

Go-Raksha, the “Cow-Life Controversy” and the Bengali Muslim Public Sphere, 1889-1890

Abstract: Mir Mosharraf Hossein (1847-1912), pioneering author of the Musalmani-Bengali novel, was also a social commentator and journalist. In reaction to the socio-political disharmony in Bengal, exacerbated by “cow-protection” movements and the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, Hossein penned a series of articles in the periodical *Ahmadi* in 1888. The articles, collected and published as *Go-Jiban (Cow-Life)* in pamphlet form, exhorted Muslims to eschew cow-slaughter. This caused vicious controversy. There were protesting editorials in the *Akhbar'e Islamia* and Hossein was accused of apostasy. He retaliated, instituting a libel-case. The controversy deepened with the publication of a refutation of *Go-Jiban* by Reazuddin Mashhadi. The periodicals were published in Kushtia and Tangail in rural East Bengal. A study of the controversy, articulated in the vernacular, non-elite public sphere through Musalmani-Bengali periodicals and pamphlets, provides a rare insight into the formation process of political identities and networks of intra-communal information exchange revolving around a religiously sensitive issue.

Contours of the Controversy:

The Bengali-Muslim periodical, *Sudhakar*, published from Calcutta, reported on a large protest-assembly at Dhaka, at the theatre hall called “Purba-Banga Ranga-Bhumi”, on Friday afternoon of 1st November 1889. Students and teachers from Dhaka College, Dhaka Madrasa, the Jubilee and Jagannath Institutions as well as from the Survey, Medical and Normal schools were in attendance. Many, not all, of them were scholars of Islam. They were there in solidarity and sympathy with a man called Moulvi Naimuddin Sahib, the editor of the newspaper *Akhbar'e Islamia*, published from Tangail in eastern Bengal (now in Bangladesh).

Naimuddin was the target of a defamation lawsuit instituted by the most well-known of Bengali-Muslim authors of the age, Mir Mosharraf Hossein. Speaking at the assembly, the professor of Arabic at Dhaka Madrassa, Moulvie Hafiz Abdullah said, “If someone, bearing the name of a Muslim, conspires to please an unbeliever, and uses the sword of treachery against Islam; and in such a circumstance, a truly faithful Musalman stands against this corrupted man, only to find himself imperiled in an unequal fight, that is a danger for the entire community and the nation. All believers should come to his aid.”¹

In the background of this groundswell of public support for Moulvi Naimuddin, was the *Go-Jiban* or *Cow-Life* controversy which was described as a *Jatiya Bipad* or national calamity. In this paper, I argue that the “Cow-Life” controversy, debated and performed in the public sphere through Musalmani-Bengali periodicals and pamphlets, provides a rare insight into the process of formation of political identities and networks of information exchange revolving around a socio-religiously inflicted issue, at a non-elite level. I also argue that the lawsuit that resulted due to the controversy provides an important background towards the genealogy of later legal juxtaposition of religious critique and criminal intent to

¹ Reported by Waris Ali, instructor at the Dhaka Madrasa. Printed in the *Sudhakar* periodical on 22nd November 1889 (8th Aghrayan, 1296). Translation mine.

defame an imagined community of faith, which would be brought into sharp relief by the infamous *Rangila Rasool* case of 1927.²

Mir Mosharraf Hossein (1847-1912), the protagonist of the controversy, belonged to an *ashraf* or aristocratic Sayyid family of Kushtia in eastern Bengal. He was the pioneering author of the Musalmani-Bengali novel-genre, having written a trilogy called *Bishad-Sindhu* or *Sea of Sorrows*, which described the tragic events surrounding the battle of Karbala.³ The trilogy garnered critical praise, but more interestingly, became a substitute for the Quran in many Bengali households. The Quran had been translated into Bengali by the Brahma preacher Bhai Girish Sen, who worked tirelessly from 1881 to 1886 to publish the version. However, even the Bengali translation was not available to most Bengali Muslims. The tenets of Islam, in Bengal, circulated through folk-literature and novels, from Syed Sultan's *Nabi Vamsa*⁴ (on the family and descendants of the Nabi, Prophet Muhammad) written in the sixteenth century, to Mir Mosharraf Hossein's novel, *Bishad Sindhu*, published in three volumes in 1885, 1887 and 1891. The novel was adapted into

² Nair, Neeti. "Beyond the 'Communal' 1920s: The Problem of Intention, Legislative Pragmatism, and the Making of Section 295A of the Indian Penal Code." *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 317–340.

