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## Book Review: Bengal Muslims and Colonial Education, 1854–1947: A Study of Curriculum, Educational Institutions, and Communal Politics

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***Book Review: Bengal Muslims and Colonial Education, 1854–1947: A Study of Curriculum, Educational Institutions, and Communal Politics***<sup>1</sup>

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The introduction of and the access to Western education during the early years of colonial rule caused a shift in paradigm within the Bengali society, providing some Bengali Hindus with an opportunity to attain higher social status by allying with their colonial masters. Despite the enthusiasm that the Hindu middle-class Bengalis during the early years of colonial rule had for Western education, their Muslim counterparts initially expressed significantly less enthusiasm in accepting the role of Western education as a means of upward mobilization. Nilanjana Paul, in her book *Bengal Muslim and Colonial Education*, explores the contemporary discourse surrounding the spread of Muslim education under colonial rule and highlights how it not only shaped Muslim educational reforms in Bengal but also contributed to communal tension in the region. Owing to the socio-economic and cultural prominence during the colonial rule, Paul geographically concentrates her work on two major cities Bengal-Dacca and Calcutta and incorporates a few urban centers of the province like Rajshahi among others. Apart from using government reports, school records, newspapers, and other archival sources, she relies on oral interviews to provide a bottom-up perspective.

Paul begins her book by accentuating the consequence of the introduction of Western education. She addresses how on one hand, the popularity of English education during the late 18th century enabled many self-styled aristocrats to become natural allies of colonial rule. On the other hand, the colonial effort of fostering English education to create a class of English-educated colonial servants gradually diminished the traditional mode of education that was prevalent in pre-colonial Bengal. Paul, in this context, adroitly refers to the writing of Sibnath Shastri to demonstrate the paranoia that the contemporary Bengalis felt about getting access to English education for their upward mobilization. If Paul, in this context, could have elaborated on the importance of this particular document, it would have benefitted non-specialist readers to grasp the significance of this source in analyzing the topic in question. The benefit of the early years of colonial rule on the upper-class Hindus of Bengali society had long been a mainstream epistemological discourse. But the impact of colonial rule on Bengali Muslims has received relatively less academic attention.

Paul's research addresses this relatively under-researched area and illustrates how the initial reluctance of the Bengali Muslims to be associated with the colonizers hindered them from attaining higher social status in colonial Bengal. She argues that it was only during the early 19th century that a few progressive Islamic scholars and reformers like Abdul Latif, Sayed Ahmed Khan, Ameer Ali and others took a pioneering role in addressing the implementation of English education among Muslim subjects. Most importantly, going beyond the conventional approach of considering the colonial Islamic community as an ideologically homogeneous entity, Paul skillfully highlights the ideological conflict among Islamic scholars regarding the issue of English education. Despite their ideological heterogeneity, the activities of the abovementioned reformers,

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<sup>1</sup> Paul, N. (2022). *Bengal Muslims and Colonial Education, 1854–1947: A Study of Curriculum, Educational Institutions, and Communal Politics*. New Delhi: Routledge India.

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as Paul contends, led the colonial government to remodel Islamic education by the second half of the 19th century. In the following years, the colonial effort of educational proliferation for the Muslims led to the popularity of English education among the Muslims which provided them with the opportunity to challenge the overwhelming presence of the English-educated Hindu middle class in the colonial administrative apparatus.

It is imperative to mention that during the early days of colonial rule, the awe of the Orientalists about India's Hindu past certainly attracted most of the Hindu elites of Bengal. Besides, the cunning justification of the colonizers that their reason for colonizing India was to restore its glorious past, which they premised as being tarnished by a prolonged Islamic rule, greatly appealed to the Hindu elites of the region. Previously, during Islamic rule, many Bengali Hindus had a socio-cultural difficulty in getting assimilated to the Islamic rule. They were compelled to learn Persian and Arabic instead of Sanskrit to secure a respectable position in the royal courts where the Muslims experienced a superior status due to their familiarity with these languages. As a result, during the early years of British rule, the Bengali Hindus perhaps realized the advantage of embracing a Western language by replacing Persian to contest the superiority that the Bengali Muslims once enjoyed during pre-colonial Bengal. For the Muslims of Bengal, however, it was arduous to accept colonial rule for both political and religious reasons. Islam's prolonged religious animosity toward Christianity and a steady eulogization of the Orientalists about Hinduism, accompanied by a vilification of Islam, made it difficult for the Islamic people to accept Western education. It would have been a delight to read the process by which these Islamic reformers managed to persuade the Muslims of Bengal to overcome their skepticism about Western culture to embrace English education.

