

NEW LIGHT ON MUSLIM BENGAL

History of the Muslims of Bengal, volume 1, Parts 1 and 2, by Muhammad Mohar Ali, Riyadh: Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, pp683 and pp404, 1985 and 1988.

The first volume of Dr Muhammad Mohar Ali's projected three-volume history of the Muslims of Bengal brings the story down to the fall of the last independent ruler of Bengal, Siraj-ud-dowla, which also marked the beginning of British rule in the subcontinent as a whole. Written under the auspices of Imam Muhammad Bin Saud Islamic University of Riyadh where Dr Mohar Ali was appointed research professor in the department of history for this purpose, the work represents an attempt to chronicle and review the fortunes of the Muslim people of Bengal in a clear perspective and will easily challenge comparison with the earlier History of Bengal in two volumes by the University of Dhaka in the forties.

The second volume of that work edited by the noted Hindu historian Jadunath Sarkar covers exactly the same ground as the first volume by Dr Mohar Ali. The reader familiar with the work of Sir Jadunath will at once be struck by a basic difference of outlook between the two. Sir Jadunath who, to give him his due, knew Persian at first hand and relied upon Persian sources heavily, treats the Muslims throughout his work as an alien people whose downfall in the eighteenth century he hailed as the start of a renaissance in the life of the Bengalis. That such a book could be published under the imprimatur of the University of Dhaka in 1948, only one year after the establishment of Pakistan, and used as mandatory reading for students at Dhaka and Rajshahi University by several generations of teachers seems puzzling at first glance and provides a clue to the growth of the Bengali nationalism of the seventies.

Although they wrote about the successive Muslim dynasties which ruled Bengal from the 13th to the 18th century, neither Sir Jadunath nor the contributors whose essays he edited believed in the separate identity of the Muslims as a group apart; they were concerned with the history of Bengal as a geographical area rather than with the history of the Muslims. This is where they differ most markedly from Mohar Ali. He does not allow himself to forget that although many of the Muslim rulers identified themselves as closely as possible with the local population which included a large proportion of Hindus and Buddhists, neither they nor their subjects could overlook the fact that they had to reckon with a Muslim administration. This is best illustrated by the Raja Kans episode when an ambitious Hindu courtier took advantage of the

weakness of the Ilyas Shahi dynasty in the 15th century, to seize power and re-establish Hindu supremacy. Sir Jadunath Sarkar dismisses the story in the Muslim chronicles as biased; Mohar Ali feels obliged to disagree with him as to the interpretation to be placed on the event.

As a matter of fact, the term history of Bengal is a misnomer. Bengal's history since the arrival of the Muslims has been throughout the entire period of Muslim rule inextricably bound up with the rise and fall of dynasties in northern India, even when Bengal became an independent Sultanate; it must consequently be viewed as an aspect of Muslim history in India, not as the history of an isolated geographical area. Dr Mohar Ali endeavours in his book to set the perspective right.

Of course linguistically the Bengali Muslims came gradually to have a distinct identity. As early as the sixteenth century there appeared a number of Muslim writers who used Bengali as the main vehicle of their self-expression in literature, but they never thought of themselves as forming a group apart except in a limited sense. They remained conscious of an Islamic culture, more or less in the way such English writers as Chaucer in the 14th century regarded themselves as members of an European Christendom. Unless this is remembered much of what happened in Bengal from the 13th to the middle of the 18th century becomes unintelligible.

Dr Mohar Ali has been able to bring to light some Arabic sources for the history of Muslim Bengal which are not so well-known. This is somewhat balanced by his forced reliance on English translations of Persian sources due to his lack of knowledge of Persian. But he has not neglected to consult as many sources as are known to throw light on his theme, whether in the original or in translation. Among the original sources are works in Bengali, the Bengali correspondence of Muslim 'Mashaikh', which help to understand many aspects of the story from a fresh angle.

One of the facts which Mohar Ali has done well to emphasise is the role played by Muslim scholars, intellectuals as we would call them in modern terminology, in the development of Muslim society and their influence on the rulers. The part that in the 15th century the famous saint Nur-i-Qutb Alam played in rescuing Bengal from the usurper Kans is not an isolated episode but provides a striking confirmation of the position of the Muslim 'ulama. Nur-i-Qutb Alam's son Shaikh Anwar was one of the numerous Muslim 'ulama unjustly persecuted and executed by Raja Kans. Kans' eventual defeat and retreat was, as even Sir Jadunath Sarkar agrees, largely due to the intervention of Nur-i-Qutb Alam who thus can be said to have saved Islam at a critical moment in its history in Bengal; but for his intervention it might have met with the same fate as Islam in the Iberian peninsula in Europe.

