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## **The Cosmopolitan Islam: Trans-national Ideological Interactions in Colonial Bengal**

**Seema Ahmed**, *Asst. Prof, Dept. of English Literature, Lokepara Mahavidyalaya, Birbhum, West Bengal, India*

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### **Abstract**

Islam in Bengal in the first half of twentieth century is the outcome of the confluence and interaction of ideas from multiple transnational locations such as Turkey, the peninsula and Iran (Persia). The global capitalist modernity under the colonial rule and the international politics pre- and post- WW-I resulted in the globality of ideas between India, the Arab countries and the West. The Khilafat movement in India occasioned the native intelligentsia to fight for the preservation of the Caliphate positioning them in global political and religious networks. The Muslim intellectual history at the time is marked by an expansive and transnational orientation while also giving birth to multiple, often contradictory positions. Bengal was no different from wider Indian subcontinent. Syed Ameer Ali, like the Ali brothers, advocated for the Caliphate whereas poet Nazrul Islam, Iqbal and Barkatullah welcomed the abolition of the Caliphate by Kemal Ataturk. Apart from this political trans-territorial influence, the cultural impact of the transnational interaction with Persia was immense in Bengali literature. The political and cultural modernity spearheaded by Ataturk and Persian poets instigated rethinking of political and cultural positions in Bengal of the young Muslim thinkers associated with the Muslim Sahitya Samaj (MSS) who started a movement called Emancipation of the Intellect (*Buddhir-Mukti Andolan*). This paper proposes to examine how this globality of ideas shaped Bengali Muslims' idea of self, socio-cultural identity and political discourse. The paper would discuss the writings of Syed Ameer Ali, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Kazi Abdul Wadud (member of MSS) to understand the transnational confluence of ideas leading to a vibrant public discourse on Bengali Muslim identity, Islam and its role in modern society.

**Keywords:** Cosmopolitan Islam, Bengali Muslim modernity, Intellectual history, Colonial Bengal

*"The literature of the time and of the place, like the literature of any place at any time, was a social product and not a collection of figments of the brain."*

- Mihir Kumar Sen, *The Visvabharati Quarterly*, 1956-57, Pg.- 345

The above quotation aptly summarises the symbiotic relation between literature and the community which produces it. The literary and cultural output of the Bengali Muslims during the colonial period can be better understood through a close analysis of its relation with the socio- cultural- political and religious movements before and after the British imperialist intervention of Bengal/ India. This paper maps the transnational traffic of ideas in colonial Bengal and the Bengali Muslim response to it through textual analysis of prominent literary and cultural figures from the region. Although the literary and cultural sphere of the Bengali Hindu have justifiably drawn academic attention, the Bengali Muslims' thought geography remains under explored. The religious and cultural ideas of the Bengali Muslims of the colonial period deserves serious attention for a comprehensive understanding of the Bengali Muslim religious and cultural self and how it was shaped by cross-currents of ideas from the so called 'Muslim world', international politics and the globality of thought on the Caliphate in the 1920s and before. The Bengali Muslim public discourse during the colonial period emerges as a vibrant, divergent and highly plural field which challenges the homogeneous idea of the Muslim community in Bengal. This paper, however, will restrict itself to the analysis of three major Muslim figures of Bengal namely, Syed Ameer Ali, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Kazi Abdul Odud and their selected writings. Through an analysis of their engagement with the broader trans-national ideas of literature, society and religion (Islam), the paper shows how Islam became a polyphonic site of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism in Bengal during the colonial period.

### **Research Questions and Methodology:**

This paper, therefore, addresses the following research questions-

1. What were the trans-territorial ideas that made their home in Bengal during colonial period?
2. How did Bengali Muslim intelligentsia respond to those thought-currents?
3. How did such interactions help them in the process of identity (ies) formation?

In order to accomplish the work, both primary and secondary sources are used. The work is based on the selected literary works of Syed Ameer Ali, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Kazi Abdul Odud. It also deals with archival materials and secondary sources on Bengal and the Bengali Muslim community.

