

Partition, Protest, and Identity: The Rise of Muslim Political Consciousness in Bengal

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Abstract: *This study traces the gradual political awakening of the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia from loyalism to assertive participation in colonial politics. Initially aligning with British authority and distancing themselves from the Indian National Congress, Bengali Muslims redefined their political stance following the Partition of Bengal (1905) and its annulment (1911). Subsequent events, including the Khilafat and Non-Cooperation Movements, deepened communal consciousness and fostered organised Muslim political activity. The paper argues that these developments transformed Muslim identity in Bengal, laying the intellectual groundwork for demands of separate representation and, ultimately, the idea of Muslim nationhood.*

Keywords: *Bengali Muslim Intelligentsia, Partition of Bengal, Khilafat Movement, Communal Consciousness, Muslim Identity, Nationhood*

In the political sphere, educated Bengali Muslims initially remained detached. Much like their moderate Hindu contemporaries, they placed faith in the benevolence of British rule. Just as many Hindus had once viewed the British presence as protection from perceived Muslim oppression, a section of Muslims similarly regarded the establishment of the British Empire in India as a providential relief from the domination of the Marathas and the Sikhs.¹ Earlier, when the Indian National Congress was founded to articulate Indian demands for representative institutions, English-educated urban Muslims as Lateef, Ameer Ali, and their followers, refused to join that organisation, lest their cordial relations with the Raj be affected. Besides, they firmly believed that representative institutions would not benefit the Muslims, as they would result in the Indian Muslim minority 'being utterly swamped in every department of the state.'² Such views, no doubt, laid bare their faith in the established government. Their politics of loyalty aimed, on the one hand, at perpetuating their traditional hold over the community under the protection of the Raj and keeping the community aloof from any anti-government politics, on the other.

A group of educated Bengali Muslims feared that the Hindus would dominate any concessions obtained by that organisation.³ This suspicion had found its material ground in the composition of the Congress, dominated as it was by the Hindu proprietors, pleaders, and merchants against whom Bengali Muslims in general, as a dominated community, had genuine grievances. The impact of the Hindu-biased cultural nationalism practised by the nationalists also played a role in their refusal to join Congress activities.⁴ However, a section among them, perhaps due to the lack of any other political forum, began getting interested in Congress. The programme and activities of the Congress, especially of the dominant moderate part of it, seemed to them neither anti-British nor anti-Muslim.⁵ Some of them also felt that Muslim aloofness from political activities had caused a disservice to themselves.⁶

In 1911, the British were forced to cancel the Bengal Partition due to the Swadeshi movement. They then tried to turn pro-partition Muslims against Hindus. On Salimullah's initiative, Muslim leaders from both Bengals met on December 30, 1911, while nationalist Muslims in Calcutta held a separate meeting with leading figures like Abdur Rasul, Mujibur Rahman, and Sheikh Abdur Rahim. They invited prominent Nawabs and representatives from 25 districts to discuss the situation. This episode shifted Bengali Muslims' view of the British, making them realise that rights could not be gained merely through petitions. In this context, 'The Mussalman' writes,

*"Those co-religionists who were under the impression that the government was on their side and they could depend upon government patronage, we think now disillusioned and have realised that the favourite wife may be, and as a matter of fact, has been, divorced without even a moment's previous notice...From the beginning, we, however, said that the motive that led to the partition was entirely different and that the concession the Muslims were said to be enjoying was not for any love for them but for dissuading them from anything embarrassing to the government. What the position of the Indian Muslims is has now been entirely clear to everybody. Self-help should henceforth be their motto...Unity between different sections of the Indian community should also be our watchword."*⁷