³ The trilogy was published from 1885 to 1889. See, Hossein, Mir Mosharraf (1936). *Bishad Sindhu*. Calcutta: Premier Publishing House.

⁴ Ayesha Irani's forthcoming book, *The Making of Bengali Islam, 1600–present: Translation and Conversion in the Nabīvaṃśa of Saiyad Sultān*, based on her PhD dissertation, discusses how the *Nabi Vamsa* became the prime source of knowledge about Islam and the Prophet in Bengal, and often provided a template for other authors working on Islamic themes, especially on *sirat* literature.

plays and cycles of folk-Jari and Bhatiyali songs describing the Prophet and his family.⁵

However, Mosharraf Hossein had begun his career as a journalist and contributor to the periodicals *Sambad Prabhakar* and *Grambarta Prakashika*, and he remained until the end a chronicler of the life and times of eastern Bengali Muslims. His connections to popular print media resulted in the sharp journalistic observations of changes in Bengali society in the latter half of the 19th century.⁶ He penned a series of articles in the *Ahmadi* periodical in 1888, exhorting fellow Muslims to forego cow-slaughter and sacrifice, in a bid to advocate for inter-communal peace. The articles were collected and published by him in pamphlet form as *Go-Jiban*, or *Cow-Life*.⁷ Controversy erupted as soon as the editorials were published, and the essay was quickly denounced as “un-Islamic”, by Moulvie Naimuddin and other members of the Bengali Ulema.

The catalyst to the most controversial episode of Mosharraf Hossein’s life was the establishment of “Go-rakshani” or cow-protection movement by Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj, in 1881-82. As analyzed by Gyanendra

⁵ See Jākāriyā, Sāimana (2011). *Pronomohi Bongomata: Indigenous Cultural Forms of Bangladesh*. 1st ed. Dhaka: Nympha Publication. Pg. 31-44. The author Abul Bashar writes poignantly of the many ways of reading, listening to and loving the novel in rural peasant and middle-class Hanafi Muslim communities in Bengal. See: Bashar, Abul. “Bishad Sindhu’r Bishadmoy Taranga”. Stable URL: <http://www.amarboi.com/2015/11/bishad-sindhur-bishadmoy-torongo-abul-bashar.html>. 3rd Paragraph. Bashar says, “In my childhood I saw pious Muslims display *Bishad Sindhu* in bamboo caskets specially used for storing religious texts with other books.”

⁶ Bandopadhyay, Brajendranath (1955). *Sahitya Sadhak Charitmalā*. Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishat. Vol. 2, No. 28-29. Pg. 31-52.

⁷ Hossein, Mir Mosharraf (1889). *Go-Jiban*. Shantikunja, Tangail.

Pandey, Anand Yang, and more recently Rohit De and others, the cow-protection movement led to escalation of communal tensions in North and East India in the 1880s.⁸ Mosharraf Hossein was keenly attuned to the rising political and social disharmony in Bengal. Two important factors need to be considered while analyzing the cultural spaces of Muslim apologetics in eastern Bengal during this period. First, Naya Miyan, leader of the Fara'idi movement, died at the age of 32 while on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1884. Naya Miyan had led the last successful charge, politically, economically and ideologically, against the forces of Hindu *zamindari* extortion of Muslim peasantry in eastern Bengal.⁹ Naya Miyan's death weakened the Fara'idi movement considerably, and left a vacuum in the rural Bengali Muslim *ecumene* in the sphere of Islamic reform and theological debate. The second factor was the social and economic changes wrought by the passage of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885 which pitted Hindu landlords against Muslim *ryots*. After a series of rent strikes by the peasantry resulting in disturbances and riots, even the depositions of the landlords, largely high caste Hindus, failed to convince the colonial administration of the wisdom of non-interference in the relationship between *raiyyat* and zamindar. The Bengal Tenancy Act invested the *raiyyats*, as Sugata Bose mentions in his seminal work on peasant labour, with