Paul's following chapters delve into a more complex topic where she analyzes the interplay between education and politics. She discusses how the decision of the colonial government regarding the partition of Bengal and its resultant socio-political consequences, both in favor of and against the decision, created a rift within the Islamic community of the state. Initially, as Paul articulates, the partition of Bengal improved the educational opportunities of the Islamic community of the newly created East Bengal and Assam provinces. The annulment of the same halted the progress of the Islamic community and compelled the Bengali Muslims to, again, accept the socio-economic hegemony of the Hindu elites of the province. According to Paul, the contemporary political climate following the annulment of the Bengal partition created communal tension between the Hindu and the Muslim communities, while the British venture to satisfy the educational demand of the Islamic community further exacerbated the situation. Paul, in this context, shows how the establishment of Dacca University and its strong Islamic study program challenged the hegemony of Calcutta University and created resentment among the Hindus.

Nevertheless, the Khilafat Movement and the subsequent non-cooperation movement rejuvenated religious harmony between the Hindu and Muslim communities of the province. Despite their unified political movement against the British Raj, as Paul underscores, many Islamic reformers like Fazlul Haque opposed this political activism against the British. The abrupt end of the non-cooperation movement by Gandhi resulted in a qualm among a section of the Islamic community regarding the true intention of the Hindus and steered many Muslim reformers to start pressing for more educational and legislative opportunities. Paul mentions how after winning the election of 1937 as the Chief Minister of Bengal, his communal politics promoted communalism

and influenced the educational sphere. Paul argues that his political bias triggered him to promote separate Islamic education thereby endorsing the idea of a separate nation for Muslims.

Paul's last chapter on Muslim women's education in Bengal explores another under-researched area of colonial Bengal. Though the chapter brilliantly articulates the challenges that the Bengali Muslim women had to endure to materialize their goal of socio-cultural and economic emancipation, if Paul could have brought up the role of gender in the previous chapters, it would have contributed well to the overall structure of this book. Nonetheless, apart from accentuating the role that women education played in the socio-economic proliferation of the Muslim women of Bengal, Paul's last chapter meticulously explores the hidden nuances of the actions of the women reformers. Paul argues how despite promoting education for women by battling religious orthodoxy, they at times conformed with certain religious norms to ensure women's participation and articulates how the rigorous and continuous effort of these reformers enabled many institutions like Dacca University, Lady Brabourne College, and others to welcome Muslim students and teachers. In spite of her commendable analytical acumen, readers might wonder how the Muslim women reformers interacted with and participated in the activities of *Bharat Stree mahamandal*, an Indian women's organization that was founded by Sarala Devi Chaudhurani of Bengal in 1910 with the purpose of promoting female education.

Overall, Paul's painstaking research of analyzing historical records from multiple archives like the British Library at London, National Archive of Bangladesh at Dacca, and National Archives of India at New Delhi, to name a few, offers a holistic approach to addressing the history of Muslim education in colonial Bengal. Additionally, Paul's proficiency in the Bengali language immensely enriches her research, while her lucid writing style, devoid of esoteric academic jargon, makes this volume an excellent work on the history of colonial Bengal. Paul's work, however, is not entirely free from methodological peccadillos. Paul, at times, relies more on the reader's expertise on the topic and consequently takes the liberty of explaining a few important themes of her work less than what perhaps is required to reach non-specialized readers. For example, Paul refers to the Permanent Settlement of 1793 and emphasizes its role in creating a Bengali middle-class, but her dearth of elucidation might create a hindrance for non-specialized readers in comprehending the connection between the Permanent Settlement and the rise of Bengali intelligentsia. Nevertheless, Paul's ability to handle complex sources and her brilliant synthesis of a bottom-up and top-down perspective makes this volume an interesting read for scholars of colonial Bengal.