After the 1912 Bengal Partition, divisions emerged within the Muslim League. Older leaders like Dhanbari Nawab Ali Chowdhury and Comilla's Shamsul Huda favoured compromise with the government and held positions in the governors' councils, while Salimullah, disillusioned and ill, withdrew from active politics. In contrast, young, educated Muslims opposed this cooperative approach, losing faith in the government. This period also saw rising religious polarisation, with Hindus and Muslims increasingly taking separate political positions.⁸ The Hindu character of the movement was not only responsible for this, but the role of the government was also substantial.⁹ The association of Hindutva with the Swadeshi movement could not involve the majority of Bengal's Muslims and thus lead to success in any more significant national movement. Most of the Hindu leaders of that time could not understand this

truth. Surendranath Bandyopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) and other leaders-intellectuals warned about the dangers of realising this truth and movement. However, they were not heeded.¹⁰ As a result, Hindu-Muslim relations gradually deteriorated. Communal riots took place in many places.¹¹

The cancellation of Bengal's partition on December 12, 1911, under Hindu pressure deeply upset Muslims and shifted their attitude toward the British. Disillusioned, they realized rights could not be gained through petitions, weakening pro-British leaders in the Muslim League and boosting radicals. Anti-British sentiment grew, fueled by Britain's Balkan War policy, and Pan-Islamism gained traction. The Mussalman noted that Muslims now saw government favours as temporary, emphasizing self-help and unity as the path forward. The cancellation of Bengal's partition on December 12, 1911, under Hindu pressure deeply upset Muslims and shifted their attitude toward the British. Disillusioned, they realised rights could not be gained through petitions, weakening pro-British leaders in the Muslim League and boosting radicals. Anti-British sentiment grew, fueled by Britain's Balkan War policy, and Pan-Islamism gained traction. The Mussalman noted that Muslims now saw government favours as temporary, emphasizing self-help and unity as the path forward.¹²

In this context, Bengali Muslims were united in the mainstream of the national movement starting from the Khilafat movement and following the non-cooperation movement. Various obstacles strengthened the concept of bi-ethnicity, but Bengalis did not take time to realize its barrenness. When the poisonous fumes of bi-ethnicity tainted the skies of Bengal on the one hand, Bengalis rose above caste-religion-caste identity and turned towards communist ideology. This evolution of Bengali political thought from the beginning of the 20th century to the period of independence is an essential chapter in the social history of Bengal. As a result of this incident, the influence of the British loyalists in the Muslim League leadership was reduced, and the Radicals grew in prestige. A Second action by the British ray that contributed to communal cleavage was the legislative Council reforms of 1909, which included the provision for Separate Muslim and General or Hindu electorates. However, this may help less organized political groups in the short run. It undoubtedly led to sharper Communal division in the long run. The number was Small (out of 26 elected members in the Bengal Legislative Council, 4 of these seats were reserved for members of the Muslim Community). Still, it was the first and was the result of vigorous lobbying by Muslim League leaders.¹³ A third development in which the British rulers played a controversial role was the bounding of the Muslim League at a meeting of upper-class Muslims in Dacca in 1906. Nawab of Dacca and his compatriots were devoted loyalists and supporters of the Raj, whose aim was the Protection of the rights of Muslims. Aga Khan worked for the acceptance of Communal electorates as a step in this direction.¹⁴ With the revocation of the Bengal partition in 1912, Some Muslim leaguers swung

towards alliance with the Congress, the 1916 Congress League Lucknow fact marked the honeymoon Period of Hindu-Muslim relations which tasted until the mid-1920s. The Pact allotted only forty per cent of Bengal seats to the Bengal Muslims, although they constituted slightly more than 50 per cent of the Population.¹⁵

