Book Review

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Rashiduzzaman, Mohammad. 2021. Identity of a Muslim Family in Colonial Bengal: Between Memories and History. New York: Peter Lang. Pages xviii+2010. Price $111.20. ISBN 978-1-4331-8319-5 (hardback)

Silent Psychological Division out of 'Social Distancing': Roots of Bengal Partition through Sociocultural Prism

Anindita Ghoshal

"You are the son of a Muslim; why do you need so much education?" (p. 30)

This one-liner in the book *Identity of a Muslim Family in Colonial Bengal: Between Memories and History* (New York: Peter Lang, 2021) by Mohammad Rashiduzzaman is enough to make one understand the enormity of the rift between Hindus and Muslims in colonial Bengal. As researchers of the Partition and refugee studies of South Asia, we often wonder how the masses began to accept the idea of making separate homelands for the two leading communities of Bengal. Indeed, they participated actively in communal politics at the grassroots level, initiated chiefly by the three major political parties of united Indian territory: the Congress, the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha, the latter two being actively against the centuries-long tradition of communal harmony in the pre-Partition East Bengal society. Interestingly, a study of the trends of Partition historiography reveals a shift, from the late 1970s onwards, in the focus of the research done by historians and social scientists: from the high politics of Partition to the more human side of it. However, the Partition narratives kept revolving only around the Hindu side of the stories. Hindu refugee narratives, therefore, became more prominent in Partition literature and films. The Muslim accounts of experiencing the division remained marginal for many reasons. The key reason was that the creation of Pakistan, a brand new nation-state on the map of South Asia, has always been seen in official accounts as an absolute achievement of Muhammad Ali Jinnah. The Muslim

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Anindita Ghoshal (ghoshal.anindita@yahoo.com) is Associate Professor of History, Diamond Harbour Women's University, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.

League played a prominent role in the division of the country as Jinnah demanded Pakistan, a *swapna-bhumi*, or 'promised land, for the Muslims in the Lahore Resolution of 1940. The demand for a separate homeland for Muslims created a grand narrative for Partition that ignored the social history of Muslim Bengalis, especially the mobility, tension and vibration between the communities in the countryside of Bengal. In this sociocultural and political context of colonial Bengal, Rashiduzzaman's book provides an eye-opening account of both the processes and reasons behind the transformation of East Bengali society from a centre of composite culture to a land of identity politics.

In the preface of the book, the author tries to situate his research within the theoretical framework of Benedict Anderson and his arguments on altering the identities of communities. The author indeed claims that this book is "a hybrid narrative that innovatively melds history with personal reminiscences, oral anecdotes, identity imagination, religiosity, scholarly studies, and grassroots encounters over three generations in united Bengal before 1947" (p. x). This work seems valuable as it blurs the lines between personal recollections and family narratives and tries to touch upon the prevailing discourses on Muslim history and politics in South Asia. Interestingly, following his father's advice, the author tried to blend memories of only two generations to write this book on the sociocultural status of Bengal over a hundred years. His village-based recount is, in several ways, a microcosm in the bigger panorama of undivided Bengal. However, it largely ignores elements like identity formation through family nostalgia as well as Islamic theological discourses, along with women's voices and their historical contributions to social development. To portray a picture of the social life of Muslims in rural Bengal, the author uses village-based accounts of Muslim families from different strata. He mentions two well-known works: *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian* by Nirad C. Chaudhuri and Abul Mansur Ahmed's *Amar Dekha Rajnitir Panchas Bochhar* in this context. Rashiduzzaman's main intention is to give a bottom-up view of the social life of Muslims in rural Bengal: their feelings, relations with Hindus, and their long struggle to advance administratively, politically and educationally.

The introduction titled "Threads of Memories: I Still Retain the Shifting" sets the tone of the volume and puts the chapters in order. The author has used some secondary sources, both vernacular and official, but he has relied primarily on human memories of different generations. He describes the sudden migration and leaving of Hindu students and teachers from the rural schools, including his own school, to the Indian part of Bengal to situate their departure and consequent migration from East Bengal within the causality of a cataclysmic event (p. 3). The author mentions "the Muslim Bangla" of his mother which comprised Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. This is one example, among many others, of the author's attempt to provide the readers with new perspectives for understanding the Muslim society within the known social, political and historical parameters of pre-partition Bengal. These intricate details of the "unwritten history", viewed from a Muslim perspective to understand the sociocultural backdrop of Partition, are provided in the form of oral narratives and recollections, family anecdotes and glimpses into local history, especially the "eclectic historiography" of his father, who was "the keeper of our family stories, mostly about his parents, personal encounters in his school, and interactions in his younger and adult life" (p. 6). The author hopes that when seen in the context of "the cluster of unparalleled events between the 1905 and 1947 partitions of Bengal—evidently caught in a national downgrading—the wealth of personal narratives and recollections here, both analytical and informative, hopefully reclaim a part of South Asia's overlooked narratives," which will contribute to grassroots historiography (p. 7–10).