### **Intellectual Climate in Bengal: Bengal Renaissance and Beyond**

The early 19<sup>th</sup> c Bengal was marked by what is known as the 'Bengal renaissance' initiated by Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and other Brahmo Samaj members. This movement was restricted mainly to the elite Bengali upper caste Hindu society of central Calcutta. The Muslims of Calcutta and the rural Bengal remained almost unaffected by the awakening as they were engrossed in various socio- political upheavals under the colonial rule. Bengal being a pot- pourri of several religious groups in the early 19<sup>th</sup>c, it witnessed the desperate contestation among Christians, Brahmos, caste Hindus and Muslims. However, it also created spaces of cultural exchange across the porous transitional borderlines through intellectual curiosity and linguistic exchange. In the early 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>c the Muslims of Bengal were under the influence of the ongoing reformist movements initiated by the *Faraizi* movement and the *Tariqah-i-Muhammadiya* movement. They were undergoing different kinds of ideas on Islam, identity and self. In one hand, figure like Maulana Karamat Ali Jaunpuri (*Taiyuni* movement) was advocating to the

Muslims that India is *dar-ul-Islam* (land of peace/ Islam) instead of *dar-ul-harb* (land of war), on the other, Jamaluddin al-Afghani's visit to India and Kolkata in 1879 inspired the idea of pan- Islamism among the Muslims of India. Afghani's writings were translated in Bengali language which contributed to the proliferation of his idea shaping the context for Khilafat movement in India. The Bengali Muslim print culture and the periodicals and magazines offered platforms for voicing their thoughts on different aspects of life. This literary sphere demands special attention to map the intellectual traditions of Muslims of Bengal during the colonial period.

### **Muslim Community in the 19<sup>th</sup> colonial Bengal: Cross-currents of Ideas from National and Trans-national Field**

The late 18<sup>th</sup> was marked by various political contestations and legal interventions on behalf of the British colonialists. The introduction of the Permanent Settlement Act (1793) in Bengal by Lord Cornwallis marked a severe blow to the Muslim landlords and the socio- economic structure of the community underwent dramatic change. The first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> experienced religious movements centering on the socio- economic crisis of the community. In the middle of the century few elite Urdu speaking Muslims in central Calcutta realized the need of accepting the western education and the support of the British government in the promotion of the community's condition. This shift in the elite Muslim class's preference for loyalty to the British Raj was further strengthened by Syed Ahmad Khan and others. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857-58 caused an interruption in this process as the colonialists became more suspicious over the Muslim community's intention. But the consistent effort of the Urdu speaking elite Muslims of Calcutta and the preaching of Maulana Karamat Ali Jaunpuri diverted the course of Bengal's Muslims towards loyalty and self- improvement. Nawab Abdul Lateef (1828- 1893), educator and social worker, formed the Mohammedan Literary Society in 1863 and remained an active member of Syed Ahmad Khan's Scientific Society of Aligarh. Nawab Abdul Lateef and his associates emphasised on the medium of Urdu as the medium of education and rejected Bengali as it was the language of the lower - class Muslims of Bengal. The language debate (Urdu- Bengali) haunted the community throughout the century and reached a sort of resolution by discarding the Dobhashi Bangla and adopting the standardised Bangla (*tatsama*) template offered by Bhai Girish Chandra Sen. Amidst all these, it was Syed Ameer Ali who cherished a broader vision of the community and acted for the educational and political upliftment of the community on pan-India basis. Bengal and the entire India in the last decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> was witnessing the anti- Turkish stand of the British Empire and was divided on their reaction. The elite class of Calcutta and the rural Bengal were divided in their response. While the rural mass (from districts like Malda and Dinajpur) and a section of the elite class showed relentless support to the cause of the Ottoman Caliphate, there were other voices too who hailed the change. Syed Ameer Ali belonged to the group of elites who supported the cause of the Ottoman Caliphate and imagined the Muslim identity in a transnational sense.

### **Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928) and His Trans-national Thoughts:**

Syed Ameer Ali, an eminent jurist in the Calcutta High Court, scholar and a thinker, was born on 8<sup>th</sup> April, 1849 in Oudh (present Uttar Pradesh). But he grew up and spend major part of his life in Bengal. He graduated from the Mohsin College in Hooghly and took admission in Calcutta University. After completing M.A. and B.L. from Calcutta

University in 1869 he went to London for studying law. From 1873- 1904 he led a very active and productive life in various spheres of service. After his retirement he settled in London and died on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1928 there.