The abolition of the Partition of Bengal later led to a change in the leadership of the Bengali Muslim Intelligentsia. The old leaders of the organization, as well as the new leaders, wanted to maintain a policy of compromise with the government, among whom Dhanbari Nawab Ali Chowdhury and Comilla Shamsul Huda are particularly noteworthy. Many of these older leaders were appointed members of the working council of the governors of Bengal and Assam, which led them to negotiate with the government to balance the future of Muslim politics. Besides, Salimullah, the prominent leader of the Bengal Muslim League, was disappointed with the administrative decision of the government and retired from direct politics due to various reasons, including physical illness.¹⁶ Due to government policies, young Muslim leaders lost faith in the old League leadership, opposing its cooperative approach. In response, a session of the Bengal Muslim League was held in Dhaka on April 13, 1912, and Abul Kassem Fazlul Haq, a rising leader of the youth, was elected president. Born in Barisal in 1883, Fazlul Haq entered politics in 1912 and was elected to the Bengal Legislative Assembly in 1913. Under his leadership, the League shifted from aristocratic to middle-class, educated leadership, gained popularity, and became a symbol of hope for Muslim youth, fostering political activism and communal harmony in Bengal.¹⁷ Under new leadership, the party abandoned its old strategy of compromise and embraced revolutionary action. Muslims began demanding autonomy through communal cooperation, coordinating with the Central All India Muslim League and the Bengal Muslim League after the abolition of partition. The central organization supported Bengali revolutionary leaders, and in 1912, the Calcutta session aimed to expand membership and programs. Senior-led committees revised the party constitution, while Fazlul Haq focused on engaging the people of Bengal and promoting deserving members within the organization.¹⁸ In 1913, he was elected a member of the managing council of Bengal from the Dhaka division and expressed sympathy for the peasant workers and the people in his election speech. By taking these actions, he became very well-liked by Bengal's common people. He became the leading Muslim leader of Bengal.¹⁹ He demanded compensation from the government for the Muslims for cancelling the partition of Bengal. He called on the government to provide a larger budget for Muslim students in the education sector. Under the leadership of Fazlul Haq, the Muslim League became a vital institution and later played a role in national formation.

One of the most influential events in the national life of the Muslims was the movement that took place in the Indian subcontinent from the time of World

War I to 1924, centred on the Caliphate movement.²⁰ The issue of the Caliphate was very touching for the Sunni Muslims of India. The question of the Caliphate had two fundamental aspects, one religious and the other political.²¹ Political awakening after the First World War, Mahatma Gandhi came to leadership in the nationalist movement and decided to include a specifically Muslim issue, the Continuation of the Caliphate, as an aim of his national Non-Cooperation Campaign. The inclusion of this issue brought about Unprecedented, though temporary, Cooperation among Hindus and Muslims throughout India. More significant numbers participated in Indian Politics than ever before.²² A large part of the Muslim community supports the Caliphate-Non-Cooperation movement and takes a vital role in favour of the movement, but some are also hostile towards it. In particular, the newspaper 'Islam Darshan' lashed out against the Caliphate, commenting, "...as a result of the non-cooperation movement, the great destruction of Indian Muslim society in the last four years and the extreme degradation of religion, ethics and nationality will be remedied in the next fifty years."²³

Shortly after the establishment of the Central Caliphate Committee in 1919, the Bengal Provincial Khilafat Committee was established in Bengal with Moulana Mujibur Rahman as its Secretary, Abdur Rauf as its president and Maulana Akram Khan as its General Secretary. The headquarters of the committee was established at Calcutta, the capital of Bengal and its branches were extended to other districts of Bengal.²⁴ The Khilafat Committee was established on March 3, 1920, in Dhaka, and its temporary office was established at Ahsan Manzil, the residence of Nawab Salimullah. It also established permanent offices in various parts of Bengal, including North Bengal and South Bengal, where the leaders of the Muslim League and the Congress worked together. From 1920 onwards, all sorts of programs of the caliphate movement started to be implemented in Bengal. In Bengal, Congress and the Muslim League jointly implemented various programs, and Congress offices were used as temporary offices for the Khilafat and non-cooperation movements. Many Hindu leaders took part in the Khilafat Committee of Bengal; among them were Bipin Chandra Pal, Chittaranjan Das, Shri Chandra Chattopadhyay, Poet Mukunda Das, Haripada Biswas Ghosh, Saral Kumar Dutt, Ranjan Gupta and Nagendra Biswas.²⁵ Funds were raised all over Bengal as announced by the Central Caliphate Committee. Movements were conducted in rural areas and different cities of Bengal. Hindus and Muslims of the village took part in the caliphate and Non-Cooperation movement together. Not only the politicians but also the religious leaders, especially the imams of the mosques, took part in this movement, and they called upon the whole Muslim nation to join the Khilafat movement.²⁶ Rallies and demonstrations took place on March 19, 1920, the largest in the country, but the largest was in Tangail, North Bengal, where more than 50,000 people attended, including people from both Hindu and Muslim communities.²⁷

