

**SITUATING THE MUSLIMS IN WEST BENGAL:
A CASE STUDY OF KOLKATA 1947-77**

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Abstract

Muslims in India Undoubtedly form a minority both on account of their numerical strength and because of their position in the power structure. Though numbering 138 million and forming the largest Muslim population next to Indonesia, Indian Muslims are 13.43% of the Indian Population. India is a secular country in the sense that the state upholds the right to religion rather than distancing itself from the religion, still organised religion continues to play a key role in power politics. J.L. Nehru being deeply influenced by the secular polity in India was of the opinion that it was the prime responsibility of the Hindus to make the large number of Muslims feel at home and not see themselves as a second class citizens existing on sufferance. The test of success, Nehru felt was not what the majority community thought but how the minority community felt. But, unfortunately as the days passed, the words of the first prime minister of the country merely look like quotation which was never applied in practice.

Till now the identity of Muslim communities has been defined through religious lense. The minority status and the attendant marginality of Muslims within the wider spectrum of post-1947 India is common; the social, economic and political positions are not. Social and political developments with regard to Muslims are watched with anxiety and alarm .Partly for religious and partly for historical reasons.

The most important issues regarding the Muslims in India are related to the questions of self-identity, security & equality; the aspect is equally important for the Muslims of Kolkata. There is a very interesting fact that after the great Calcutta Killings of 1946, which accompanied by partition and Independence of the country, the number of communal riots was the lowest in the province as well as in the city. Definitely there were riots in 1950s and also in 1964 but the intensity of them was much less in comparison to some other provinces in the country. But unfortunately this does not prove that the acceptance of the Muslim society is much more here than in other cities. Till date the sign of communalism here is like the quicksand. Muslims are concentrated in certain geographic zones of the city and lead a ghettoised existence. They do step out of these neighborhoods to travel to work but cannot find a place to own, buy or rent in their

preferable locations due to communal prejudices and this has become an open secret in the city. Neo-liberal jobless growth affects them and has deepened their poverty. Local prejudices, assisted by older forms of widespread communal myths played a key role in their living style.

A long time has passed after partition; now it's time to rethink and re-formulate the actual situation of Muslim communities in Kolkata. We can trace their evolution post independence, both historically and socially. We can focus on the timeline from 1940 to 1977.

The questions which I tried to find answers mainly are a) whether the Muslim politics in the city changed completely after Independence or is it just the continuation of the Muslim politics in the pre-partition era. b) How the Partition affected the Muslim Communities in Kolkata? c) How the communal attacks and riots have affected the Muslims in the city in pre-partition and post-partition era? d) Is there any difference between the riots before partition and after partition?.

Without understanding the politics of the Muslims in the city before the partition, it is not possible for us to understand the political, social changes which happened after partition. Existing literature on Kolkata's Muslims are very limited. Especially, those dealing with the post-partition period are insignificant in number. The works which can be mentioned are Joya Chatterjee's 'The spoils of Partition: Bengal and India 1947-67' and M.K.A Siddiqui's 'Muslims of Calcutta: A study in aspects of their social organization'. I have used them as secondary sources. The Primary source of my work contains the Census reports, Newspaper reports, Intelligence branch reports, Police reports and memoir of the people who experienced partition in their lifetime. I have also interviewed some of the important personalities with expertise relevant to this field. Through these various sources at disposal, I have tried to find out the answer to my questions.

In the first chapter I have tried to give a brief historical account of the Muslims in the city of Kolkata , the inner division between them , the differences between the Bengali and non-Bengali Muslims, and how the difference has played an important role in the Muslim politics of the state in the colonial and also in the post colonial times . These issues are very important for us to understand the fact that the Muslims were not a homogeneous entity, neither in India nor in Kolkata. Neither in the time of pre-independence nor in the post –independence era. There are class and caste, ethno-language

division between them , which is very much responsible for shaping the politics in the city. My work primarily based on the M.K.A Siddiqui's '*Muslims of Calcutta: A study in aspects of their social organization*', [Anthropological Survey of India,1974] '*Hindu-Muslim Relations*' [Abadi Publications 1993] along with the others. I have tried to portray an idea about the history of the Muslims in Kolkata, it's a small attempt to show that how important part they are in this city , from the very beginning .