The address by the Right honourable Syed Ameer Ali on Islam in the League of Nations in 1919 implicitly establishes his position on Turkey and the caliphate. League of Nations was an organisation established after the end of World War I in order to maintain international peace and integrity of sovereign states (member states). At the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 the Treaty of Versailles was signed and the formation of the League of Nations was undertaken. The first meeting of the council was held on 16 January 1920. In his speech on Islam to the Council in 1919 Syed Ameer Ali attempted to highlight the glorious past of the Islamic civilization. His speech was intended to include Islamic States specially Turkey within the ambit of the League of Nations. Several points were raised by him to the council. The chairman also put forth certain queries to which Syed Ameer Ali responded convincingly. The significant point in his speech was to give emphasis on the possibility and capacity of Turkey as an Islamic state and its inclusion to the League as the League is meant for equality and cooperation. According to him Turkey started its modernisation project since 1838. Its approach to western modernisation keeping pace with Islam is how it distinguishes itself from the Arab and Islamic States. In 1846 Turkey separated secular education from the religious education. Here Ameer Ali mentions James Baker's observation,

“It was the beginning of a new life, of a modern life in Turkey” (Pg. 132). He criticizes the biased mentality in judging the Muslims of the Islamic States. The community is not hostile to the foreigners in their land. Following their religious code of conduct (Islamic Law) every Muslim state offers ‘capitulations’ i.e. the foreigners in allegiance of the Muslim State (called *muslamens*) come to visit the land and are provided with the entitlement of being protected. The state provides them protection (*aman*) to all these visitors to stay peacefully and do business. Thus, the Islamic states celebrate liberalism by preserving the rights of others. Turkey has been ravaged by several wars over a long period of time (war with Russia, Balkan war) still it claims to be a civilised state enriched in tradition and modern values. The cause of Turkey is the concern of every Muslim according to him. In his words, “the ferment which is going on at this moment among the vast Moslem population within the British Dominions, not only in India but in other parts of the world, shows the keen interest they feel in the fate of Turkey, and no British statesman will find it possible to ignore their feelings without great detriment to our world- wide Empire” (pg. no. 133).

Turkey has always tried to cooperate Europe (specially England) to control conflict and preserve peace but so far, she has not received proper cooperation from the other side. At the hour of historical crisis England must listen to the voice of the Muslims and support to sustain the Caliphate in Turkey. Both Shia and Sunni Muslims believe in *Imam* which is of two kinds- chief Imam and minor Imam. The Caliph (the chief Imam) gives the validation to the prayers uttered by the minor Imam. Without his presence, there is no connection between the Imam and the devotees. The spiritual and temporal independence of the chief Imam is necessary. He then provides a historical understanding of the necessity of the Caliph in the Islamic States. The absence of Caliph in Cairo for two years caused ‘spiritual darkness’ as there was no chief imam to validate people's prayers. The restoration of the

position in 1261 brought relief to them. In 1516 the Caliph of Arab entrusted Selim I, the Caliph of Cairo, with the solemn attributes of the Prophet. This shows the importance of Caliph to the Muslim states. When asked about the importance of Hedjaz, as the League of Nations aims to include certain part of the Arab and not even the province of Nejd (dominated by the Wahabi sect) is excluded, Syed Ameer Ali reminds that the Muslims of India do not accept the supremacy of Hedjaz. Rather Indian Muslims see Hedjaz as the hindrance to their Caliph of Turkey over the period of time. Although the Turkish Caliphate signifies the *Sunni Church* both Shia and Sunni Muslim of India claim to make Turkey and its Caliphate free from any kind of dominance and guardianship from European dominion (England).