⁸ Pandey, Gyandendra (1983). "Rallying Around the Cow: Sectarian Strife in the Bhojpuri Region, c.1888-1917". Ed. Guha, Ranajit. *Subaltern Studies II*. Delhi.

⁹ Ahmad Khan, Muin-ud-din. *History of the Fara'idi Movement in Bengal, 1818-1906*. Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1965. Print. Pakistan Historical Society Publication; No. 41. Pg. 50-56.

“right to the land with substance and security”.¹⁰ One of the major aims of the Fara’idi movement had been the rights of the land for the cultivator – “*Langal jar jomi tar*”. With the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885, and a corresponding withering of zamindari rights to land, the Muslim peasantry found a new economic and social stability. 1885 was the final closing of a kind of political and economic possibility for the Muslim peasantry, and the opportunity for new articulations of rights and reforms. This cannot be discounted in the flowering of subaltern discourses on religion, culture, social hierarchies, and resistance against suspected efforts at depredations of social cohesion through evangelical Christian missionary activity. Recent historiography on liberalism and empire privileges a materialist understanding of liberalism based on right to property and a Bengali Muslim politics of peasant independence deriving and evolving out of that right. Andrew Sartori’s analysis of proprietary rights to land held customarily by the *raiyyats* paints a partial picture of Muslim peasant political agitation.¹¹ Beginning with Titu Mir in the early 19th century, through the Fara’idis, to the distinctive approach of Mosharraf Hossein towards communitarian cohesion - religion and religious identity played just as important a role in defining self and other in Bengal, and agitation for land-rights by the peasants was deeply imbued with a sense of religious fervor. It was just as important to be a good Musalman, as my story

¹⁰ Bose, Sugata. *Peasant Labour and Colonial Capital: Rural Bengal since 1770*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993. Pg. 81.

¹¹ Sartori, Andrew. *Liberalism in Empire: An Alternative History*. 2014.

shows, as it was to be a good cultivator, that Sartori demonstrates in his analysis of early 20th century pamphlets.¹² Defining the parameters of being a good and true Muslim demarked the lines of political and social agitation, where religion and right to property were interwoven, proximate and omnipresent strands. The conditions of faith in rural Bengal were riven with tensions. Such tensions were effectively expressed intra-communally as well, in an effort to expunge the space of syncretism that allowed accommodation of other religious and cultural practices within Bengali Islam.

After having been afforded the legal right of the individual to property, it is possible that Bengali Muslims turned their attentions towards a better definition of themselves as subjects and citizens. The category of reform both most intimately accessible to them, and offering the most visible potential for resistance, was religion. In this, three major religions had to be considered. Their own, an uniquely Bengali Islam (or South-Asian Islam), which their reformers saw as hopelessly syncretic and muddled; the Hinduism of their immemorial neighbors, usages borrowed from which had apparently led to pollution of their own social rites and customs – as such Hinduism was the excess, the interiorized impurity, which had to be exorcised in order to be better Muslims; and last and most externally threatening, the unstated but omnipresent faith of the colonial imperial state and its

¹² Ibid. Chapter 5, “Peasant Property and Muslim Freedom”.

officials and non-official members – Christianity, which the Bengali Muslims viewed with suspicion as a tool of erasure of their identity. It was an atmosphere of rapid change, compounded by ecological disaster and socio-religious disarray, and increasing intrusion of the colonial state, both officially and unofficially, into the lives of Bengali Muslims.

