syed Warish Ali, a distinguished alumnus and former temporary teacher of Hooghly Mohsin College, was permanently appointed to government service shortly after the Great Rebellion of 1857. He was appointed by the British government as Deputy Magistrate and Deputy Collector of Shahabad district in Bihar. During the rebellion led by Kunwar Singh; he played a crucial role in efficiently restoring law and order in the district. He served with distinction in this capacity for approximately sixteen years. In 1873, he died suddenly by the heart failure, bringing to an end a notable administrative career.<sup>(11)</sup> Syed Ameer Ali was profoundly influenced by his elder brother, Syed Warish Ali. While studying in London, Ameer Ali was deeply distressed upon receiving the news of his brother’s death, an event that created an irreparable void in his personal life. As an expression of his enduring affection and respect for Warish Ali, he dedicated his first major work, “*The Critical Examination of the Life and Teaching of Mohammed*”, published in London, to his brother’s memory.<sup>(12)</sup>

### **Contribution and Impact:**

Until the mid-nineteenth century, there was no significant growth of interest in English education among students of the elite and middle-class Muslim society in Bengal. Owing to the conservative attitude of the Muslim community toward education, even despite government efforts to promote English and modern Western education through institutions such as Calcutta Madrasa College and Hooghly Mohsin College, particularly through their Anglo-Arabic and Anglo-Persian departments; but there was little noticeable enthusiasm among Muslim students for English education. Up to 1852 CE, only a total of four students, two from each of these institutions were successfully passed with Junior Scholarships.<sup>(13)</sup> In fact, in such a gloomy situation, Syed Warish Ali emerged as a bright and talented student among the Muslim students of Hooghly Mohsin College in the field of English and modern Western education. In his later role as a temporary teacher at the same institution, he played a significant part in fostering



interest in English and Western education among the first generation of Muslim students of the college. Moreover, Warish Ali had a profound influence on his younger brother, Syed Ameer Ali, who was also a student of the Mohsin college. His encouragement and guidance were instrumental in shaping Ameer Ali's pursuit of English and higher Western education. In this sense, Warish Ali may be regarded as one of the key sources of inspiration behind Ameer Ali, who later became one of the first Muslim post graduates of colonial Bengal. He also played an important role in motivating him to travel to England for the higher study of law. Furthermore; Warish Ali was among the early Muslims of colonial Bengal to enter higher positions in the British administration, serving as Deputy Collector and Deputy Magistrate. Through his adoption of English education and entry into government service, he acted as a bridge in establishing a new relationship between the Muslim community and the British administration. At the same time, by demonstrating the practical value of English education, he helped open new avenues of employment for Indians under colonial rule.

### Conclusion:

Syed Warish Ali stands as a key transitional figure in the early phase of Muslim engagement with modern education and colonial administration. His academic success, teaching role, and administrative career following the Indian Rebellion of 1857 not only demonstrated the practical value of English education but also inspired contemporaries, including Syed Ameer Ali. His life thus symbolizes the gradual transformation of Bengali Muslim society toward modernity.

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