The onslaught on Turkey dates back to 1798. From 1798 to 1912 several countries like Russia, Greece, Italy and the Balkan League have invaded and attacked Turkey in order to defeat and eradicate the caliphate but Turkey survived all those and emerged as a self-sustained glorious state. Turkey symbolised to the Muslims of the Indian Subcontinent the spiritual guiding spirit amid the loss of Islamic power almost all over the world. Since the Russo-Turkey war of 1877-78, Muslims of Bengal and India started to express their disgust over the invasion as it meant to them another blockage over Islamic territory. The connection between the Bengali Muslims (Indian) and the Turkish Caliphate was never a concrete one; rather it was a symbolic relation as Turkish Caliphate signified the vanguard of Islam in the world to them. Attack on Turkey therefore ignites "an urge to support the Turks became a dominant theme among Bengal Muslims at this time, and this was clearly reflected in public discussions and deliberations in Muslim newspapers and periodicals" (Pg. no. 87, Mohammad Shah: Rafiuddin Ahmed).

Syed Jamaluddin al- Afghani, the originator of the pan-Islamic idea, advocated unity among Muslims of the world to retaliate the Western imperialism. His visit to India and subsequently to Bengal in 1879 aroused the spirit of pan-Islamism among Bengali (and other Indian) Muslims. His books written in Persian and Urdu were translated in Bengal immensely. Bengali Muslim figures like Reyazuddin Ahmed Mashadi, Maulavi Meyarazuddin Ahmed, Sheikh Abdur Rahim, Mohammad Reyazuddin Ahmed, poet Mozammel Haq started translating Afghani's work in Bengali. His book *Al-Urwa al-Wuthqawas* was translated massively (in Bengali and Urdu) in Bengal and North India. His anti-Western imperial stand paved the ground for the uprising of Indian pan-Islamic movement. Europe tried to replace the supremacy of Turkey by replacing it with Saudi Arabia. The European power intended to dismantle the Caliphate by replacing it with parliamentary form of government, was the perception of the Muslims. By this the territory of Islam will be tarnished and contracted. It was feared that "the risk of loss of Muslim superiority in the Turkish empire if Turkey were to become a republic under the new constitution of 1924 promulgated under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk (1881- 1938) declaring Turkey a secular state" (pg. no. 89: Mohammad Shah). The Europe was also blamed to inducing the party of the Young Turk in order to dismantle the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid (1876- 1909).

Syed Ameer Ali's defence for Turkey in the Turco-Italian war (1912) was supported by the Hindu and Muslim opinions in Bengal and all over India. According to A. Yusuf Ali,

"In pressing for the integrity of the Khilafat after the Great War, he took his stand on the unity of Islam rather than on any bias for or against Turkey. He

stood for the rights of Persia in a paper he read to the Central Asian Society in 1918" (The Right Hon. Syed Ameer Ali: A. Yusuf Ali: 1928).

Syed Ameer Ali's endeavours were directed to the retention of the Ottoman Caliphate and their rights (and of Persia) which would keep intact the traditional political structure of the state, a symbolic celebration of the pan-Islamic unity for the Muslim community of the world. Kazi Nazrul Islam, on the other hand, a fluid literary personality who celebrated the potential literary and linguistic resources of Persia (Iran) and other Muslim countries of Middle East, the liberation of Turkey under Kamal Ataturk and never envisioned the Muslim community strictly on the religious line only. He celebrated Islam and never treated it as a closed water tide compartment. Islam to him was an infinite source of different ideas which he incorporated in many of his writings and whenever felt ostracized he broke the shackles.

