

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE OF BENGAL IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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Abstract

The death of Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707 A.D. was a turning point in the history of Indo-Pakistan, especially in its eastern part. It was followed by two political changes in Bengal, one comparatively minor, the establishment of an independent Nizamat in 1717 A.D. and the other of a revolutionary character, the foundation of the British Empire in the country as a result of the Battle of Plassey, 1757 A.D. Although those two political changes affected the fortunes of the Bengali people in some respect differently. They however introduced far-reaching social and economic changes in the country.

In consequence of the establishment of an independent Nizamat in 1707 A.D. with Murshid Quli Khan, Bengal was cut off from the great Imperial social system of the Mughals. As the Provincial Subahdari was a replica of the Mughal Imperial system and independent Nawab Nazims maintained that structure with little or no modification, the Bengali society under the Nizamat continued to represent the characteristic of the Imperial social system reflecting its culture. The Mughal (or Persian) aristocracy and culture dominated the Bengali society in the eighteenth century. This political change was, however, associated with two different significant social development in the Bengal, the assimilation of the ruling Muslims, and the rise of a new social and political force of the Hindus in the country.

The political changes of 1757, which culminated in the establishment of the British Empire in Bengal, introduced more momentous changes in the Bengali society, the super session of the Muslim aristocracy by the new Hindu aristocracy and the break-down of the economic life of prosperous Muslim community of the country. Within a few years of the loss of political power, the Bengali Muslims found their economic life shattered and ruined on account of the severe blows they received from the newly-established British rule in the shape of the Permanent Settlement of 1793 A.D., the resumption of Holdings and the displacement of the court language, Persian, by the local languages and English in the early thirties of the nineteenth century. Being thus dispossessed of power, zamindaris, estates and employment, the Muslims fell from their positions of influence and status in society.

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Socio-Culture Of Bengal

The establishment of the British rule continued to exhibit the essential characteristics and features of the Muslim Bengal Society and culture of the period of the Nizamat. The British Government maintained the administrative machinery and revenue system of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan. Following the example of the Bengali Nizamat, they left the local affairs in the hands of the local people. Persian culture remained the dominating force in the Courts of the British Government and with the zamindars and Hindu Rajas as well. Sir Jadunath Sarkar observes, "..... British governor added something to the superstructure while the basis remained the same as before."¹ However, the Persian language prevailed in Bengali society till it was ousted from the Court by Lord William Bentinck in 1833 A.D.

One noteworthy feature of the Bengali society of the eighteenth century, particularly of the period of the Nizamat (1717 – 1772 A.D.), was the absorption of the Nawab and ruling Muslims in Bengal. Nawab Murshid Quli Khan and his successors adopted Bengal as their home. The courtiers and associates of the Nawabs, adventures, fortune-seekers, traders, scholars, poets, theologians and others who came to Bengal from Persia were domiciled there. Murshidabad, Hughly, Dhaka (Dacca) and other important towns and trading centers developed into prosperous Persian and Shi-ite colonies. Before Nawab Murshid Quli Khan, the Mughal Subadars in Bengal came for a short term and as such they did not develop much sympathy for the soil and its people. What is more, they amassed millions of rupees during the period of their Subahdari and carried the same to Delhi and Agra. Nawab Shayista Khan took ninety millions of rupees from Bengal in his sixteen year Subahdari. Subahdars Khan Jahan Bahadur Khan and Prince 'Azimush-Shan amassed twenty millions and eighty millions of rupees in one year and nine-year Subahdars respectively from Bengal. In this way many other Mughal Subahdars, Diwans, Bakhshis and other official used to enrich Northern Hind (India). This practice, however, stopped when Murshid Quli Khan, his successors permanently settled down in Bengal and identified themselves with the interests of its peoples. Henceforth, the Nawab's wealth, his income and expenditure, benefited the Bengali people and they could also look up to him as one of their members. As the sons of the soil, the Murshidabad Nawabs had naturally developed a more sympathetic attitude than the Mughal Subahdars to the welfare and prosperity of the people of Bengal, because their interests were inseparably bound together in the independent Nizamat.

In their eagerness to be one with the Bengali people and to conduct themselves as Bengali rulers, the Murshidabad Nawabs encouraged and took part in local social institutions and festivals. Karam Ali, author of *Muzaffarnamah*, says that Shahamat Jang and Salabat Jang, nephews of Nawab Alivardi Khan, enjoyed the Holi festival for seven days in the garden of Moti Jhil and the author himself was present there.² The same author informs us that, after the treaty of Alinagar (February 9, 1757), Nawab Siraj ud-Daulah also enjoyed the Holi festival in the palace of Mansurganj.³ Ghulam Hussain,

¹ Sir Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Bengal*, II, published by Dacca University. p.105

² Karam Ali, *Muzaffarnamah*, pp. 86-a 68-b.

³ *Ibid*, p.123-b.

author of *Siyar al-Mutakhkharin*, says that Nawab Mir Ja'far Ali Khan participated in the enjoyment of Holi with all his men at Azimabad (Patna).⁴ These are but a few typical instances which illustrate the merging of the Murshidabad Nawabs in the Bengali Society.

The Bengali Nizamat of Murshidabad followed nationalistic policy in administration and patronized the Bengali intellectuals and offered them positions of honour and dignity in the state. Before the establishment of Nizamat, the officials of the civil, military and revenue departments of the Bengal Subah (Province) were supplied from Delhi and Agra. The flow of talents from Upper India had thus stopped after Bahadur Shah's death (1712) as the Imperial authority disintegrated and several independent dynasties sprang up of the Mughal Empire. The gap in the civil and military services and revenue offices was filled up by men drawn from the Bengali Society.