Background:

I want to briefly discuss Mir Mosharraf Hossein's arguments against cow-slaughter, and the responses it drew from Naimuddin, the *Akhbar'e Islamia*, the *Sudhakar* group and Reazuddin Mashhadi. These arguments, against cow-slaughter for either celebratory or religious reasons, took three different angles. The first was about the limits of Quranic sanction of animal-sacrifice and appropriate substitutions that could be offered instead of beef. The second argument was about social cohesion and respecting the religious and cultural sensibilities of Bengali Hindus. And the third argument was a combination of economic and medical reasons against cow-slaughter. All these arguments should sound very familiar to the audience members.

In terms of textual sanction in the Quran of animal sacrifice, Mosharraf Hossein's argument was simply this – just because certain animals were marked as 'halal', it did not mean the injunction was for mandatory consumption of the meat of those

animals. In his opinion, the limit was the prohibition, not the permission. For example, wild boar could not be eaten at the peril of eternity in *Jahannum*. Cow was permissible, but it did not mean beef had to be compulsorily ingested.

Mosharraf Hossein made a point of insisting that cow-sacrifice during Eid and other celebrations had as much to do with cultural norms and performance of social prestige for Bengali Muslims, as it had to ostensibly do with religious observance. For example, he said, cow-sacrifice was almost unknown in Arabia, where camel-sacrifice was far more popular. Bengalis of course almost never sacrificed camel, for understandable reasons, since camels were pretty rare in Bengal. Therefore, cows could be substituted by a number of other animals, including goats, and the pious devotional intent behind the sacrifice would not be lessened at all.

The argument about social cohesion was that if there were no overt religious sanctions against the prohibition of cow-slaughter, Bengali Muslims should, as a matter of respect for their immemorial neighbours, the Hindus, refrain from making beef-eating a performance of social eminence and an article of faith.

Mosharraf Hossein here depended on a sketch of the ability of his faith to adapt to very different social and political regimes. He said that Islam, by crossing mountains and deserts, had unfurled its flag over Hindustan, but in the process, had also adapted to its environs. This adaptability was historically documented. Surely, this reasoning could be extended to allow substitution of animals other than cows

for sacrifice – animals which were not tied as closely to the religious sensibilities of Hindus?

The third argument centered on the many different economic uses of cows – from milk, which was a staple in Bengali households irrespective of religious faith, to the use of cattle in agriculture. Mosharraf Hossein added the environmental aspect of Bengal's weather and the medical suitability of eating beef, which he said was difficult to digest with very few discernible health benefits, to the diet of Bengali Muslims. Contemporary opinions about the proverbial weakness of Bengali stomachs aside, Mosharraf Hossein pointed out that in their daily diet comprising largely of rice, lentils, vegetables and milk, Bengali Hindus and Muslims did not really differ very much from each other. No one enjoyed or could enjoy the rich preparations demanded by beef, more suitable for the drier North-Indian climate, as a daily component of their food. In fact, daily consumption of beef in Bengal's very humid and hot climate would result in ailments ranging from dyspepsia and gout to leprosy. It was God himself who had made common sense an arbiter of human action, and God who had mandated differing diets according to different climatic conditions in different countries. If beef-eating was such a central factor in

the true observance of Islam, God would not have filled Bengal with greenery, with fruits and vegetables and rivers teeming with fish.¹³

As should be clear from the arguments Mosharraf Hossein presented, the foundation of his desire for prohibition of cow-slaughter was one based on a rational, logical interpretation of religious observances based on material conditions of daily life of Bengal's Muslims. The concept of independent reasoning, or 'ijtihad', was attracting increasingly urgent new debates in Northern Indian elite Muslim societies, primarily through Syed Ahmed Khan and his Aligarh Reform movement.¹⁴ Mosharraf Hossein was primarily motivated by the communal riots and tensions exacerbated by the "Go-Raksha" movement in Bengal, which was spearheaded by men like Sriman Swamy who was a charlatan and a rabble-rouser, as well as other cow-protectionists, both Arya Samajists and high caste orthodox Hindus.¹⁵ However, it is not unreasonable to conjecture that Mosharraf Hossein's position on the cow-slaughter controversy sought support in the use of *ijtihad* as it was beginning to be used to discuss the condition of Muslims in British India who, after the Census of 1872, lived in close relationship with a newly demographically defined Hindu-majority population.

