



A Brief Analysis of the Socio-Economic Condition of Muslims in Bengal during the Colonial Period

Md. Golam Murshid

Research Scholar, Department of History, Aliah University, Kolkata, W.B.

Abstract

The establishment of British Rule in India after the battle of Plassey and the subsequent consolidation of the company's power with the 'Treaty of Allahabad', the British East India Company occupied the military and political power in India. Bengal became one of the important areas where the British established their strong hold. The Independent Bengal Nawab and the local zamindars lost their power and prestige which they enjoyed in pre-British Rule. The Britishers exploited the Indian revenue which led to economic depression of Indian peasants had strong impact on socio-economic conditions of the people of India and also of Bengal. The earlier rulers or zamindars who patronized education system could not be able to patronize the same system of education as they lost their economic power. The Muslims of Bengal could not respond properly to the changed politico-economic situation which they have responded earlier. The lack of attitude and foresight of the Muslims in the non-acceptance of western and scientific education resulted in the degeneration of the Muslims of Bengal in socio-economic and political fronts. The non-acceptance of western and scientific education paved the way for their inabilities to secure Governmental and non-Governmental services.

Keywords: Bengal, British, English, Muslim, Zamindar

In 1717, The British East India Company gained permission from the Mughal Emperor Farukh Shiyar to carry out business without tax liabilities. In 1757, the company defeated Siraj-ud-Dullah at the battle of Plassey and occupied the military and political power of Bengal. Subsequently the fate of Bengal and India went to in the hand of the British Company. It was gone to the climax when the company defeated the combined forces of Nawab of Bengal, Mir Qasim, Nawab of Awadh, Suja-ud-Dullah and Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II at the battle of Buxar and British East India Company gained the permission of revenue collection from the Mughal Emperor, Shah Alam II.

Lord Clive familiarized the dual administrative system in which Nawab was given the responsibility of administration and the Company took the charge of revenue collection. As the Company was the business establishment, the company's people were least anxious about the public welfare rather they were more interested in their

business by any means.

The majority of the landholders and zamindars under Murshid Quli Khan were from Hindus community.¹ Hindus held almost exclusive monopoly of employment in the revenue department under the Muslim Governments. After the accession of the power of the East India Company and the acquiring of the Diwani right, the Hindus held in the same position because they were Zamindars in the Mughal sense or because they were revenue farmers. This monopoly the Hindus retained even during the later years. The advent of the British rule had far reaching effects upon the life and position of the Muslim aristocracy. With the establishment of British rule, they lost most of their avenues of employment, economic position and power. W.W. Hunter mentioned in his book “The Indian Musalmans” that “We shut the Musalman aristocracy out of the Army, because we believed that their exclusion was necessary to our own safety. We deprived them of their monopoly of the most lucrative functions in the Administration”.²

The British Authority generated huge amount of revenue from Indian soil and used for their colonial interested. This policy of investment proved wrong in the long-run, which was admitted in the report of Select Committee of House of Commons in the year 1793 A.D.³ This erroneous investment policy caused lack of fund that was required to run an administration for due functioning.

Subsequently Nawab became a helpless who had neither the required number of militaries nor sufficient amount of finance to run the administration properly. He became a puppet Nawab in the hands of the British. The agonies of the common people increased in various affairs which further compounded by the breakout of great famine of 1770 A.D. Warren Hastings was appointed as Governor General who first abolished the dual administration and shifted the capital from Murshidabad to Calcutta in the year 1772 A.D.

Warren Hastings informed the Court of Directors of England in 3rd November 1772 about the great famine which occurred during the year 1770. The great famine caused the perishing of one-third of the whole population of Bengal. It came into observation that the revenue collected in the year 1771 was greater than the revenue collected during the year 1768 before the outbreak of the famine.⁴

Hunter observed the situation and thus stated that, “All through the stifling summer of 1770 the people went on dying. The husbandmen sold their cattle; they sold their implements of agriculture; they devoured their seed-grain; they sold their sons and daughters, till at length no buyer of children could be found; they eat the leaves of trees and the grass of field; and in June 1770 the Resident at the Durbar affirmed the living were feeding on the dead”.⁵

In spite of this situation, Sitab Ray who was the in-charge of Bihar and Reza Khan who was the in-charge of Bengal- showed high handedness in the collection of

revenues in post famine period. Therefore, Warren Hastings removed both of them from their respective posts.

Hastings assigned the duty of tax collections on the district collectors who selected the contractors through auction and who were the highest bidders were assigned the charge of collection. This process of revenue collection was not free from malpractices. This situation resulted in the passing of the Pitts India Act (1784 A.D.).