### **Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) and His Trans-territorial Aesthetic Universe:**

Kazi Nazrul Islam, the rebel poet of Bengal, was born on 24 May in 1899 at Churulia in Burdwan district of present West Bengal. The Kazi families/clan of Churulia received untaxed lands (*lakhiraj*) from the Muslim Kings. But Nazrul's father sold all his wealth due to his addiction to playing pasha. Nazrul and his family spent their life in utter poverty. He received his early education in the village madrasa and learnt Arabic and Persian. His school education got interrupted repeatedly due to economic crisis. From his childhood he used to accompany the *leto* troupes of his village. He used to write *leto* songs for the group. During this time, he came into close contact with the Mahabharat and Ramayana and delved deep into the Puran and local folklores.<sup>1</sup> His concept of Hinduism got deepened at this time period. Being the son of the Kazi family, he already was introduced to the Islamic tradition. At this early stage of his life both Islamic and the Hindu tradition enriched his thinking. In order to sustain his life and educational drive he used to work as a servant at a railway guard's house and at a roti shop (bakery). But time and again he proved his intelligence and earned support from others for education. His diverse childhood experience shaped his personality and influenced his perspective towards life. Finally, he got admission in Raniganj's Searsole Raj High School in class seven. During his school day he met Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay, a Hindu Brahmin and Sailajananda Ghosh, a Christian and became very close friends. While reading in this school he came into close contact with Shree Nibaranchandra Ghatak, a revolutionary teacher who was associated with the contemporary Jugantar group.<sup>2</sup> Nazrul's first introduction to the rebellious spirit was ignited through this great rebel. After finishing his matriculation exam from Searsole Raj high school he joined to the Anglo-Indian Army against the Germans in First World War in 1917. He joined to the Bengali regiment called 49<sup>th</sup> Bengalis. Both Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay and Kazi Nazrul enrolled themselves for the Army but only Kazi could go for it as Sailajananda's great grandfather managed to cancel his enrolment. According to various sources, Nazrul never went to the battlefield and he used to stay in Karachi soldier barrack waiting for order. Therefore, it was not possible for him to experience the horror of battlefield in person but he experienced the impact of war from his everyday experiences at soldiers' barrack. His life in Karachi cantonment shaped him and his writings dynamically. According to Radha Chakravarty, Nazrul was introduced to communism with the unfoldment of the Russian Revolution while he was in the Karachi stint and other events like the Turkish Revolution, the Irish Revolution also consolidated

his political stance.<sup>3</sup>

### **Writings of Kazi Nazrul Islam:**

“My birth in this country and this society does not mean that I shall be constricted and confined to them. No, I belong to all countries and to all men”.

Kazi Nazrul Islam was the epitome of fresh ideas. His writings enumerate a break from the earlier trends in Bengali literature. The writings of early phase were very much inspired by his exposure to the changes in the Middle East/ Arab world/ West Asia. His poetry “Kamal Pasha” is a celebration of that change where autocratic rule gave way to democracy. “Anwar” was written in the celebration of the bravery and fearlessness of the fighter from the Turkish group who remembers Anwar Pasha, his leader, and motivates himself with the burning spirit of freedom. “Ranabheri” was written in the backdrop of the war between Greece and Angora- Turk government. It was proposed that a number of ten thousand soldiers would go from India in Kamal Pasha’s support in this war. Inspired by this proposal Nazrul wrote this poem where he wishes Islam’s victory in the hand of Kamal Pasha. He gives call to the Indians, “let’s go to the brave land as brave/ the captivated are proceeding to free the unchained country” (pg. 34). His essays reflect the rebel in him. “*Muhajirin Hotyar Jonyo Dayi k?*” (Who is Responsible for the Murder of Muhajirin?) is a powerful piece which expresses his anger against the British atrocities. It is based on the brutal killing of Habibulla. A group of forty *Muhajirins* (emigrants) gathered at the border in order to move to Afghanistan but they were stopped and were mercilessly shot by the British controlled Indian soldiers. Nazrul vehemently criticized this act in this piece. He writes, “Just few days back poor people dreamt of an unknown free land leaving behind the known, a life soaked in happiness- sorrow and memories, ancestral homestead, relatives, love for one’s own motherland, cutting all the ties with the affection led memories those people with heavy heart, do you have that heart to understand their pain?” (pg. 424). Nazrul criticized the ruthless and inhuman behaviour of the British government who did not even allowed people to meet their wish. His “*Turk Mahilar Ghomta Khuli*” (Unveiling the Turk Woman) is a satirical piece written as a response to the writing of Hemendra. Here he praises the Turks. According to him the beauty of the Turkish women is beyond words. No women in the earth are as beautiful as them. Therefore, it is mere foolishness on the part of the writer “ to belittle the Turks as if only one part of the land is so remarkable how would be the entire land! His essay ‘Kamal’ is on Kamal Pasha celebrating the fiery spirit of the leader.

When early writers of BMSP (Bangiya Muslim Sahitya Patrika) were concerned about their identity based on language and religion, it was Kazi Nazrul Islam who first broke those rigid shackles and started a fresh aesthetic and literary endeavour based on social justice, equality, anti-colonial vigour, religious and cultural mingling, humanity and political consciousness. *Byathar Daan* (Offerings of Pain) also exemplifies his broader thoughts.