The second chapter of my thesis The second chapter deals with the 'Muslims in the political discourse of the British ruled Bengal' , it's very important to us to understand the colonial politics and how they permanently sealed the future of this two community, through their diplomatic measures. I have tried to explain that the political discourse of the Muslims in the city is very much interrelated with the policy of the British divide and rule, the education policy of the British, the search of Bengali Muslim identity, the conflict between the Bengali and non-Bengali Muslims, the role and attitude of the Hindu middle class towards the Muslims. The counter attitude of the Muslim middle class as well as the newly emerged Bengali Muslim middle class. The inner conflict between the Krishak Praja party and Muslim League . The mass mobilization policy of the Muslim league and the Hindu Muslim relation in the province all are equally involved to shape the Muslim politics in the pre –independence era of the province and to determine the future of the Muslims in the city after independence. For this part *Modern India* by Sumit Sarker [Laxmi Publications, 2008] “ *Muslim Politics 1906-47 and other essays*” [Firma k.L Mukhopadhyay, 1969]by Humayun Kabir, “*Muslim Politics in Bengal*” [Impex India 1976] by Shila Sen, “*The Muslim Microcosm, Calcutta 1918 to 1935*” [Franz-Steiner Verlag,1974] by Kenneth Macpherson, “*Roots of separatism in Nineteenth Century Bengal*” [Ratna Prakashan, 1974] by Amalendu De, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition 1932-1947* [Cambridge University Press,2002] by Joya Chatterji, *Crises and Creativities : Middle Class Bhadrolok in Bengal c1939-52* [Oxford university press,2005] by Amit Kumar Gupta are important sources along with the others. The communal riots form an integral part of the Hindu Muslim politics in the country, in the third chapter I have mainly focused on the riots in the pre- partition era and how it changes its nature with the course of time, it is very important for us to understand the dimension of the riot in the pre-partition era, because without understanding this it will not possible for us to understand the changing nature of the riot in the post partition times. '*Communal Riots in Bengal 1905-1947*' [oxford university press, 1993]by Professor

Suranjan Das is the torch-bearer in this section . Apart from this ‘*Communalism in Bengal From Famine to Noakhali*’ 1943-47 [Sage Publications,2005] by Prof Rakesh Batyabal, ‘*Riots and Victims: violence, Construction of communal identity among Bengali Muslims 1905-1947* [Westview press, 1999] by Patricia A. Grossman, ‘*Making Peace Making Riots , Communalism and Communal Violence , Bengal 1940-1947, Making Peace ,Making Riots* [Cambridge University Press,2018] by Anwesha Roy, are important sources to gather the information and insights about the riots in pre- partition times.

The fourth chapter of my thesis contains the changing nature of the Muslim politics in the city. For the post-partition scenario ,where the books written by Gazala Jamil “ *Accumulation by Segregation: Muslim Localities in Delhi*” [oxford university press,2017] , “ *The Long Partition: and the making of Modern South Asia, Refugees Boundaries, Histories*” [Penguin Random House,2008] by Vazira Fazila – Yacoobali Zamindar , “*The Spoils of Partition*”[Cambridge University Press 2007] and “*Partition Legacies*” [Permanent Black,2019] by Joya Chatterji, “*Partitioned lives : Migrants, Refugees, Citizens in India and Pakistan, 1947-1965*” [oxford university press,2012] by Haimanti Roy, *Legacy of a divided Nation : India’s Muslims since Independence* [oxford university press,1997]. *Moderate or Militant : Images of India’s Muslims* [oxford university press,2008] by Mushirul Hasan, *The production of Hindu-Muslim violence in contemporary India* [oxford university press,2003] by Paul.R.Brass, shape my ideas about the post- partition condition in the country from different aspects the books including *The Disinherited State: a study of West Bengal 1967-70* [orient longman, 1971] by Shankar Ghosh, *Calcutta 1964: A social survey* [Lalvani publishing house,1968] by Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Calcutta: Its urban development and employment prospects* [Concept Publishing Company,1974] by Harold Lubell, “*Food movement of 1959: Documenting A turning point in the History of West Bengal* edited by Suranjan Das & Premangshu Kumar Bandhopadhay,[K.P Bagchi,2004] ‘ *The Marginal men*’[Lumiere books,1970] By Prafulla Kumar Chakrabarty, *Politics in West Bengal , Institutions, Processes and Problems*[wordPress,1985] edited by Rakhahari Chatterji, *Radical politics in West Bengal*,[MIT Press,1971] and *Political Development and Political Decay in Bengal* by Marcus F. Franda [Firma.K.L Mukhopadhyay,1971] gives me an idea about the political situation about the state. I used these along with the reports by Intelligence Branch of Govt of West Bengal, Police reports, Newspaper Reports.

I have found after analyze the above mention souces that the Muslims who stayed on, majority of them were situated in the lower stara of the society. The main concern of the Muslims who stayed on was the issue of their safety and security, The Muslim's in the city were no exception. They started to live together irrespective of their class and caste differences for their safety and security. The Muslims understands that for the majority of the people their identity confined with the two words, minority and Muslims. There is no difference between a Bengali and Non-Bengali Muslims in the eyes of the majority community. This causes shrinking of their Physical space.