The whole situation led to the appointment of Charles Grants and Sir John Shore by Lord Cornwallis, the Govern-General of India to examine the various provisions of tax collection which had the effect of people-friendly method of tax collection aimed at the benefit of the people. Lord Cornwallis handed over the charges of revenue collection to the zamindars for ten years on the recommendation of John Shore. But Cornwallis requested the higher authority to extend this ten years period up to lifelong to prepare the zamindars to take proper care of land. The Permanent Settlement was introduced by Lord Cornwallis in 1793. The Permanent Settlement made the zamindars 'the real owner of land'. The Government also having been ensured that they can now get fixed amount of revenue from the zaminadr and zamindars were made responsible to collect the revenue. Permanent Settlement was an agreement between the British Government and the Zamindars.

The introduction of new revenue policies by the British led to the increase in the collection of annual taxes. This further became more efficient with the introduction of sun-set law in which the dues of taxes if not cleared on the scheduled date before the sun set, the defaulter zamindars would be put on mart which proved heavy for the old zamindars specially the Muslim zamindars who were already fragmented into pieces because of their inheritance law.

It was also observed that the most of the Muslim zamindars were affected by the Permanent Settlement. According to Metcalfe, "The most sweeping act of oppression ever committed in any country, by which the landed property of the country had been transferred from the class of people entitled to it, to a set of Baboos, who have made their wealth by bribery and corruption".⁶

James O Kenely observed that "It elevated the Hindu collectors who up to that time had held but unimportant posts, to the position of land holders, gave them proprietary right in the soil and allowed them to accumulate wealth which would have gone to the Mussalmans under their own Rule".⁷ These neo-zamindars made this opulence by adopting unfair means. They usually used to work as banya, muksuddi, dalal, gomosta, poddar, mahajan etc. Most of these neo-zamindars belonged to the Hindu community. Permanent settlement of zamindari gave rise to another class of people called "Madhyasatwabhogi". The zamindars having been disgusted with the monotonous and dull village life shifted to city to enjoy its charm, leaving their zamindareis in charge of someone who became known as pattani and in course of time they became pattanidar or a

small zamindars and they were also allowed to enjoy their status for generations.⁸ Hunter wrote as a result of permanent settlement great Muhammadan Houses were seriously damaged.⁹

The measures introduced by the Company Government had effectively destroyed the economic basics of many aristocratic Muslims who were the holder Lakheraj or rent-free lands. During Muslim rule, there were a kind of tax-free lands known as Lakheraj land which was to be awarded to the people of eminence of any field irrespective of cast and creed. There were twenty-seven kinds of people who were to enjoy Lakheraj property and most of them belonged to the Muslim community. Many Muslim educational institutions were to run with the income of big Lakheraj properties. With the confiscation of Lakheraj property by the British in the year 1828 – “hundreds of ancient families were ruined and the educational system of Mussalmans, which was about entirely maintained by rent-free grants received its death-blow”.¹⁰

On seeing the poverty of the Muslim at this time, Hunter remarked, “A hundred and seventy years ago it was almost impossible for a well-born Musalman in Bengal to become poor at present it is almost impossible for him to continue rich”.¹¹

During the Muslim reign, Persian was Court Language and this was in vogue for many years even during the British rule. So it was very prestigious to learn this language. If a learner could not learn Persian language, in spite of his proficiency in other languages, he was not held in high esteem in the society and even scolded in his own family. The same thing happened in the life of Bharat Chandra, when he came back home after attaining profound knowledge in Sanskrit grammar and lexicon but without acquiring any knowledge in Persian, instead of getting warm reception at home he was severely scolded by the guardian of the family.¹² Judicial proceedings were conducted in Persian language and in virtue of this, many Muslims were employed in different post, starting from the highest post of justice to the lowest post of general attendant. In the Judiciary highest posts went to the English officer, but the posts like the Qazi, Mir Adl, Mufti, etc., were still held by the Muslim officers. Persian, the court language of the Mughals and the Bengal Nawabs, continues till 1830s to maintain its privileged position and Muslim law continued to be administered in the Sadr Nizamat Adalat as also in the district criminal courts.¹³ The British Government ordered in the early part that without the certificate from the Madrasah no one could be employed to the judicial department - so this department was almost monopolized by the Muslims but the fortune did not last long. Lord Bentick declared in 1837 that English would be the Court Language instead of Persian. With this declaration, a large number of Muslims were thrown out of services because ignorance of the English language. As the Muslim did not show any interest in learning English as well as local language even when it (English) was introduced into the Calcutta Madrasah syllabus, as a result of which their number in

Government services greatly decreased. The doors of the Government services for the Muslims had been closed before they realized the utility of learning of English language. By the end of the first half of the nineteenth century, their disadvantage was overwhelming.