According to the decision of the non-cooperation and Caliphate committee members, teachers and students participated in various programs, including the boycott of class examinations in educational institutions. Fazlul Haq, the leader of the Muslim League, was against the boycott of educational institutions because, according to him, the Muslims of Bengal had long been backwards in education. At various events in Dhaka, Khilafat and Swaraj Party leaders suggested the closure of educational institutions, but Fazlul Haq advised students not to boycott educational institutions during his rallies. He could not agree with some of the programs of the Khilafat movement and some of the policies of the non-cooperation movement. Fazlul Haq's argument regarding education was that the students of the educational institutions run by the people of Bengal in the form of tax had their right to education, which should be accepted. It took much work for the Hindu-Muslim leaders to coordinate the programs and activities of the Khilafat movement. However, prominent and visionary politicians established compromises for the country's greater good. Leaders and activists from different levels of Bengal participated in the Khilafat movement, but Maulana Akram Khan played the most important role among them. Through his well-organized leadership, the Khilafat movement was accelerated. The Muslim leaders of Bengal made essential contributions to the central caliphate movement of the subcontinent. At the same time, the activities of this movement were conducted extensively in Bengal. It is also seen that Abul Kasem Fazlul Haque and some other leading persons who were closely associated with the movement later withdrew from the movement.²⁸ During the Khilafat agitation, Haq went to the extent of supporting the issue of cow protection to establish cordial Hindu-Muslim relations. Haq played a significant role in ameliorating the condition of the peasants in Bengal. Both these attitudes are clearly and strongly identified in the Khilafat movement. Qazi Abdul Wadud, writing as Abdullah-al-Azad, highlighted the essential aspects of Muslims' non-cooperation: preserving the honour and independence of the country and restoring the Caliphate's former glory.²⁹

The Non-Cooperation and Caliphate movement in 1920 brought an organized political movement to the Muslim Masses in Bengal for the big time. Maniruzzaman Islamabadi expressed his opinion in *Islamist 'Al-Eslam'* about the goal and rationale of the Khilafat and non-cooperation movement; the purpose of this non-cooperation movement is to solve the two problems of non-cooperation, protect the status of the Caliphate in the world of Islam, and gain India's Swaraj.³⁰ The Khilafat movement infused new ideas into the thoughts of the Muslims. The movement blended both religion and politics under one banner. The Khilafat movement was a religious movement that was pan-Islamic in spirit. The very basis of the movement was orthodox. The caliph is a unique pillar of Islam. If the Caliphate is not preserved, it will lead to a significant loss for Islam and the downfall of the Muslim nation. The Caliph serves as the protector of Islam and the foundation of the Muslim nation.³¹ According to