Various indigenous literary figures from medieval period such as Chaitanya, Tukaram, Kabir, Chandidas, Nanak etc. as well as world literary giants such as Shamsuddin Muhammad Hafiz, Omar Khayyam, Rumi, Walt Whitman, P.B. Shelly etc. shaped his cultural, political and social vision.<sup>5</sup>

Local, national and international currents of events left impeccable impact on his artistic self that made him emerge as a porous figure which sometimes made him ambivalent adding his complex and sometimes contradictory artistic manoeuvre. In the words of Radha Chakravarty, “we encounter, for instance, tensions between dystopian and utopian perspectives, realism and romanticism, tradition and modernity, destruction and creation, rage and love, spiritual and secular tendencies, as well as indigenous and transnational features.”<sup>6</sup> Nazrul published his essay “Kamal” in *Dhumketu* and a poem “Kamal Pasha” in *Moslem Bharat*.

His exploration of the vast cultural richness, that the pan-Islamic world and its history cherish, deeply influenced his artistic world. The poems of Persian poet Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), Hafez (1325-1390) and mystic poet Rumi (1207-1273) sculpted his poetic self and strengthened his tools of crafting poems. The influence of Persian literature and Persian language was evitable throughout his creative world. Almost all of his writings are composed of different languages such as Persian, Arabic, Bengali etc. But the use of Persian language and the rhyme scheme of Persian poems can be witnessed in several of his poems. To mention few- Kamal Pasha, Shat-il-Arab, Moharram, Qorbani etc. He also wrote ghazals, an Arabic poetry form or ode, in the later phase of his poetic career.

The writings of Nazrul truly represent world literature. His conscious choice of mix language and use of poetry/ writing as political medium establishes him as the poet of people. The spirit of Kazi Nazrul Islam and his writings profoundly influenced the activities of Muslim Sahitya Samaj (Dhaka). His very presence in the early proceedings of the society and writings in *Sikha* was genuinely celebrated and nourished by its members.

### **Muslim Literary Society: A Legacy of *Ijtihad* Thought Tradition**

After Nazrul Islam, it was Kazi Abdul Odud and his associates from the *Muslim Sahitya Samaj* (Muslim Literary Society) (1926-1936) who inherited the legacy of the great polymath. These group of writers/ thinkers engaged with the problems of the contemporary Bengali Muslim society (through literature mainly) and tried to interpret and engage with Islam in order to carve out ways to deal with the maladies of the Muslim society. On 19 Jan 1926 a group of teachers and students of Dhaka University formed the group Muslim Sahitya Samaj with the motto “Emancipation of intellect” as their belief was “where knowledge is limited, intellect is inert, freedom is impossible”. With the spirit of rationalism this group started publishing its mouthpiece, *Sikha* (1927-1931). Dr. Mohammad Shahidullah, Kazi Abdul Odud, Abul Husain, Abdul Kadir, Moulana Anwarul Kadir, Kazi Motahar Hossain were among the founding members of the society. According to Dr. Mahmud Hossain, one of the sympathisers of the society,

“...Kazi Abdul Wadud had a daringly original mode of thinking...Mr. Abul Husain...was a man of will and action. The man of thought and the man of action combined in 1927 to found Dacca Muslim Sahitya Samaj, which came to be regarded as a new school of thought. I was also one of them...We preached through our writings the ideal of emancipation of intellect.”<sup>7</sup>

The very first session of the Muslim Literary Society was attended by Kazi Nazrul Islam where he said,

“Today I can see the new expedition of the Muslims has started. I will declare the message everywhere. (One more point I would like to add. Till now I used to believe that I am the only *kafer* (non-believer), but I felt

satisfied today seeing that Moulvi Anwarul Kadir and other wise men are also *kafer*. I want nothing except the satisfaction that my team has extended." (Kazi Narul Islam, 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Session, Muslim Literary Society, 1927.)

All most all the members of the society and the writings of Sikha celebrated the music of intellect to understand and analyse the Muslim community, Bengali Muslim society and Islam in general and to 'renovate' the society.<sup>8</sup> Among them Kazi Abdul Odud was the most prominent one.