The new needs and attitudes found expression in the discussions which led the decision, in 1835, that Western knowledge should be imparted rather than Eastern, and in English rather than in Oriental languages.¹⁴ This decision of the British rulers of India had effects on the two major communities e.g., Hindus and Muslims in the country. The acceptance of English language was easy for the Hindus because the establishment of the British power in India, bringing a new language and educational system which meant no more than a change of masters. But the Muslims with their pride as the former rulers of the country were slow in adapting themselves to changing circumstances. The transference of power from Muslim to British hands produced widespread degradation among the former rulers and the “whole community sank with the empire”.¹⁵ The majority community accepted English education and prepared themselves for service under the British Government. Their religion, culture was not necessary affected. For the Muslims the abandonment of Arabic studies – with their religious impotence and of Persian, the language of polite society, meant the abandonment of essential elements. Thus they were slow to accept the change. Philip Hartog points out that “a real though unfounded fear that it would lead Christian proselytization on a large scale”.¹⁶ So the position of Hindus and Muslims gradually changed. The Hindus, who took advantage of the new educational system introduced by the British, gained knowledge and steadily acquired wealth and position, while the Muslims declined in all walks of life.¹⁷

The following table shows the enrolment of the Muslim students in the institutions where instructions were provided in English.

Table 1

Enrolment of Muslim Students in the Important Provinces Compared to the Percentage of enrolment Other Communities.¹⁸

<i>Sl. No</i>	<i>Provinces</i>	<i>Class of Institution</i>	<i>Total Number of Students</i>	<i>Muslims</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
1	Madras	Colleges	1669	30	1.7
		Eng. High Schools	4836	117	2.4
		Eng. Middle	18553	702	3.8
		Total	25058	870	3.4
2	Bombay	Colleges	475	7	1.4
		Eng. High Schools	5731	118	2.0
		Eng. Middle	14257	781	5.4

		Total	20463	906	4.4
3	Bengal	Colleges	2783	106	3.8
		Eng. High Schools	43747	3831	8.7
		Eng. Middle	37959	5032	13.2
		Total	84444	8969	10.6
4	N.W. Provinces	Colleges	223	29	13.0
		Eng. High Schools	4273	697	16.3
		Eng. Middle			
		Total	4496	726	16.3
5	Oudh	Colleges	126	7	5.5
		Eng. High Schools	1081	195	18.0
		Eng. Middle			
		Total	1207	202	16.7
6	Punjab	Colleges	103	13	12.6
		Eng. High Schools	453	91	20.0
		Eng. Middle	2671	703	26.3
		Total	3227	807	25.0
7	All the above Provinces	Colleges	5334	192	3.6
		Eng. High Schools	133561	12288	9.2
		Eng. Middle			
		Total	138895	124840	8.9

According to the Education Commission of 1882, the enrolment of Muslims was generally very low. Table 1 indicates the percentage of Muslim students' enrolment compared to others in colleges and Schools of English medium in six provinces under British India. The total number of students' enrolment in the Bengal province was 84444; out of which 8969 students were Muslims.

In 1844, Lord Hardinge issued a circular in which he declared that those who had Degrees in English would get preference in Government services. This time from the Hindu community youths who had received education in English from English and Missionary school entered into Government services. The Muslims were deprived of government services to such a great extent that in a few years they became socio, economically and politically became retrograde. Hunter observes that "Even ten years ago, the Musalmans invariably managed to transmit the post of Nazir, or chief of Revenue Bailiffs to men of their own creed; but now one or

two unpopular appointments about the jail are the most that the former masters of India can hope for”.¹⁹

Table 2

The following table provides information about Contemptible condition of Muslim representation in the Colonial Bengal (April, 1871).²⁰

<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Name of posts</i>	<i>European</i>	<i>Hindus</i>	<i>Muslims</i>	<i>Total</i>
1	Covenanted Civil Services	260	Nil	Nil	260
2	Judicial Officers	47	Nil	Nil	47
3	Assistant Commissioners	26	7	Nil	33
4	Deputy Magistrates & Deputy Collectors	53	113	30	196
5	Income Tax Officers	11	43	6	60
6	Registration Department	33	25	2	60
7	Judges of Lower Court & Subordinate Judges	14	25	8	47
8	Munsif	1	178	37	216
9	Police Department, Gazetted Officers of all grades	106	3	Nil	109
10	Public Works Department, Engineer Establishment	154	19	0	173
11	Public Works Department, Subordinate Establishment	72	125	4	201
12	Public Works Department, Account Establishment	22	54	0	76
13	Medical Department, Officers attached to Medical College, Jails, Charitable Dispensaries, Sanitation and Vaccination Establishment and Medical Officers in Charge of District etc.	89	65	4	158
14	Department of Public Instruction	38	14	1	53