On the vexed question of the ethnic origins Bengali Muslims Dr Ali has chosen to strike a balance between those who think the majority of them are descended from Hindu castes and Dewan Fazli Rabbi, a Muslim scholar, who published in 1893 a strong rebuttal of the arguments of the British official often quoted as the main source for this view. Fazli Rabbi's work was written in Persian under the title of 'Haqiqat-i-Musalman-i-Bangalah', an English translation appeared in 1895. The Origins of the Musalmans of Bengal by Rabbi examines Risley's arguments thoroughly and maintains that contrary to his best belief most of the Muslims who streamed into Bengal during five and half centuries of Muslim rule. Of course there was a great deal

of intermingling by intermarriage between these Muslims and local converts preponderate in the population. One argument which Dr Ali might have used is the difference in speech between the lowest strata of Hindus and the lowest strata of Muslims. The Muslims employ a large number of words from Arabic, Persian and Urdu which cannot be explained by assuming that they are the children of Hindus who embraced Islam. Particularly significant is the presence in the vocabulary of illiterate Muslims of north Indian Hindi and Urdu expressions which their Hindu neighbours do not use and even understand.

The ethnic origins of the Bengali Muslims have acquired a new importance since the rise of Bangladesh. The theoreticians of Bengali nationalism reject the whole of Muslim history are trying to convince the younger generation of the falsity of the concept of Muslim history. The new text-books in use in Bangladeshi schools treat the pre-Muslim rulers as their real heroes and every Muslim potentate as a usurper and alien. Even Siraj-ud-dowla whose fall at the hands of Clive was lamented by many 19th century Hindus as the beginning of slavery has now been relegated to the status of a foreigner. Although Dr Mohar Ali has not been as emphatic on this issue as one might have expected, his chapter on the formation of Muslim society in Bengal may go a long way to correct errors held almost sacrosanct in certain intellectual circles in Bangladesh.

There are two issues on which the present reviewer found Dr Ali's survey of economic and intellectual life in Muslim Bengal a little inadequate. He supports the conventional view that Bengal was a fertile and prosperous country and cites the testimony of foreign travellers to substantiate it. This does not explain the extreme poverty in which the lowest strata of people lived. Bengali poets left graphic accounts of the sufferings of common people which do not square with the belief that the country could always have been overflowing with milk and honey. For while the land was undoubtedly fertile and bore plentiful harvests in normal times, it was also subject to natural calamities such as floods, cyclones, and tidal bores which caused widespread death and gave rise to devastating famines occasionally.

The other thing which needs to be remembered is that attempts by successive Muslim rulers to assert their independence from Delhi which was the intellectual and nerve centre in the Muslim period cut Bengal off from a vital source of inspiration. Bengal failed on this account to contribute to the Mughal tradition of culture development in north India or to Mughal technology. Thus when the present generation of Muslims try to detach themselves from the main stream of Muslim history and disown the Islamic past, they are confronted with a sense of vacuousness or emptiness which has no parallel in the consciousness of their co-religionists elsewhere. Hence the attempt to find a substitute in indigenous culture completely divorced from Islam.

There are many paradoxes in the history of Muslim Bengal which need to be understood correctly before we can understand the ambivalence in its attitudes to the tenor of Muslim history in general as well as the real identity of its Muslim inhabitants.

There is another fact which neither Dr Mohar Ali nor the earlier historians have emphasised sufficiently. Bengal or for that matter Muslim Bengal had seldom political unity except for brief spells under powerful rulers. British rule changed all

<http://www.bmri.org.uk>

this, but until then the territory remained a battleground over which different dynasties fought for control. The local chiefs who asserted their autonomy periodically during the Mughal period are sometimes praised for their refusal to submit to the emperor at Delhi, but culturally and economically this had the effect of depriving Bengal of the best fruits of Pax Mughalica.

Dr Mohar Ali maintains quite correctly that it was not the lure of high office or better employment opportunities or direct persecution which account for large scale conversions to Islam. The Muslim rulers's policy of tolerance extended even to the encouragement of such revivalist Hindu movements as that launched by Chaitanya in the in the 15th century. The truth, as Sir Jadunath Sarkar admits in The Dhaka University History of Bengal, was that it was the magnetism of the nobler ideals set before the Hindu public, the example of the lives of Muslim saints, and even Muslims officials, which attracted so many adherents to Islam. The intellectual and cultural darkness which characterised the life of pre-Muslim Bengal has interestingly received more emphasis in Jadunath than in Mohar Ali.

These points can be elaborated ad nauseum. But however, one may differ with Mohar Ali on points of detail his work must be acknowledged to be a major achievement. That is all the more reason why the occasional stylistic blemishes which should have been carefully pruned out jar on the reader. Dr Mohar Ali deserves special praise for the extensive bibliography he has provided. Its special feature, as we have said above, is the inclusion of books and writings in Bengali which are usually neglected in standard books.

By Altaf Ali

(Pen-name of late Professor Dr Syed Sajjad Husain, who was the Vice-Chancellor of Dhaka and Rajshahi Universities)

Source: Impact International Magazine, London, 1989.