Nawab Murshid Quli Khan appointed Raghunandan, Alamchand, Jaswant Ray, Sri Krishna and many other Hindus in responsible posts in the Government. Hence, Sir Jadunath Sarkar remarks, "Under the later Nawabs more than one Bengali Hindu held the rank of Rai-i-Rayan (Sanskrit equivalent of Khan Khanan) with the function of the chancellor of exchequer. So many Bangalis of the Brahmin, Vaidya and Kayasth castes claim descent from Rai-i-Rayans that these ancestors must have been chancellors only to district magistrates, like the Nawabs of Dacca or Purnea. Kayesth Ghoses of Gava (Brisal) are called Dastidars, from having once held charge of the lights of the Bengal fleet under the Nawab. Old official titles like Bakhshi, Sarkar, Qanungo, Shahna (Police, prefect), Chakladar, Tarafdar, Munshi, lashkar and Khan are still held by the Bengali Hindu families, reminding us of their ancestors' careers in the age of the Nawabs."⁵ Indeed under the successors of Murshid Quli Khan, the Hindu official aristocracy rose rapidly in position, wealth and influence. Alam Chand, who obtained the title of Rai-i-Rayan, became the Finance Minister and the most confidential counselor of Nawab Shuja' ud Din and Nawab Sarfaraz Khan.⁶

Hindu official aristocracy rose to the zenith of its prosperity, influence and social status in the reign of Nawab Alivardi Khan. Hence Orme says, "Nawab Alivardi preferred the services of Hindus in every office and dignity of state, and seemed to regard the increase of their wealth as his own." Orme further observed, "The Rajas both of Bengal and Bihar sought the protection and exemptions from their fellows Gentoos (Hindus) and contributed not a little to increase their fortunes. Thus was the Hindu connection become the most opulent influence in the government, of which it pervaded every department with such efficiency that nothing of moment could move without their participation or knowledge."⁷

⁴ Ghulam Hussain, *Siyar al Mutakhkharin*, II, p. 266.

⁵ Sir Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Bengal D. U. II*, p. 410.

⁶ Briggs: *Siyarul-Mutakhkherin*, p.254-255 and Orme: *History of Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan*, p.29.

⁷ Orme: II, p. 29.

The zamindars used to pay their revenues to the Murshidabad treasury through the banking of Jagat Seth. The Nawabs also sent their tributes to the Emperor at Delhi, through the agency of this great banker.⁸ Omichand, a Sikh, had also prosperous trade, in Calcutta, Murshidabad, Cassimbazar and other places of Bengal and Bihar. Like Jagat Seth, he had also considerable influence at Murshidabad Court. Orme observes, "By present and services he (Omichand) had acquired so much influence with the principal officers of the government that the Presidency in times of difficulty used to employ his mediation with the Nawab. He possessed of four millions of rupees."⁹

The rise of a new class of landed aristocracy was another significant feature of the eighteenth century Bengal. It was also the creation of the Murshidabad Nawabs. The Malzamini System of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan introduced this new landed aristocracy in Bengal whose position was confirmed and made hereditary by Lord Cornwallis in 1793 A.D. Before the Mal-zamini System, the State used to get its revenues in the lump from the old land-proprietors of Bengal, called zamindars, Bhuyans and Rajas. As they were irregular in the payment, and in many cases unable to pay the State dues, Murshid Quli Khan introduced a new arrangement of the land revenues of Bengal, called the Mal-zamini System. He ousted many of the old zamindars, and appointed ijaradars or revenue-farmers on the contract that they would receive a percentage of the revenues they would collect from the peasants.

In the absence of any other suitable terminology, the Bengali society in the eighteenth century may be termed as a feudal organization. Of course, it assumed the aspect of a feudal society, but it differed widely from the feudal institutions prevailing in the European countries.

In Bengal, the relations between the Nawab and the landlords and the British Government and the zamindars were not of a feudal nature, the performance of military services and the payment of occasional feudal dues. The zamindars were rather the intermediaries between the State and the people for collection of State revenue. They had no laws, civil, criminal or financial, of their own, like the European feudal lords; one legal system prevailed throughout Bengal either under the Muslim Nizamat or under the Company's rule. Moreover, unlike their counterpart in European countries, the Bengali peasants were not the slaves or serfs of their landlords. There was no forced labour and the Bengali peasant was not permanently tied to the land to be treated as commodity. The Government, either of the Nawab or of the Company had strict orders on the zamindars to work for the improvement of the land and look after the welfare of the peasants.

The Nawab lived luxuriously in the palaces of Murshidabad and maintained a pompous court in the palace of Chihil Satun. Ceremonials proceeded and followed the Nawab where-ever he went. He kept a splendid body-guard round his person and was surrounded by the dignitaries like the hajibs, naqibs and others who were always in attendance on him. Of the Nawabs of Bengal, Murshid Quli Khan and 'Alivardi Khan

⁸ Briggs: Ghulam Hussain Tabatabai, *Siyarul-Mutakhkherin*, p. 255.

⁹ Orme: II, p. 50.

were men of frugal habits. Though a Hindu convert, Murshid Quli Khan was deeply religious and puritan in life in the best traditions of his great masters, Emperor Aurangzeb. The author of *Tarikh-i-Bangala*, Salimullah, says that Murshid Quli Khan did never in his life take any other consort except his one married wife. From break-fast to noon he employed himself in copying the Quran, and maintained above two hundred qaris, beadsmen and chanters who were constantly employed in reading the Quran and other acts of devotion. He also despised luxury, particularly in dress and food. Like Murshid Quli Khan, Nawab Alivardi Khan was also extremely temperate, and "always lived the husband of one wife,"¹⁰ Sarfan-Nisa to whom he was deeply devoted. He sometimes personally supervised and suggested new methods of cooking to his cook.

Shuja-ud-Din, Sarfaraz Khan, Siraj-ud-Daulah and Mir Ja'far Ali Khan lived an extravagant life and were fond of the harem. Nawab Shuja-ud-Din maintained a big harem of women, slave-girls, dancing girls and eunuchs, and he was surpassed by his son Nawab Sarfaraz Khan whose harem is said to have contained 1500 women. Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah had also a big harem and after his fall his women were presented by Nawab Mir Ja'far Ali Khan to Robert Clive.¹¹ His second wife Lutf-un-Nisa was originally a slave-girl named Raj Kunwar. Mir Ja'far Ali Khan's seraglio consisted of many women, concubines and slave-girls. His wives, the famous Munni Begum and Babbu Begum, originally, belonged to a troupe of dancing girls.

While enjoying the Holi festival in the garden of Moti Jhil, Shahamat Jang and Salabat Jang filled 200 reservoirs with coloured water and collected heaps of abira (red powder) and saffron. They also brought more than five hundred dancing girls, dressed in costly robes and jewels that used to appear in a body every morning and evening mustering from every pivot of the garden. At the marriage of his adopted son Ikram-ud-Daulah, younger brother of Siraj-ud-Daulah, Shahamat Jang brought from Delhi a dancing troupe to which Munni Begum belonged, for a fee of rupees ten thousand.