### **Kazi Abdul Odud (1894-1970) & His World Literature:**

Kazi Abdul Odud was born on 26 April in 1894 at his maternal uncle's home at Jagannathpur in Kustia district of undivided Bengal. His ancestral home was at Bagmara village in Faridpur, now in Bangladesh. His father Kazi Syed Hossain (Sagir Kazi) was in the post of station master in Eastern railway. His father was a moody but generous person and his mother was very intelligent and composed. Odud was brought up in the company of his maternal uncle. He had to change schools due to his maternal uncle's transferrable job. At the suggestion of his youngest maternal uncle, Najiruddin, he took admission in Presidency College, Calcutta. In 1915 he completed I.A from there. He graduated from Presidency in 1917. In 1919 he completed his M.A. degree from Calcutta University in Political Economy. During his undergraduate days he stayed at the Baker hostel and in his Masters, he stayed with his maternal uncle who shifted to Calcutta as an Inspector in Calcutta Police. During his I.A at Presidency College stalwarts like Subhas Chandra Bose, Rama Prasad Mukhopadhyay, Dilip Kumar Roy, Nirendranath Roy and Amin Ahmed were his close friends (Pg no. 16). In the mean time he got married to his cousin Jamila Khatun (eldest maternal uncle Ashabuddin's elder daughter). Due to his wife's deteriorated health Odud had to go back to Dhaka East Bengal. He joined to the Dhaka Intermediate College in 1920 at the reference of Dr. Dineshchandra Sen in the post of Lecturer at the Dept. of Bengali Literature. His fame as a writer owned him this post instead of his Masters in Political Economy. For the next twenty years he taught there. - Despite he remained pensive because of his wife's bad health and death of his children, he produced his best writings during this time period.

### **Odud's Literary Works:**

Odud wrote several essays, novel, drama, biography and critical writings. Among those his essays, critical and biographical writings are immensely significant. These are- "Naba Parjay"- (in 2 parts), "Samaj o Sahitya", "Hindu Musalmaner Birodh", "Saswata Banga", "Banglar Jagaron", "Kabi Guru Rabindranath", "Kavi Guru Goethe", "Hazrat Mohammad O Islam" etc.

Odud was inspired by the concept of New Humanism, a product of renaissance in the 18<sup>th</sup> Europe. He considered Goethe and Rabindranath Tagore as the proponents of new humanism.<sup>9</sup> He was immensely influenced by Rammohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Goethe, Kamal Pasha, Shaikh Sadi, Hafez- Iranian literature and Hazrat Muhammad. In 1924 Odud wrote in his diary, "What would be the form of Muslim Renaissance in Bengal?"<sup>10</sup> In the very first part of "Naba Parjay" he wrote an essay "Few Words Regarding Mustafa Kamal" where he said,

"What Kamal have tried to do for the renaissance seeking Turks society would not be possibly exactly followed by the Bengali Muslim society,

different form would be followed here, but what did we receive from Kamal is that new creation is impossible in the blind imitation of the past. Those who desire for renaissance/ regeneration, there is no any other option but to change some parts of the past.”<sup>11</sup>

He considered Kamal as the leader of the modern Muslim society. He cited Kamal's words that Muslims have dreamt many fruitless dreams so far like Pan-Islamism and Pan-Turanianism. These dreams have inflicted damage upon the Muslim society instead of doing well. Odud thinks that it is not for the love of religion that the entire Muslim world is accepting Pan- Islamism; the current status of the Muslim community is miserable/ inglorious. They have united in order to avoid more misery. But actually, such unity has reared the weakness of the Muslim community. Instead of searching for the solutions according to different contexts this unity has kept them blind to the real problems of the community. Therefore, according to Odud, Muslims of the world and of Bengal should devote themselves in regeneration from the very beginning. In his diary on 7 March in 1924 Odud wrote,

“Khilafat got destroyed.... Looking at the world it seems that this is the most necessary thing at present...Apart from that the blessing of the end of Khilafat is that it is really harmful for the soul under the fear/ oppression which the Muslims are exerting in the name of Islam.”<sup>12</sup>