In "Weaving Contemporary and Comparable Memories", the author describes how "the remnants of Muslim *khandan*, fixated on their lost opulence and influence, had a certain equivalency with the Hindu *bhadralok*, though they fell behind in education and professional achievements". And how "they wanted to be the equivalent of (Hindu) *bhadralok*". The author believes those *khandans* exemplified the "grassroots dynamics of Colonial Bengal's political history" (p. 19). The relationship between the core and the periphery becomes evident when he mentions, "There was a noticeable tension in my school in 1946 and in our sub-district town when the news of the "Great Calcutta killing" reached our villages, and for many years, the family elders talked about great tragedies in Calcutta, Noakhali, and Bihar" (p. 20). Interestingly, on the eve of 14 August 1947, the day of Pakistan's independence, and immediately after the historic day, he remembers noticing that most Hindu students and teachers had been frequently absent from their classes" (p. 21). His personal narrative comes across as rather different from the grand narrative of community relationships in pre-Partition Bengal when he recalls, "Millions of gods and goddesses that the Hindus worship are the representations of Brahman, the ultimate creator and power that guided the universe; my father explained those Hindu beliefs to me before I finished my seventh grade" (p. 29). He believes that a lack of initiative to create a common Hindu-Muslim civil society led to the absence of mutually respectful two-way interactions between the Hindus and Muslims in rural Bengal. During the mid-1940s, a widely discussed slogan was "vote for the nominee of the Muslim League, even if it is a banana plant," not the slogan "*Hindu-Muslim Bhai Bhai*" (Hindus and Muslims are Brothers!) (p. 32).

After the Partition, a vacuum in small towns and villages was evident because of the steady departure of the Hindus in the typical rural areas. Hindu zamindars and the *bhadralok* community were relocating to Calcutta or comparable urban areas as they no longer felt secure there. The community that stayed back felt a sense of loss at the steady departure of the Hindus to India. But what was the key reason behind the insecurity and fear of the Hindus? The tradition of Hindus not touching Muslims or caste Hindus, not even walking in the shadows of lower caste people, was commonly known as *choi-na-choi* (touching and not touching)—it was this custom that socially divided the Bengali society long before the Partition in 1947. As the book points out, "the Hindus and Muslims, except in schools, business, and occasional cultural activities, mostly refrained from social interactions like dining, voluntary socialization, intermarriage and sharing the same neighbourhoods", probably as Muslims were inferior in the eyes of the caste Hindus (p. 40)! The government also feared the potential for anti-colonial anger among the Muslims (p. 50). The government officers and babus in town then were mostly Hindus; only one or two Muslim teachers were in the school. No one of the senior tax collectors was Muslim; the postmaster was usually a Hindu, and the mailmen were either Hindu or Christian in those decades (p. 59). This trend, however, impacted the popular psyche and the minds of enlightened Muslim families at the ground level and in private spaces too. For example, the author has beautifully portrayed the mixed feelings of her grandmother on the eve of her son's departure for college: "She suffered from a strange combination of hopes and fears—she dreaded that her son's departure for college was the beginning of her family's breakup" (p.73). In the first three chapters of the book, the author showed how this feeling of dilemma and confusion was present at every level and how the issue of a separate Muslim identity always played a major role in defining their sociocultural positions in public and private spaces.

Chapter 4 deals with how dress played a crucial role in redefining the identities of the religious communities in Bengal. The author notes that traditional attires like *achkan/sherwani, fez, lungi* and *dhoti* are mostly viewed as either Muslim or Hindu dress (p. 83). In this context, a very interesting account is presented in this chapter: "During the Hindu-Muslim rioting in the 1940s and 1950s, outdoor dress, in a way, became a life and death question! I heard in numerous accounts that Muslim men went to the Hindu-majority neighbourhoods wearing *dhoti*. And Hindu men visited the Muslim majority areas wearing a *pajama* and *kurta* or even wearing *lungi.*" At his school, a few Muslim students occasionally came in *dhoti,* but not after 1946. As the tide of Muslim identity gained a new momentum in the 1940s, almost all Muslims started avoiding wearing the *dhoti*, at least in public (p. 85). Chapter 5 connects the material, ideological, and spiritual aspects of the society before the division. Though the impact of Sufism was strong in Bengal, as noted by Richard Eaton, among others, the notion of a 'Sufi Solidarity', which spread in South Asia and far beyond, could not stem the tide of communalism in Bengal (p. 96–97). Simultaneously, "the rural political eminence was monopolised by the landowning *bhadralok* in Colonial Bengal—mostly Hindus with a sprinkling of Muslim *khandans.* However, the peasants, no matter Hindus or Muslims, were uniformly inarticulate in politics" (p. 129). The key thrust of the last four chapters can be understood from a few terms and sentences. "Never Apologize for Being a Muslim!" is a line that captures the central idea of this book, which is manifested by another incident recounted by the author: "Possibly in 1948 or 1949, once a Hindu classmate vented his frustration to me when he was visiting our outer house for private tuition from my father: "You Muslims wanted a separate state so that you could have more jobs without competing with the Hindus!" (p. 186). Such was the feeling of mistrust that the Calcutta-based *bhadralok* class stopped visiting their caretaker-managed rural estates during the

(Hindu) Puja festivals. So, more than the differences in educational, economic and professional fronts, it was the 'social distance' between the communities that became a systemic issue dividing the Hindus and Muslims across the spectrum (p. 191).

This book and Joya Chatterji's latest book, *Shadows at Noon: The South Asian Twentieth Century* (Viking, 2023), have certain parallels—both tried to blend memories and anecdotes with history and scholarly works. Both are genre-challenging books that shed light on the complex historical landscape of South Asia, with narratives that historians might find useful. The innovative approach of combining elements of historical analysis, cultural critique, personal narratives, storytelling and an interdisciplinary approach allows the reader to explore the multifaceted dimensions of South Asian history that transcend conventional boundaries. By using different methodologies and unconventional sources, both books negate the idea of putting the 'blame for the 1947 Partition' on Muslims: their distinctive identity and imagination presumed to be the culprit. For its global and local approach, rational representation of facts and impartial analysis, this book should be on the reading list of all researchers working in similar fields of social sciences.