Next in social rank to the ruling family were the official nobles, who enjoyed special honours and privileges in the society. They rolled in wealth and comforts and vied with one another in display and splendour. The official aristocracy hailed from both the communities, the Muslims, and Hindus. The Upper India Muslims, particularly the Parsian, who came to Bengal with Murshid Quli Khan, Shuja-ud-Din and Alivardi Khan, generally formed the Muslim aristocracy in the Nizamat. The Hindu official aristocracy was rather, as we have seen before, the creation of the Nawabs of Murshidabad. The opulent commercial and landed aristocracy also lived in princely style. Omichand's establishments illustrate the magnificence of the commercial aristocracy. Orme writes of Omichand, "The extent of his habitation, divided into various departments, the number of his servants continually employed in various occupations and a retinue of armed men in constant pay, resembled more the state of a prince than the condition of a merchant."¹² The zamindars, many of them dignified with the titles of Rajas and Maharajas, such as Maharaja Kirtichandra of Burdwan, Raja

¹⁰ Orme:II, History of Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan. P.29.

¹¹ Verelst, Rise & Progress of the English in Bengal, p.30.

¹² Orme:II, History of Military Transaction of British, p. 50.

Gopalsinghdeva of Bhisnupur, Raja Asadullah of Birbhum, Maharaja Krishnachandra of Navadhip (Krishnanagar), Raja Ramanth of Dinajpur and Rani Bhawani of Natore, imitated the Nawab in majesty and splendour.

The defaulting Zamindars also had often very bad time at the Court. They were sometimes kept prisoners at Murshidabad and punished in various ways. Sometimes they were made to stand on bricks, were whipped, pulled by the nose.¹³ Salimullah, author of *Tarikh-i-Bengala*, says that Saiyid Raza Khan, Nawab Murshid Quli Khan's grand-daughter's husband and Deputy-Diwan of Bengal, introduced several species of severity for the Zamindars, who were irregular in the payment of revenues.

One of such species needs especial notice. "He ordered a pit to be dug, about the height of a man which was filled with human excrement in a state of putrefaction. The zamindars who failed in their payments were ducked in this pit. Because in the Hindi language Vaikuntha signifies Paradise, Saiyid Raza Khan called this infernal pit by that name."¹⁴ Except Salimullah, no contemporary historian refers to this kind of obnoxious punishment prevailing at the time of Murshid Quli Khan. Salimullah, who flourished long after Murshid Quli Khan evidently derived his information from the exaggerated reports, and hence his evidence cannot be accepted literally. It, however, leaves an idea that the zamindars had to feel that they had also to serve hard masters.

In the strict sense there was no middle class in the eighteenth century Bengali society. The smaller government officers and Zamindars and middle-sized traders and businessmen can however be grouped into the middle class. Economically well off and educationally enlightened, the middle class enjoyed a social status inferior to the aristocracy but superior to the common people.

Next to the middle class came the common people who formed the bulk of the population of Bengal which numbered about fifteen millions in the middle of the eighteenth century.¹⁵ They were mostly cultivators and agricultural labourers. Though generally illiterate, they, however, had not to suffer from want of food, clothing, and other necessities of life. Their life was simple, and wants were few and hence they could be easily satisfied. By tradition and temperament, the Bengali people were fatalists and for everything of their life, they resigned themselves to the will of God.

In the eighteenth century, the Bengali society was composed of two main religious communities, the Muslims and Hindus, though a small number of Buddhists also existed. Islam had succeeded in acquiring large converts in Bengal than in any other part of India. Hence in East Bengal, Muslim formed majority. The success of Islam in this area was largely Muslim darwishes, who came here in large number in the wake of Muslim expansion, and offered the superior ideals of Islam to the down-trodden and oppressed mass of the population, both Hindus and Buddhists. As a result, Islam became the all-pervading religion in Bengal; the mass of the Muslims, however still retained

¹³ Sir Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Bengal*, II, D. U.p.98

¹⁴ Sir Jadunath Sarkar, *History of Bengal*, I, D. U.

¹⁵ Alexander Dow, *Hindustan* (1768-69 A.D.). p110.

their traditional social set-up, popular mythological beliefs and prejudices, the language. Out of political necessity, i.e, the maintenance of their independent rule, the Turkish governors, the Saiyid Sultans, the Afghan rulers and the Murshidabad Nawabs also conducted themselves as Bengali rulers and extended sympathy and patronage to the local institutions and practices.

The Muslims similarly influenced the Hindu society in various ways. The Hindus had veneration for the Qur'an and Muslim saints. The Brahmins used to consult the Qur'an to find out auspicious day for the journey and the Hindu merchants set out for voyages praying to Allah for their safety. It is known from Ksemananda's *Manasamangala* that in the steel-chamber prepared for Laksmindra a copy of the Qur'an was kept along with other sacred chants, of the Hindus to avert Manasa-devi's wrath.¹⁶ The Hindus had great respect for the great saint Hazrat Shah Jalal. They prayed to him for a son or the fulfillment of their heart's desires. The Hindus even attached themselves as disciples to Muslims pirs. The poet Krishna-Haridas introduced himself in his poem as a disciple of Tahir Mahmud.¹⁷

This interchange of ideas and customs led to the evolution of a common cult known as the Satya Pir in the Bengali Society. Though this institution had its origin in the fifteenth or sixteenth century, it however flourished in the eighteenth century. The contemporary Bengali literature reflects how the Hindus and Muslims in general believed in the miraculous power of the Satya Pir and in adoration offered 'sirni' (Sweet) to him. With regard to the origin of the Satya Pir cult, Bharatchandara says that a 'faqir' appeared before a Brahmin and asked him to give sirni (Sweet). As the Brahmin refused, the 'faqeer' disappeared, and reappeared in the form of the Hindu god, Hari, and again disappeared. Being now convinced that the Hindu god Satya (Hari) and the Muslim pir (faqir) were in fact spiritually the same, the Brahmin adored Satya Pir and offered him sirni (Sweet).¹⁸ The poets of the period remarks that by adoring Satya pir every body obtained his heart's desire. Poets like Vidyapati, Arif, Krishnagaridas and others in Hindu community of came closer to the Muslims. So we find Krishnagaridas advocating Satya Pir's saying that there was no difference between Bishnu and Allah.¹⁹

Thus through understanding and cooperation, the Hindus and Muslims of Bengal lived in peace and harmony. The Nawabs favoured the Hindus in office, land and trade in the country. The Hindus also gave their wealth to the cause of their benefactors. Orme writes that the Seths of Murshidabad alone gave Nawab Alivardi Khan an enormous sum of three millions of rupees as a contribution to support the expenses of the Maratha war.²⁰

¹⁶ K. K. Datt: *History of Bengal Subah*, p. 94.