official reports, the majority of the agitators were itinerant Maulavis, but the primary impetus came from ulema, or religious preachers, primarily from the Farazi sect. In 1922, when the Government of India suggested that the provinces think of utilizing the service of maulvis for propaganda on Muhammadan questions, the Government of Bengal Promptly replied that it would be reasonable of doubtful value. The Khilafat agitation has been too prolonged and has gone too deep to make it worth trying to organise these men now for a counterattack.³² This movement also brought to the fore a new section of Muslim leaders, organisers of Khilafat and Non-Cooperation in different districts of Bengal, having strong connections with the religious and social leadership of the Muslim Peasantry.³³ Many maulanas, or Muslim scholars, are well-known religious leaders. Some of these notable figures include Abdullah Baqi from Dinajpur, Maniruzzaman Islamabadi from Chittagong and Calcutta, Akram Khan from 24-Parganas, Shamsuddin Ahmed from Nadia, and Ashrafuddin Choudhary from Tippera. Coordinating the programs of the Khilafat movement was challenging for Hindu and Muslim leaders, yet visionary politicians made compromises for the country's greater good. Leaders from across Bengal participated, with Maulana Akram Khan playing a pivotal role. Through his organized leadership, he accelerated the movement, striving to unite Muslims of different ideologies. An intellectual, journalist, social reformer, writer, and Islamic scholar, Akram Khan guided the Muslim community with foresight, significantly contributing to the Muslim Awakening and advancing their intellectual and social development.³⁴

To bridge the gap among the Muslim leaders, he contacted many leaders of the time, among whom were Fazlul Haq, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, Abdul Alim and Muhammad Shahidullah was one of them. To strengthen the bond between the Muslims in Parbati, he established 'Anjumane-Ulama-Bangla' with the scholars. This organization was the mouthpiece of the Muslim Alim Samaj of Bengal and was instrumental in uniting the Muslims of India during the First World War. He had meetings with many scholars to resolve differences of opinion on religious matters and organized discussion meetings with members of different sects.³⁵ The revolutionary life of Maulana Akram Khan started through the Mohammadi. Akram Khan skilfully edited the newspaper, and due to his sincere efforts and foresight, the Masik Mohammadi became a weekly newspaper. He became the magazine's owner in 1904, and the magazine's publisher was Munshi Karim Box. The first issue of the weekly Mohammad was published in Calcutta. The first issue was 500 copies, the second issue published 400 copies, and the price was reduced from the 4th issue.³⁶ 'Mohammadi' played an important role in the Muslim Awakening and Khilafat Movement in Bengal as well as contributing to the realization of Muslims social and political rights. Akram Khan was a staunch supporter of Pan-Islamism. He tried to spread the idea of Pan-Islamism throughout Bengal through this magazine.³⁷ The weekly Mohammadi was published in Bengali and Urdu in these two editions. The

Bengali language was promoted initially here. Through this magazine, the intellectual practice of intellectuals in Bengal was encouraged. Through the paper, Bengali-speaking Muslims could present their independent views to the Government.³⁸ Akram Khan published a magazine called *Al-Eslam*. It was a monthly magazine from Calcutta, first published on May 3, 1915. Its publisher was Muzaffar Ahmed, and its editor was Akram Khan. Maulana Moniruzzaman was the Islamic newspaper's assistant editor and the acting editor from the third year.³⁹ *Al-Eslam* was the spokesperson of the 'Anjuman-Ulama-Bangla' organization. The magazine was popular among Muslims all over Bengal, and it spread to every corner of Bengal, especially in Dhaka, and its Calcutta-centric influence was noticeable. The magazine regularly published articles on various important topics, including Muslim history, heritage, religion, patriotism, society, and culture.⁴⁰ Famous writers of the time used to write various articles in the magazine. However, this magazine was unsuitable for the public and mainly for the educated class. The magazine acted as a mouthpiece for the Muslims of Bengal in the Khilafat movement, and various inspirational writings of scholars, Ulama and intellectuals were regularly published here, which made the movement more dynamic. Maulana Akram Khan played a leading role in the Khilafat movement by introducing the Muslims of the region to their origins during the agitation. He repeatedly hinted that Muslims have a traditional past from which they could quickly re-establish themselves with inspiration. He focused on the problem of developing the neglected superstitious Muslim society of Bengal. He played an essential role in the Bengali Muslim Renaissance and in developing the consciousness of Bengali Muslims on a larger scale.