Next feature which is visible after Partition that, whenever, there was a communal riot or communal violence after partition, Muslims tended to leave their places and they left it, and went for a secure place in suburb or rural area where they had some contact or associate, but after that when they came back they noticed that their properties had been confiscated. Sometimes it was the refugees and some time it was the local people (mostly from majority community) who did not want 'Muslims' in their locality. Obviously there was Evacuees property act by the Government of India but the implementation of it was not at all easy. The public opinion as well as the sympathy towards the refugee stood in the way for implementation of this law.

Nirmal Kumar Bose in his book ' Calcutta : 1964 a social survey' clearly indicates this pattern, about the ' living space' of the Muslims in the city , in his own words that " there is a large concentration of the Muslim labourers, artisans and craftsmen in wards like 15,16,48,49,55,57,73,74 and part of 75. The majority of them belong either to Bihar or Uttar Pradesh.

Formerly those who lived in Wards 15, 16,33,35 etc were employed largely in soap or leather works , carried out on a household scale . But after the Hindu-Muslim Riots of 1946-47 , there has been some amount of re-distribution of population, while Bustees have been largely cleared out in this area . Muslims have consequently , moved into greater concentration in wards like 32,33,34 and 35 and work as masons in the building trade or as artisans in various industries.

Prof Joya Chatterji explained this 'shrinking nature' of Muslim neighbourhood very well. She writes, "Over time, as each incident of rioting and tension sparked off an exodus of frightened and vulnerable Muslims fleeing to safer areas, and as each temporary flight became a permanent exile, Muslim Communities which had been large and well

established before partition now disappeared altogether or shrank into tiny clusters. Particularly in the towns and cities of southern West Bengal , where Muslims had once played a prominent part in Urban life , now they huddled together in small areas, hemmed in by colonies of Hindu refugees that sprang up around them. These tiny Muslim pockets surrounded and continually squeezed by hostile neighbors, became increasingly crowded little enclaves with the distinctive air of the ghetto about them”.

It is not only that they lost their ‘Physical Space’, they also started to lose their ‘rights’. The rights which they have been enjoying since long , after partition they started to compromise with it. The Muslims who lived in the city after partition started to realize , that partition made them the most unprotected, unsafe, endangered community as a whole, so in this changed situation if they wanted to ‘protect’ themselves from the rage of the majority community, they have to sacrifice and compromise on some of the ground which may cause fury or agitation among the Hindus or the majority. Among this the major prerogative was the right of ‘Korbani’ (Most of the time there was a cow which the Muslims slaughtered during the time of Eid) , that was sometimes voluntarily given up by the Muslims in a couple of instances. The issue of cow-slaughter or ‘Go-Korbani’ is a very sensitive matter from the very beginning, there was a long history of conflict regarding this issue among the Hindus and Muslims. But after partition , the Muslims realized that their position has changed , they have actually become second class citizen here. So for the sake of their safety many times they decided not to perform the ritual of ‘Cow Slaughter’ or Korbani. Apart from this the procession of holi, puja before the mosque was also a matter of conflict before the partition, but after partition Muslims became silent about these issues, There was one instance which came to notice from the report of the Kolkata Police, where the leader of Anjuman-e- Mafidul –Islam S.M Salahuddin contacted the Mohalla Sarders of PhulBagan and Tanti Bagan locality of Beniapukur , and urged them to be quiet during the festival of Holi, and did not give in to any kind of persuasion. The report of popular Muslim Newspaper ‘Paigam’ of 17th August 1954 confirmed that at the behest of the Indian government the West Bengal government has closed the special Haj office in Kolkata, and why this office has been closed , or when will it reopen or re-open at all, nothing was said about this. There are also incidents where the poor Muslim people were forced to give up their rights over their cemetery.

Giving up these kind of rights is not something that the Muslims would do spontaneously, Rather they were forced to do it and they realized that perhaps this was the

right way to protect themselves. Although this does not mean that Hindus started to sympathize with them, they take these 'signs' as a subordination stance for the Muslims. The majority of Hindus started to think that the Muslims don't have the right to perform their Korbani, in a country where they have become the minority. There were plenty of instances found in the year 1948, 1949 where despite all the assurance from the Muslims like the choice of the place for korbani, where no Hindu lived or the sounds of korbani would have not reached any the Hindus, Hindus were vehemently opposed to the idea of Korbani, as well as threatened them. During his survey Nirmal Kumar Bose found that in ward number 14 there were 12 mosques and four of them were actually in possession of refugees from East Pakistan who used them for their residential purposes. These examples are enough to prove how the majority try to pressurize the 'Muslims' in the very 'physical' and 'public' spaces of them.