¹⁷ Sukumar Sen, *Bangala Sahityer Itihasa*, 1, p. 819.

¹⁸ Bharatchandra-SATYA-NARAYANER BRATAKATHA. Kanka, a Brahmin boy accepted Islam and composed Vidyasundar Kahani to glorify Satyapir: Muslim Bangla Shahitya.

¹⁹ Sukumar Sen's *BENGALA SAHITYER ITIHASHA*, 1, p. 819.

²⁰ Orme: 11, p 5.

This was noticed even by the foreigners. Col. Scott wrote to his friends in 1754, "Jentue (Hindu) Rajahs and zamindars were much disaffected to the Moor government and secretly wished for a change and opportunity of throwing off their tyrannical yoke."²¹

This feelings of Hindu animosity to the Muslim rule is also revealed in the writings of a contemporary Hindu poet, Ramanandadas, who in this Ramayana Kavya says, "The country has become the property of the 'Mlechhas' (Muslims) and the goddess of fortune has been born as a slave-girl in a low family. I shall forcibly snatch away the kingdom from these foreigners and give the Sovereignty to the Brahma."²² Hill remarks that, quite in keeping with the tradition of Indian history, the Hindu aristocrats and zamindars joined the English in overthrowing the Nawabi and establishing the British power in Bengal. They even popularized the English cause at the Court of the Mughal Emperor and persuaded him to grant the Diwani of Bengal-Bihar-Orisaa to the Company.²³

Two movements of the Bengali Muslim society of the period under review deserve notice: one Faraizi, and the other Muwahidun, nicknamed as Wahhabism by the European writers, and it is by this name that is known to history. Haji Shari'attullah (1764-1840) born at Bahadarpur in the district of Faridpur in East Bengal was the founder of the faraizi movement. It was an agrarian and socio-religious movement directed against the oppression and extortion of Zamindars and superstitious and un-Islamic practices which had crept in the Muslim society over the time. Indeed after the loss of sovereignty, the Bengali Muslims suffered much under the Hindu Zamindars. Again, on account of the influence of the Hindu social customs, many un-Islamic practices, such as the adoration of the pirs, and the tombs of the saints and others had found their way into the Muslim society. Haji Shari'atullah felt it his duty to save the Bengali Muslims from the clutches of the oppressive Zamindars and to salvage their social and religious life from all prevailing evils. His idea was to educate the Muslims and to establish an ideal Muslim society of the early days of Islam. So long as he lived he championed the cause of the Muslim peasants and tried to improve their condition in every way.

The leader of the Wahhabi movement in the India was Saiyid Ahmed Shaheed of Rai Bereli (in Uttar Pradesh). It was a movement to free the Muslims from political dependence and to establish an ideal Muslim State in the sub-continent. The Bengali Muslims had substantial contribution to this political and social movement. Nisar Ali, better known as Titu Mir (1782-1831), a disciple of Saiyid Ahmed Shaheed, fought as a Mujahid against the Hindu Zamindars and the British power in Bengal. In several engagements against the local Zamindars he defeated their forces and established a fort at Narikelbaria in 24 Parganas. He also beat several detachments of British forces. He was, however, defeated and killed in a fight with a large force of the British in 1831.

²¹ S.C. Hill: Bengal, II, p. 328.

²² Sukumar Sen: Bangala Sahityer Itihash, pp. 680-81.

²³ Orme: 11 ,p. 196, and Datt: History of Bengal Subah, pp. 102-4.

The Bengali Muslims also helped the Jihad movement with men and money. Several thousand Bengali Mujahids took part in the wars against Sikhs and the British in the frontier. The Jihad movement, however, declined with the martyrdom of Sayyid Ahmed Shahid in the Battle of Balakot in 1831.

Position of Women:-

In the eighteenth century of Bengal, women were generally dependent on men, and lived in the seclusion of the harem. Verelst observes both Muslims and Hindus considered exposure of the women as worst dishonor. Appearance of the females in public with bare faces or heads was condemned in the society. Their husbands were all in all to them and it was in their husband's house where they would live honourably. Jaya's advice in the *Annadamangala* of Bharatchandra also illustrates this.²⁴

Though dependent on men, some of the women however played a distinguished role in the socio and political affairs of Bengal during the Nizamat period. Zinatun-Nisa, daughter of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan, took active part in the Government of her husband, Nawab Shuja-ud-Din. It was on account of her step-son, Muhammad Tariq Khan, as Deputy-Governor of Bihar, and appointed `Alivardi Khan to that post which she formally confirmed by investing him with a *Khil`at* the patent."²⁵ Ghulam Husain says Nawab `Alivardi Khan had much respect for Zinatu-Nisa and he never approached her without a 'profound bow'. Durdan Begum, daughter of Shuja'ud-Din, exercised great influence in Bengal politics and was more respected in the province than her husband Murshid Quli II, Deputy-Governor of Orissa under Nawab Sarfaraz Khan. She continually incited her husband to avenge the death of her brother Sarfaraz Khan, but he hesitated to fight superior strength of `Alivardi Khan. The high-spirited princess at last threatened that if he failed to assert himself, she would abandon her husband and make over her riches and province of Orissa to her son-in-law, Mirza Baqir Khan. The husband had to give way to wife's influence.²⁶

Sarf-un-Nisa Begum, wife of Nawab `Alivardi Khan, was another great lady who exercised profound influence in political and social affairs of her time. The active part she took in her husband's battle against Murshid Quli Khan II and the Marathas, even having the risk of being captured.

Sarf-un-Nisa worked as the supreme political officer in Bengal when Nawab `Alivardi Khan had been fighting against the Marathas.²⁷ Ghulam Husaain says. "Nawab `Alivardi Khan was accustomed to pay the highest difference to his wife's advice and the tenderest regard to her wishes." Because of her counsel, the Nawab cancelled the appointment of his nephew and son-in-law Sayyid Ahmed Khan to the Deputy-Governorship of Bihar in favour of Siraj and also nominated the grand-son as his successor to the Masnad.