Due to the leadership of nationalist Muslims and the participation of clerical society, this movement gained widespread support from the people. Meetings were held all over Bengal in support of Khilafat and non-cooperation. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Maulana Mujibar Rahman, Maulana Abdullah Baki, Maulana Abdullah Kafi, Pir Badshah Mia, Wazed Ali Khan Panni, Ismail Hussain Siraji, A. K. Fazlul Haque, Abul Kasem, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Aftabuddin Chowdhury, Syed Majid Bux, Taibuddin Ahmad, Fazlul Haque Senvarshi, Ashrafuddin Chowdhury, Abdur Rashid Khan, Shah Badiul Alam (Chittagong), Maulana Moniruddin (Dinajpur), Syed Jabaluddin Hashemi, Shamsuddin Ahmad, Mohammad Waliullah, Ibrahim Khan, Abul Mansoor Ahmad, Abul Kalam Shamsuddin etc. are notable. Nationalist Bengali Muslim leaders Syed Manjir Bux, Ashraf Uddin Chowdhury, Shamsuddin Ahmad, and others discussed the issue with Maulana Abul Kalam Azad.⁴¹ Maulana Azad told them that they had gathered under the Congress flag for the country's freedom. Leaving Congress over trivial issues would not be advisable, as the movement would stagnate. We have to fight unitedly for the greater interest of achieving freedom. Abdul Mansur Ahmed, himself an essential member of this new leadership, has given a graphic account of his social background and the kinds of cultural change that were occurring in Muslim rural life in eastern Bengal in this Period.⁴²

In the post-Khilafat era, orthodox Muslim intellectuals shaped public opinion by linking political developments with sectarian ideas. Although the Khilafat movement ended unsuccessfully, it strengthened religious orthodoxy and the Ulama's influence, who traditionally maintained close ties with individual Muslims.⁴³ Because of this, English-educated leaders such as Haq and Abul Kasem sought their services – albeit on a limited scale – during the early phase of the movement. Gradually, effective leadership passed into the hands of the Ulama. This also allowed them to extend their influence to the political arena, thus further upgrading their status. No wonder, despite the Khilafat movement's pathetic denouement, the Ulama's influence became more potent than ever. That is why, after the collapse of the Khilafat movement, loyalists, as well as a section of the English-educated leaders, sought the assistance of a section of the Ulama to whip up communal passion to secure their political ends.

The organisational form with which this new Muslim leadership conducted the Non-Cooperation in agitation in the districts. Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das took an admirable initiative to develop Hindu-Muslim relations in Bengal in this political situation. C.R. Das also sought to move beyond Calcutta's small coterie of Westernised aristocratic Muslim leaders and engage with the broader sections of Muslim leadership in the districts. For this, he also devised a Programmatic forum, a Hindu-Muslim Pact that, apart from allaying Muslim grievances about music before mosques and cow slaughter, provided that 55 per cent of government employees and 60 per cent of the membership in local bodies in Muslim-majority districts would be reserved for Muslim. The Pact achieved Das's immediate objective of rallying broad-based Muslim Support for Swarajist politics. Many Muslims stood as Swarajist Candidates in the elections of 1923, and the party scored major Successes in the district boards.⁴⁴ Within a year of C.R. Das's death in 1925, the Hindu-Muslim Pact collapsed, communal riots erupted across districts, and most Muslim leaders left Congress. To understand the shift in Muslim Bengal's political alignment, one must examine the peasantry's ideology. The final blow came in 1926 with an amendment to the Bengal Tenancy Act, leaving neither Muslim nor peasant interests able to rely on Congress.⁴⁵ From this period, Muslim masses in Bengal largely turned away from Congress, with minimal participation in civil disobedience. Earlier, C.R. Das, as Bengal's nationalist leader, had secured strong Muslim support for the Swaraj Party, building trust through the 1923 Bengal Pact.⁴⁶ After Das's death in 1925, the Swaraj Party lost Muslim support, and communal relations in Bengal worsened. Calcutta witnessed serious Hindu-Muslim riots, fueled by Arya Samajists, Hindu Mahasabha members, and H.S. Suhrawardy, reflecting rising communal tensions from 1911 to 1940.