15	Other Departments, such as Customs, Marine, Survey, Opium, etc.	412	10`	0	422
Total		1338	681	92	2111

In Table 2, Hunter categorically explained that representation of Muslims in the services is in a very pitiable position. Out of 2111 prestigious officers in the British Services, only 92 officers were hailing from the Muslim community. This was an irony in the political history of India. W.W. Hunter perceived that “A hundred years ago, the Musalmans monopolized all the important offices of State”.²¹

During Muslim rule, there were mutual trust, love and respect between the subjects and the zamindars. Zamindars were responsible for the maintenance of law and order problem within their jurisdiction. When these old benevolent zamindars were replaced by new malevolent zamindars these amicable relations were lost because of latter's selfish mentality. They were less interested with the welfare of their subjects rather more interested with the collection of taxes and in doing these, they were not hesitant in indulging in any kind of atrocities.

The colonial policies affected the Muslim cultivators in the same way as they affected fellow cultivators of other faiths. The Hindu and Muslim cultivators were exploited for the benefit of the large class of absentee zaminadrs, their agent and middlemen. In Lower Bengal, the Muhammadans have suffered most severely under the British Rule.²² The lower classes of the people were affected by the British rule in other ways. The sources of income of the people were agricultural and weaving. There were thousands of people, mostly Muslims, who were sole dependent on weaving. The destruction of weaving industries of Bengal by the import of Manchester goods from the first quarter of the nineteenth century and also the tariff policy of the colonial Government placed thousands of people into distress and disturbance. As a result, the people were driven, by and large to fall back on the productivity of the alone for earning their livelihood and the retrogressive and disastrous effect which placed the rural economy on distress. The political changes had affected earlier only the top layer of the society. Now masses also had showed a sense of disinterestedness.

During the reign of Muslim rulers, the cultivation of Nil (Indigo) was dependent on the will of the peasantries. When there came in Europe the tide of Industrial Revolution - then here in Bengal, the cultivation of Indigo started at a very large scale to meet the increasing demand of the textile industries of Europe. Bengal was very fertile. According to Robert Orme, "the province of Bengal is the most fertile land of any in the universe, more than Egypt, and with greater certainty."²³ The East India Company used to make profit, about ten to twelve Lakhs rupees, annually by cultivating Indigo. The private merchants used to make more profits than the company in Nil cultivation.²⁴ Having seen the profuse profit made by the British - the native zamindars also entered and

appeared in the field of Indigo cultivation. The manners the Nilkar sahebs adopted to make profit quite miserable and atrocities perpetrated there broke the all-time record of barbarism in the world history.²⁵ One magistrate commented that there was not a single box containing Nil (indigo), sent to England, that was not stained with the blood of Nil (indigo) farmer.²⁶ When the brutality of the Nil sahibs against the Nil farmers exceeded the limit of tolerance, the pent-up angers of the farmers burst out in the form of the revolt.

Deno Bandhu Mitra wrote a book on Nil revolt entitled *Nil Darpan*, Michael Madhu Sudhan translated it into English and James Long published it, for which Long was imprisoned by the British.

Harish Chandra also wrote about Nil revolt in *Hindu Patriot* for which he had to suffer a lot and died a pre-matured death.

"Nilbanore Sonar Bangla korlo ebar charkhar

Asamaye Harish molo Longer Holo karagar

Projar aar pran banchanor bhar ".²⁷

The 19th Century was the age of great turmoil. The widespread discontent which accumulated among the mass of people gradually created a tense situation in rural Bengal during the nineteenth century, which found outlet in occasional movements and agitations. Physical torture was carried by the atrocious zamindars and cruel Nilkars, economic deprivation caused by zamindars and mahajans (moneylenders) forcible proselytization made by Christian Missionaries gave rise to public displeasure. Though at the beginning this displeasure was confined to some particular areas, but later on, it broke out in a wide spread area. The public displeasures which were worth mentioning at that time were as follows - Titumir's Movement, Farazi movement by Shariatullah and his son Dudhu Mian, Santal revolt, Sepoy mutiny, Nil movement, and Pabna's public movement. Santal revolt, Titumir's movement and Sepoy mutiny were aimed at abolishing the sovereignty of the British Raj. Whereas Nil movement, Public movement of Pabna and Farazi movement by Sariatullah were started just to draw attention of the British authorities to the atrocities perpetrated by the Nilkars and the Zamindars and these movements mainly stemmed from economic injustice.²⁸

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