²⁴ Bharatchandara: *Annadamangala*, I, p. 26.

²⁵ Briggs: *Siyar*, p. 253.

²⁶ Charles Stewart: *History of Bengal*, p. 511.

²⁷ *Ibid.* p.512.

Sarf-un-Nisa continued to have the same influence in the time of Nawab Siarj-ud-Daulah. It was at her intercession that the Nawab released Holwell and other prisoners, brought from Calcutta to Murshidabad. Holwell paid glowing tribute to this remarkable lady: "A woman whose wisdom, magnanimity, benevolence and every amicable quality reflected high honour on her sex and status. She influenced the usurper's councils and was ever consulted by him in every material movement in the state, except when sanguinary and treacherous measures were judged necessary, which he (Siraj-ud-Daullah) knew she would oppose, as she ever condemned them when perpetrated, however, successful, predicting always that such politics would end in the ruin of the family." Her daughters, Ghasiti and Amina, on the contrary, fell into the vices of luxury and obtained a bad reputation in social life. Ghasiti Begum also participated in the politics of her time; but her energies were diverted to destruction rather than construction. She was greatly responsible for the fall of her sister's son, Nawab Siraj-ud-Daullah in 1757.

Like Sarf-un-Nisa, Lutf-un-Nisa, wife of Nawab Siraj-ud-Daullah, was an ideal of womanhood. She was a faithful partner to her husband in his weal and woe. In his flight from Murshidabad after the battle of Plassey, Lutf-un-Nisa accompanied him, in spite of his unwillingness, and took care to mitigate his exhaustion, fanning him continually with her handkerchief. After his husband's sad end, she lost all taste for life and refused with scorn several proposals for marriage. Cherishing as a memory of her husband, this young and beautiful widowed queen faithfully mourned for him for 34 years, till her death in 1790. Though reduced to a starving allowance, she maintained some Quran-readers and a langar (charity-kitchen) for the good of her husband, and also strewn flowers and lighted lamps while she adored at his grave.

The wife of Nawab Mir Ja'far aLi Khan, Munni Begum, had considerable influence in the reigns of her husband and his successors. The company's Governors and officials held her in high esteem and valued her counsel and help so much that they called her the 'Mother of the Company'.²⁸

Rani Bhuwani of Natore was another distinguished ladies of the eighteenth century Bengal. Her intelligence, wisdom, ability in administration, and above all, her generosity and charity earned her a unique position in the society of time. Jayaduraga Chaudhurani, a woman Zamindar, led a revolt against the oppressive Zamindar Devisingh of Rangpur. Yet another lady, Devi Chandhurani, took the leadership of a native revolt against the Company's rule at the time of Warren Hastings. These reveal that Bengali women, notwithstanding the general system of seclusion in the harem and dependence on men, played an important role in the vital affairs of the politics and social life.

Marriage:

The system of early marriage prevailed in then century Bengali society. Generally, the marriage of a girl at an advanced age was disfavoured in the society and the parents of such a girl incurred universal odium. Crawford observes: "The Hindus are so scrupulous

²⁸ B. N. Banerjee: Begams of Bengal, p. 54.

with respect to the virginity of their brides that they marry extremely young, although consummation is deferred till the first menstruation, when they perform the ceremony of punarviva (Second marriage) with various rites, and customs similar to those of the first marriage." Srafton adds:

"They are married in their infancy, and consummate at 14 on the male side and 10 or 11 on the female, and it is common to see a woman of 12 and with a child in her arms. At 18 their beauty is on the decline and at 25 they are strongly marked with age."

The contemporary literature corroborates Srafton's reflections. The girl had no choice whatsoever in the selection of their husbands and the boys in that of their wives. The parents and guardians did not consider their opinion to be at all necessary. Sometimes a young, beautiful and an accomplished girl was married to a deaf or a blind or an old man.²⁹ There was also the evils of 'kulinism' of dowry system among the Hindus.

Early marriage prevailed since a long time past. So Emperor Akbar promulgated an ordinance marriage. He forbade marriage before puberty and made the consent of the bride and bridegroom essential in marriage contracts. The Emperor disapproved polygamy and dowry system.³⁰ Polygamy was obtained among Muslims, among upper class and Kulin Hindus. Bhavananda Majumdar of Bharatchandra's Annadamangala, had two wives. Atyabodha Kavya's hero, Mana, had two wives, Sumati and Kumati.³¹

The practice of 'Sati' (Spouse dying with husband) prevailed in Bengali Hindu society. The government, however, disfavoured it. Grauford says that the permission of the local 'faujdar' was essential for this practice, because he was to see if the widow was willing to sacrifice her life voluntarily or she was forced to such an act. Widow marriage was unknown among the Hindus. Rani Bhowani of Natore and Raja Rajballav of Dacca tried to introduce it, but they failed owing to the opposition of Hindu clerics.³²

There were certain superstitious practices in the society. People believed in incantations and charms. Wives used to have recourse to it to win the love of their husbands and men to capture the hearts of women. From Bharatchandra's reference to the family of Bhavananda we get an idea that wicked women of the type of Sadhi, adept in practices of charm, were common in the society of the time. Incensed oil, flower, vermilion, etc., were used in these practices.³³

Dancing and music were the favourite amusements of the people. There were professional dancing-girls and musicians in the society. Grauford says that the people would spend the whole night in watching dance and musical performances. They were also fond of listening to the poetical compositions.

²⁹ Bharatchandara: Annadamangala ,pp 97-99 and Datt, pp. 70 -71.

³⁰ Balochman: Ain-i-Akbari, p.1

³¹ Sukumar Sen I, p. 685.

³² Datt, p.52.

³³ Bhartachandara: p. 128.

Dress:

The upper class Muslims would put on an ijar (pajama), a chola (closed coat) and a jama (long shirt) with a muslin slash wrapped round the waist. Sometimes they wore a short close vest of fine worked muslin over the jama. Occasionally they put on shirt. A head-dress, either a turban or a topi (cap), formed essential part of their dress. They also had a deman underwear. On ceremonial occasions, the princes and wealthy persons put on gorgeous, richly adorned with diamonds and gems. The princes used, in addition, precious ornaments, necklace, bracelet and earrings of gold and diamond, and weapons like the sword, bow and arrows. Rich people also dressed themselves with ornaments and jewelleryes.