But it would be wrong to think that the Muslims accepted their destiny as subordinate citizens. Obviously they realized that their position in the country changed, but with the course of time they also realized their importance in the politics of the country, the Muslims of the city were no exception.

After independence, Muslims started to rely on Congress, one of the reasons behind it was obviously the assurance given by Pandit Nehru towards the minorities and secondly the ideology and policy of 'territorial nationalism' and 'secularism' propagated extensively by Congress from before Independence, and finally to protect themselves from Hindu communal organizations like RSS. There is a letter written by President of CoochBihar District Committee Ansaruddin Ahmed, where he stated that "Muslims, originally wary of Congress, had eventually "veered round and agreed with us that in the secular Constitution of India laid down by the Congress lies our greatest safety and if congress did nothing but give us this Secular constitution it was enough for us and we would stand by the Congress". As a result, after independence a large number of Muslims started to rely on Congress. As far as the Muslim politicians were concerned there were two kind of politicians. We could find the first category including people who joined in the congress. It was the easiest way to secure their political life, and on the other hand for Congress they became the proof of secularism, the ideology that the congress has been talking about from the beginning. There were 82 Muslim candidate during the time of 1952 election where 21 of them were from congress, 14 from the other political parties or oppositions, and 45 of them were stood Independent in the election, 17 Congress

Candidate won along with the 2 Independent candidate, what is important that no one from the any opposition won. This is a clear example that the way in which the Congress was able to gain the reliability of the Muslims after independence was not possible for any other political party.

But , gradually the situation began to change, each and every political party realized the importance of ‘ Muslim vote’ and tried to achieve it. On the other hand Muslims also realized their importance in the ballot box , and started to reunite. If we observe the trend of Muslim politics in the post independence period in west Bengal as well as in Kolkata , we understand a number of political trends, the first one obviously sided with the congress, the second one was the trend of Independent leaders, other than these there were some people who started to lean towards leftist politics. As we all know that in politics there is no place for a feature like ‘distinct’ or ‘Obvious’, Muslim politics in the city was complex, multidimensional and indistinct.

The Bengali and non-Bengali conflict in the city depending on the situation of East Bengal was an important characteristics of the city’s Muslim Politics. There are plenty of reports which helps us to understand that although for the majority community their identity remains with single identity but among them there are huge internal differences. It also helps us to understand that how wrong the notion of Muslim League was about their so called Two- nation theory. The fray between Bengali and non- Bengali Muslims in the city became an important feature in the domain of Muslim social and political sphere.

A new kind of politics also started to grow in the city after partition depending completely on the ‘Muslim Identity’, and for this the Muslim social organizations became the most important medium. There were some old and some newly formed social organizations in the city which started to mobilize the Muslims masses on different context. Among these organizations, The Tablighi Jamat, The Jaamat Isami, The Momin Conference, The AnjumanTanzimul Momenin, The Jamat ul ulemai Hind and The West Bengal Muslim Rehabilitation Committee became very important. The Muslims irrespective of their cast and creed differences, understood that it was much easier for them to inform the government about their plight through the medium of social organization because they realized that in this changed social , political condition if they established any kind of political organization , it would create a suspicion in the eyes of the government as well as in the eyes of majority. They expected the social organization

through their different kinds of activities informing the government about their condition, and also it helped to unite Muslims from different class and caste to come under one umbrella.

As far the riots were concern the main two riots after partition which effected the large number of masses was the riot of 1950 and 1964. the reason behind these two riots were the events in East Pakistan. Although the main issue of the 1964 riot was based in India. 'Religion' played an instrument of politics here also. Where the causes of the first phases of riot in the city lies in the socio-economic factor and subsequently religion, religious identity, religious issues take the centre stage. The 1946 'Partition Riots' is the finest example that how religious identity drives and makes people insane. The earlier riots before partition were a battleground for both the communities to establish their dominance in the power structure, where the post-partition riots were clearly indication of dominance of the majority community over the minority in both the countries.

Persecution of Hindus, Competition for power among the Bengali and non-Bengali Muslims, confrontation between them all this made East Pakistan was the centre of political turmoil. In most of the riot after partition in the city, we can see that it was a reaction of the oppression of Hindus in East Pakistan. Although the ideology of communalism is also active here.

In conclusion, we can say that at a time when religious intolerance has been growing in the country & economic dispossession looms over the great majority of the working poor, Muslims not only remain second class citizen but face an array of discrimination . My research has tried to trace the roots of Muslim marginality in a city that has up to now avoided a major communal bloodbath since 1946 but cannot claim to be free of communal prejudice.

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