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, two groups of Bengali Muslim intelligentsia had emerged. One, mainly English-educated urban Ashraf, sought an all-India Muslim identity linked to Urdu and supported the Aligarh movement while collaborating with the government. The other, traditionally

educated and Bengali-oriented, valued their culture and religion, often opposing the Aligarh movement to preserve Bengal's religious character.⁴⁷ They indeed represented only a meager section of their community's half-articulate Intelligentsia. Naturally, their impact was limited. They truly reflected the dilemma confronted by the section on the dilemma of retaining their identity as a part of a separate religious community and making rapid progress in English education so that members of their community could compete with the relatively advanced Bengali Hindus. The role of the Bengali intellectual community in the spread of Muslim education in the first quarter of the 20th century is undeniable. From the beginning of the 20th century, Muslim writers, journalists, and politicians encouraged Muslims to study Arabic, Persian, and English. However, there was disagreement among intellectuals about the nature of Muslim education, its methods, and the medium it used. A large section of Muslim intellectuals termed madrasa education as unnecessary, traditional, and unscientific. In favour of reforming the Muslim education system, replacing Arabic-Persian in the mother tongue, Bengali, and closing all new and old madrasas in school-college education. A large section of Muslim intellectuals tried to shape public opinion in favour of the spread of modern education in Muslim society. A large section of Bengali Muslim intellectuals expressed their strong support for modern and up-to-date education. The Indian National Movement, as it developed during the last quarters of the nineteenth century, was dominated by high-caste Hindus. These men recruited primarily from the Brahmin, Kayastha, and Vaidya played paramount roles in positions in the professions and the Cultural life of Bengal.⁴⁸ Faster to take to Western education, they continued to fill high status during earlier ages in colonial Bengal.⁴⁹ In Bengal, the Muslims were slightly classified by the census, for the moment, they lagged behind the Hindus in education, professions, and government service. Most of the Muslims were lower-class cultivators in the Eastern districts of Bengal. The Muslims were much slower to gain Western education in Bengal.⁵⁰

Questions arose over whether Muslims should engage in politics under British rule, and Bengali Muslim society remained divided on the issue. Some argued that active political participation was crucial for the community's overall progress. The newspaper *Navnur* observed, "By distancing themselves from the political movement, Muslims have done themselves a great disservice."⁵¹ Such internal contradictions reflected the shifting concerns and perspectives of the emerging Bengali Muslim intelligentsia. The early intellectuals—whether originating from the urban Ashraf aristocracy or having ascended to Ashraf status from modest rural backgrounds through perseverance—shared a common identity as social reformers deeply invested in advancing the education and upliftment of their community. Prominent figures from the urban Ashraf elite included Nawab Abdul Latif, Syed Ameer Ali, Sir Salimullah, Mir Musharraf Hussain, and Wajed Ali Khan Panni, while those who rose from humble rural origins included Munshi Meherullah, Danshil Ketabuddin, and

Munshi Bu Ali.⁵² Among the later generation of Bengali Muslim intellectuals, a large segment emerged from the Ashraf class with strong rural roots, while another significant portion traced their lineage to the urban aristocracy with weaker ties to the countryside. The latter group included figures such as Maulana Akram Khan, Nawab Abdur Rahim, Shahid Suhrawardy, Khwaja Nazimuddin, and Abdul Karim Ghaznavi, whereas the former comprised personalities like A. K. Fazlul Huq, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Abul Mansur Ahmad, Abul Hashim, and Comrade Muzaffar Ahmed. This later generation, though more vocal, confident, and politically assertive than their predecessors, encompassed a broad ideological spectrum—moderate, radical, and conservative. Representative figures of these tendencies included Abdur Rasul (moderate), A. K. Fazlul Huq, Muzaffar Ahmed, Kazi Nazrul Islam, and Abul Hashim (radical), and Maulana Akram Khan, Nawab Sir Salimullah, Shahid Suhrawardy, and Khwaja Nazimuddin (conservative).

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