The aristocratic Hindus would either put on a pajam or a dhuti as their under garments and a banian (chola, close short coat) and a jama as upper garments and on special occasion, they dressed themselves with rich turbans.

The Muslim aristocratic ladies' dress consisted of a chola and a daman (petticoat) reaching the heels and lined with the most gaudy silk and adorned with lace. They also wore an 'orna' (scarf) of fine piece of muslin. The Hindu ladies put on fine cotton and silk saris. Nilambari saris and saris set with gold and jewel were highly prized by them. They used Kanchuli (tight-breast) as an upper garment. Sometimes ghaguries (skirt) were worn by them in place of 'saris'. On festive occasions, the Hindu ladies, particularly of the upper class, would put on ghaguries, jam, nibibandh (belt) and orna like the Muslim ladies of the time. Silk cloth, handkerchiefs and shawls were generally used by the rich. Leather slippers were occasionally used. Slippers of fine woolen cloth or velvet embroidered with silver, gold and precious stones were used by the rich and the princes. The poor could afford only the wooden sandals.

Women were fond of ornaments and wore various kinds of ornaments of gold, silver and copper according to their means. Middle class women adorned themselves with nath and vesara on the nose, kundala, jhumka and pasa as earrings and bajus on their arms. Fillet (Smrithi and tara) and nupuras (anklets) were in fashion.³⁴ Gold ring, bracelet and necklace of pearls, gems and rubies of value were used by the aristocratic and wealthy ladies. The women of poor class could wear ornaments of brass, cowries and other inferior metals. Women generally used scented hair-oils, hair pins, ribbons, gold bodkins, flowers, cua (attar), kumkum (saffron), kasturi (musk), vermilion, collyrium, lace-dye, etc., in hair-dressing and toilet.

Food

The people used to take rice, various kinds of fish, vegetables, meat, milk and sweets as their food. Coffee found use in this period. Nawab `Alivardi Khan would take coffee in the morning. Ganja and tobacco, smoking with hookah, were prevalent in the society. Betels were also common among all classes of people.

³⁴ Bharatchandara, Anandamangala, p. 157.

Communities

In every village or town peoples of various callings would live so that socially and economically it formed almost a self-sufficient unit. There were cultivators, weavers, oilmen, milk-men, fishermen, washermen, cobbler, blacksmith and others living in different localities of the village or town. Besides, the people mentioned above, various other classes of people, such as businessmen, money-lenders, and even the European traders lived in important towns. The Kotwal was the most imposing person in the town. Entrusted with the multifarious responsibilities for the maintenance of law and order, moral and social security, the Kotwal wielded power in such a despotic way that he became a terror to the people.³⁵

Commercial relations

Since long time Bengal had traded with Persia, Arabia, Georgia, Turkey, Armenia, Asia, Minor, China, Philippines, Malayan, Island, Ceylon, Kashmir, Nepal, Tibet and various parts of India. She exported raw silk, silk manufactures, cotton cloths, rice, sugar, opium, indigo, ginger, turmeric, long pepper, etc., and imported cotton, pepper, drugs, fruits, cowries, tin, etc., from them. Alexander Dow writes that till the establishment of British rule and the commercial monopoly of the East India Company the balance of trade was always in favour of Bengal. Bengal was considered as "a sink where gold and silver disappeared without the least prospect of return." Bengal supplied rich cargoes for 50 to 60 ships yearly.

Besides silk and cotton, Bengal had sugar, carpet, jute-carpet and jute-cloth industries. She also manufactured excellent guns which were admired even by the English gunsmen.

The writing of the Europeans reveals that on account of manufactures and extensive favourable trade. Bengal swam in prosperity during the period of the Nawabi. A poem entitled 'Bengal Desh O ki Ghazal' by a Jain poet Nihal, who came to Bengal in the thirties gives an idea of the great prosperity of the cities of Malda, Murshidabad, Baluchar, Cassimbazar and others at the time in industry, trade and wealth.³⁶

Agriculture had been an important element in the economic life of Bengal. Dow remarks that, watered by many navigable rivers and canals and inhabited by fifteen million industrious people, Bengal was marked out by the hand of nature "as the most advantageous region of the earth for agriculture." Orme also observed that Bengal, particularly its lower part, produced food-stuff in such plenty that it was often sold at the rate of two pounds for a furthing.³⁷ Various kinds of paddy were grown.

³⁵ Bharatchandara, p. 193.

³⁶ Sukumar Sen, p. 601.

³⁷ Orme: II, History of Military Transaction of the British Nation in Indostan II, p. 4.

Every town had its own markets, where varieties of articles, food-stuffs, cloths and other necessities of life were bought and sold. The city markets were stuffed luxurious articles: muslin, velvet, vanat, gems, pearls and rubies. There were many bilati (European) articles of fancy price and fashionable designs, which were however heaped together for want of customers.³⁸ important market had roaring trade. According to Holwell, the customs duties on grain only at Bhagwangola amounted to three lacs of rupees a year.

Strict orders were maintained in the important markets by local zamindars. One officer was to examine the weights and measures, quality of articles and regulate the prices. The violators of these regulations were subjected to severe punishment.

As there was abundance of produce in the country, the necessities of life were naturally very cheap. We know from Madhavacharya's *Chandikavya* that the expenditure in an ordinary marriage did not exceed three pice (Paisa) in the later part of the seventeenth century.³⁹ In the early part of the eighteenth century, in the days of Nawab Shuja-ud-Din (1724-34) also, the prices of articles were so low that rice sold at 8 maunds per rupee, and the western gate of Jahangirnagar, which had been closed by Shaista Khan with the injunction that no governor should open it till one rupee bought 8 maunds of rice, was ceremoniously opened by Jaswant Ray, the Diwan and Naib to the Deputy Governor of Dacca.

In 1729, the prices of the necessities of life in Murshidabad were as follows: fine rice 1 maund 10 seers a rupee, coarse rice 7 maunds 20 seers a rupee, wheat 3 maunds to 3 maunds 30 seers a rupee and ghee 11 seers a rupee. In 1751-52 prices rose by more than 30 p.c. particularly because of the Maratha ravages (1742-51).