In his writing on Iqbal in ‘Samaj O Sahitya’, Odud has highlighted the rational aspect of Iqbal's thinking. He cited from Iqbal's speech collection titled “The Reconstruction of Religious Thoughts in Islam”, “The birth of Islam, as I hope to be able presently to prove to your satisfaction, is the birth of inductive intellect”. Again, he quotes Iqbal,

“If the Renaissance of Islam is a fact, and I believe it is a fact, we too one day, like the Turks, will have to re-evaluate our intellectual inheritance...The truth is that among the Muslim nations of to-day, Turkey alone has shaken off its dogmatic slumber, and attained to self-consciousness. She alone has claimed her right of intellectual freedom; she alone has passed from the ideal to the real- a transition which entails keen intellectual and moral struggle” (Nurul Amin: 202).

His essay on Nazrul Islam also celebrated his idea of humanism and rationalism over orthodoxy.

#### **Other voices:**

The writings of Kazi Motahar Hossain, Abul Husein, Abdul Kadir and others also celebrate intellect over blind following of religion. According to them this is the only solution to the malady-ridden Bengali Muslim society.

#### **Conclusion:**

Islam in Bengal, according to Richard Eaton, was the “religion of plough”.<sup>13</sup> The conversion in Islam happened chiefly through cultivation and the *sufi pirs* also played tremendously significant role apart from other agents and factors. During the Muslim rule and later on, Islam and the Muslim community were in a constant dialogue with the existing socio- cultural- economic and political structures and got shaped and reshaped in order to sustain themselves. Bengal during the British rule faced the toughest confrontation in terms of western/ European modernity and the political hegemony. The

Muslim community of Bengal and India underwent tremendous change under the new rule and the process is still continuous even in postcolonial India. Categorising Islam and the Muslim community of Bengal as a rigid group or putting them in any binary would cause damage to the vibrant and divergent nature of the heterogeneous community. Tracing the response of the Syed Ameer Ali, Kazi Nazrul Islam and Kazi Abdul Odud justly addresses the concern. The community had never been a monolithic entity and the intervention of the above-mentioned figures established the community in truly global sense. The cosmopolitan nature of all these three figures mark Bengal's Muslim community as global citizens. Any monolithic representation of Bengal's Islam and the Muslim community would not do justice to any scientific research and the larger understanding of Bengal.

### **Endnotes:**

- <sup>1</sup> Nazrul Jibani by Rafikul Islam (proper footnote)
- <sup>2</sup> Qazi Nazrul Islam Smritikatha by Muzaffar Ahmad
- <sup>3</sup> 'Selected Essays: Kazi Nazrul Islam' translated by Radha Chakravarty: Modern Classics; Penguin Random House India. 2024
- <sup>4</sup> Serajul Islam Choudhury, "The Blazing Comet" in Kazi Nazrul Islam: A New Anthology, ed. Rafikul Islam (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1990), Pg.- 180.
- <sup>5</sup> Radha Chakravarty & Abdul Mannan Syed (ed), Pg. No.- xxi, 15.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. xv (Radha C)
- <sup>7</sup> Muslim Sahitya Samaj: Buddhir Mukti Andolon, Bangladesher Renaissance. Ed. Purba: Kolkata. 2024. Pg. 197.
- <sup>8</sup> Odud Charcha by Syed-Ur- Rahman. Kakoli Prakashani: Dhaka. 2014. Pg. 41.
- <sup>9</sup> Odud Rachana O Bangla Samaj by Nurul Amin, Bangla Academy Dhaka: Bangladesh. 2008. Pg. 427.
- <sup>10</sup> Nurul Amin. Ibid..166
- <sup>11</sup> ShreshthyaPrabandha: Kazi Abdul Odud by Jasim Uddin. Katha Prakash: Dhaka. 2015. Pg. 326.
- <sup>12</sup> Odud Rachana O Bangali Samaj by Nurul Amin, Bangla Academy Dhaka: Bangladesh. 2008. Pg. 167.
- <sup>13</sup> Eaton, Richard. The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204- 1760. UCP: USA.1996

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10. *Muslim Sahitya Samaj: Buddhir Mukti Andolan, Bangladesher Renaissance*. Purba: Kolkata. 2024.