In 1760, the price of fine rice was Rs. 1/15/- per maund and coarse rice Rs. 1/10/-. The rising tendency in price continued and in 1770 there came the great catastrophic famine which carried away one-third of Bengal's population. Writing about the condition of the time, Stavorinus remarks that an average man, earning only a penny and a half per day, could not get even a tenth part of the rice he needed for the family and consequently the whole family perished miserably. In 1776 however when the market became a bit stable, rice of various qualities sold from 16 seers to 1 maund 10 seers a rupee, wheat 30 to 33 seers, oil 6 to 7 seers, and ghee 3 to 4 seers, a rupee.

With the exception of the Maratha ravages and the terrible famine of 1770, Bengali people in the eighteenth century, particularly under the Nawabi, on the whole had a prosperous life and they had plenty to eat.

³⁸ Rammandas, Vidyasundara, p. 6.

³⁹ D.C. Sen, *Bangala Bhasa o Sahitya*, 233.

Culture

One of the most outstanding features of the eighteenth century Bengal was the predominance of Persian culture and education in the social life. The Mughal ruled had broken the narrow isolation in which Bengal had been living for some centuries and introduced her to a wider and refined Persian culture of the Mughals. The stream of Persian culture and learning, which flowed to Bengal with the highly educated and cultured Subahdars, Diwans, Amirs, Bakshish, Qazis, Munshis, Waqia navis and other officials, and scholars, religious teachers, Sufis, physicians and others who came in their wake, reached its climax when an independent Nizamat was established by Nawab Murshid Quli Khan in Murshidabad. Murshid Quli Khan was by education and association a Persian and his successors were really Persians. Hence in them Bengal got the rule of a Persian Shia dynasty. Naturally the Murshidabad Court became the centre of attraction of the Shias and Persians. The disorders and insecurity that prevailed in Persia in the period of the alter Safavi forced its scholars, theologians, physicians, philosophers, Sufis, merchants and other fortune-seekers to and migrate to Bengal where their brethren, the Nawabs of Murshidabad, were ever ready to welcome them. These talented Persian immigrants settled particularly in Murshidabad, Hughly and Jahangirnagar. As a result, these three cities became the most illuminating centres of Persian learning and culture.

The Nawabs of Murshidabad, Murshid Quli Khan, Shuja-ud-Din, Sarfaraz Khan and Alivardi Khan in particular, were highly educated and cultured persons with profound interest in learning and education. Murshid Quli Khan II, Deputy-Governor of Dacca and son-in-law of Nawab Shuja-ud-Din, was one of the eminent poets and men of letters. He composed fine verses under the poetical surname of Makhmur. Barq, another great poet of the time, earned the name of the parrot of Bengal, Aqdas, was another talented Persian poet. The historian Abdul Hasan Gulistani, the author of *Mujmil-ut-Tarikh ba'd az Nadiriya*, was one of the gifted refugees from Persia to Bengal towards the close of Alivardi's reign. Ghulam Husain also speaks of the scholarship of another Persian refugee, Muhammad al Medoo Bed Ali. In the list of the men of medicine, the name of Muhammad Ali Khan, the Court physician of Nawab Sarfaraz Khan, comes out prominent.

The educated and enlightened Hindu families regarded education incomplete and ineffectual without a knowledge of Persian. Ramparsada Sena, author of *Vidyasundara*, was sent by his father to a Maulvi where he mastered Persian in the course of a few years. In his epic we get an idea of his knowledge of the Persian language. The great poet Bharatchandra was rebuked by his elder brother for learning only Sanskrit and Bengali, ignoring Persian which was so essential in national life.

There was 'Khanqahs'⁴⁰ of Pirs and Sufis almost in every important locality of Bengal. These were centers of Persian language and culture. As these 'khanqahs' were frequented by both Muslims and Hindus, they served as the most useful institution for popularizing Persian language and Sufistic ideas, which greatly contributed to the

⁴⁰ Bharatchandra: *Annadamangala*.

cultural fusion of the two peoples of Bengal. A school of heterodox Sufism known as 'Faqirism'⁴¹ originated in Bengal in which the Muslims as well as Hindus formed into a common mystic association. Sir Jadunath Sarkar observes that the prolific crop of Sufi verses written in Persian in Bengal illustrates this fusion of culture. The Bengali literature of the time also reveals the great influence of Sufism in Bengali society. Many Hindus and Muslim poets composed verses on Sufism in Bengali. Their written works express that they belonged to 'Faqirism'. The Hindu poet, Krishnaridas, was a disciple of a Muslim preceptor (Pir) named Tahir Mahmud. Many Muslim poets such as Shaikh Chand, Muzammil, Muhammad Sahfi, Aqil Ahmad, Kanu Faqir were followers of Faqirism as it is reflected in their writings.

Through the Persian language, the Bengali society came in possession of the rich romantic literature and folk-tales of Persia which they utilized in either contributing their talent to the development of the Persian literature or enriching their own Bengali literature. Indeed the introduction of romance in the Bengali literature is the most remarkable contribution of the Muslims. The Bengali Muslim poets first wrote on romantic topics, such as Laila-Ma'nun, Suhrab-Rustam, Yusuf-Zulaikha, Saif-ul-Muluk, Badi-uz-Zaman, etc., and this gave a new lease of life to the Bengali language and literature. Even other languages like Urdu were influenced by the Persian writings of the Bengali Muslims. So, Mir Ikram says, "The most popular story books in Urdu are translation of the Persian romances of Sheikh Izzatullah Bengali."⁴²

Persian also contributed a new literary form, such as ghazal, to the Bengali language and literature. Even the Hindu poets made use of Persian forms and words in the composition of their verses. The writing of Bharatchandra, Ramananda, Vidyapati of the eighteenth century, and others illustrate this fact. Indeed it can be rightly said that the Persian romance, ghazlas and vocabulary together with the religious and historical topics connected with Islam helped the growth of what is known as the Muslim Bengali language and literature.

The Muslim contribution to the development of Bengali language and literature was more substantial and distinguished than that of the Hindus. It was the Bengali Muslim rulers of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries who first invited the Bengali language to their Courts and extended their liberal patronage to the Bengali poets. The patronage of the Muslim rulers and nobles as well as the contribution of the Bengali Muslim poets saved the hitherto neglected Bengali language from being destroyed under the pressure of Brahmanical Sanskrit, and promoted its healthy growth. So, Dr. D. C Sen remarks, "Bengali would scarcely have got an opportunity to find its way to the courts of the kings, if the Hindu kings had continued to enjoy independence."

The encouragement thus given to Bengali by the Muslim rulers and noble stimulated the Hindu chiefs and zamindars to extend their patronage to the Bengali poets. So we find that in the eighteenth century many poets flourished under their patronage. Bharatchandara (1712-61) compiled his epic 'Annadamangala' under the patronage of

⁴¹ Sukumar Sen, *Bangala Sahityer Itihasa*, Vol. I.

⁴² Ikram, *The Legacy of Pakistan Culture*.

Krishnamangala as court poet of Gopal Krishandeva (1712-48) of Bishanpur. Narasingha Basu, author of Dharmamangala (1737) received the patronage of Asadullah, zamindar of Bribhum. Kritichandara of Burdwan liberally helped his court poet Gungaram Chakarvarti in the composition of his Dharmamangala (1711). Thus under the patronage of zamindars and nobles, Bengali literature prospered and we find a large number of poets, both Hindus and Muslims, of the eighteenth century displaying their talent in composition of verses on various subjects. Besides the poets mentioned above, the names of Ramaparsada Sena (1769), author of Vidyasundara, Ramakanta Misra (1768), Kavindra Chakravati (1757), Ramananda Jati (1768), Faqirram (1702), Gangaram, author of Maharastra-Purana, Krishnaharidas and Vidyapati come out prominent among the Hindus in this period.

In the eighteenth century, at least in its early part, Bengal made remarkable progress in education. Rawlinson remarks, "The high degree of culture in Mughal India was largely due to the excellent system of education. Education was considered as a religious duty."⁴³ This observation of Rawlinson is equally applicable to Bengal as other parts of India. There was well-organized system of education and elaborate facilities for its diffusion in the country. Though education was generally left to the local initiative yet the liberal patronage of the rulers, nobles and chiefs to the learned and learning by generous grants stimulated the growth of educational institutions in every important locality of Bengal. According to Adam's Report on the Vernacular education, there were 100,000 institutions in Bengal in the early part of the nineteenth century.

In fact, there was no a mosque or Imambarah in which professors or Arabic or Persian were not maintained. Maktabas sprang up wherever a few families of Muslims lived. Not only the Persian and Arabic literature, but the science of medicine, philosophy, mathematics, astrology and other subjects were taught in those institutions. We know from the contemporary Bengali works Shamsar Gazir Puthi that often the same school used to teach Arabic, Persian and Bengali.

As there were madrasahs for learning Arabic, Persian and Islamic subjects, there were also 'tols' (Schools) for Sanskrit learning. Murshidabad, Azimabad, Dacca, Hughly and Nagor were illustrious centers of Arabic and Persian learning in the eighteenth century. The magnificence, Haji Muhammad Mohsin, made Hughly a centre of attraction to Muslim scholars and students from all parts of Bengal. Navadhip was likewise an illuminating center of Sanskrit learning in the eighteenth century. It was the Oxford of Bengal.

⁴³ Ibid.

Education was encouraged in every sphere of life and society. Scafton says that the boys of rank and family generally began their education at 5 or 6. Besides Arabic, Persian and other subjects, they were taught to say their prayers. At 8 or 9 they were also taught to ride and use arms. This manner of education continued till the age of 13 or 14.

In the eighteenth century, education had permeated even the lower class of the Bengali society. We know of some Bengali works written by men belonging to the lower strata of the society. Ramnarayan Gopa wrote *Devayani Upakhyan* in 1778 and Bhagyamanta Dhupi wrote *Harivansa* about the same time. Madhusadhan Napit (barber) composed *Nala-Damayanti* and he observed that his grandfather and father were good poets. Suvankari formed an essential part of the elementary arithmetic in primary education.

The above discussion proves that during the eighteenth century, particularly under the Muslim Nizamat, the Bengali society was economically prosperous; culturally and educationally advanced. But the prosperity and progress of the Bengali Muslims in particular declined with the advent of the British power in Bengal and loss of Muslim sovereignty. The successive blows of the British Government, however, proved too fatal to them, because they got disorganized, shattered and their economic, cultural and educational life was ruined. First, the army and office, which were an important source of their income, were closed to them. William Hunter says, "We shut the Musalman aristocracy out of the Army, because we believed that their exclusion was necessary to our own safety." The severest blow to the Muslim society came in the shape of the Permanent Settlement. William Hunter, of the Bengali Muslims this way also acknowledged by who said, "It most seriously damaged the position of the great Muhammadan Houses. For the whole tendency of the Settlement was to acknowledge as the land-holders the subordinate Hindu officers who dealt directly with the husbandmen. It elevated the Hindu collectors who up to that time had held but unimportant posts, to the position of land-holders, gave them a proprietary right on the soil, and allowed them to accumulate wealth which would have gone to the Musalmans under their Rule."⁴⁴

Another yet below to Bengali Muslims came from the Resumption Proceedings by the British Government. The government resumed to the State all the Wakfs and other rent-free lands which were granted by the Muslim rulers and nobles to the religious and educational institutions and persons. This destroyed the educational and cultural institutions of the Muslims. William Hunter prove this. He says, "Hundreds of ancient families were ruined, and the educational system of the Musalmans, which was almost entirely maintained by rent-free lands, received its death-blow. The scholastic classes of Muhammadan emerged from the eighteen years of harrying, absolutely ruined.... Since then the profession of a Man of learning, a dignified and lucrative calling under Native Rulers has ceased to exist in Bengal."⁴⁵

⁴⁴ N. W. Hunter, *The Indian Musalman*, pp. 153-54.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 177-78.

The scandalous policy of the British towards the Muslim families and educational institutions did not stop with the Resumption Proceedings. They even misappropriated the income of the Muslim estates granted for Muslim educational institutions. At the time of his death in 1806, Haji Muhammad Mohsin left his vast property for the promotion of Muslim education. The British authorities however diverted this grant to non-Muslim education, in criminal disregard to the will of that pious and large-hearted Muslim.

Thus due to distrust and one-eyed policy of the British, the Muslims found by 1831 their social and economic life ruined, their educational system disorganized, and their cultural life assailed and shattered in every conceivable way, and the prosperous and cultured Muslim community receded from the fore-front to the poor and backward class of the Bengali society.