“Un-Islamic?” The backlash against Mosharraf Hossein:

¹³ Hossein, Mir Mosharraf (1889). *Go-Jiban*. Shantikunja, Tangail. 1st-3rd Suggestion.

¹⁴ Jalal, Ayesha (2000). *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850*. New York, Routledge. Pgs.279-280.

¹⁵ Mashhadi, Reazuddin (1903). *Agni-Kukkut*. Calcutta: Shahenshah and Company. 2nd Edition. Pg. 13-17.

The backlash against *Go-Jiban* and Mir Mosharraf Hossein was instantaneous. The first attack came from Tangail, by Moulvie Naimuddin, who accused Mosharraf Hossein of apostasy. The editorial published a point-by-point rebuttal of *Go-Jiban*'s arguments, beginning with Mosharraf Hossein's contention that it was necessary for the sake of social cohesion and normalization of tensions between Hindus and Muslims that cow-slaughter needed to be voluntarily banned by the Bengali Muslim community.¹⁶ According to Naimuddin, the argument was not only deeply flawed, but actually a blasphemous one. There could be no higher consideration than the belief in and fulfilment of the tenets of one's faith. The fact that sacrifice of cows and the eating of beef was 'halal' for Muslims, meant that there were no other factors important enough to merit the reconsideration of that permission. In other words, permissions and prohibitions were equally important and equally binding upon believing Muslims to observe. Mosharraf Hossein, by placing social and communal relationships with Hindus, who did not belong to the community of the people of the Book, the Ahl-e-Kitab, above the textual and customary sanctions admitted by Islam, had proclaimed his own apostasy.

The place of humor and satire, which Mosharraf Hossein had indeed used in his articles, were another admission of apostasy, since true faith should not be made an object of laughter by the ignorant. One who brought the true faith into disrepute by

¹⁶ Hossein, Mir Mosharraf (1889). *Go-Jiban*. Shantikunja, Tangail. Appendix. See Moulvie Naimuddin. "Refutation of the essay, "Fear of extinction of the cow-species", by Mir Mosharraf Hossein".

use of such low means, was a *Kafir* as no true Muslim would ever dare, at the peril of their own souls, to do such a thing. The use of terminology was suspect as well – Mosharraff Hossein had used the word “Balidan” instead of “Kurbani” for sacrifice, which showed that prolonged and close contact with Hindus had corrupted his identity as a true Muslim. And of course, Mosharraff Hossein’s belief that cow-sacrifice could be substituted by sacrifices of other permissible animals, such as goats, came under the greatest fire. If cows were on the brink of extinction because Musalmans of India insisted on sacrificing them for religious reasons and regularly ate beef even though the climatic conditions were inclement for such a diet – Naimuddin asked why Mosharraff Hossein did not write another article against Hindus and their sacrificial practices involving goats, which was surely leading to the extinction of all ungulates? Naimuddin ended his diatribe with a clear threat against Mosharraff Hossein – that of excommunication from society. He also piously advised Hossein to do the *Taubah* and return to the true faith, which he had apostasized from.

Naimuddin did not stop with his editorials. He organized a meeting in Tangail town on 17th August 1889. In the presence of the Qazi, Sultan Ahmed Sahib and the sub-deputy magistrate, Safiuddin Sahib, in front of the elite members of Tangail’s Muslim society, he proclaimed Mosharraff Hossein a *Kafir* again, and declared his relationship with his wife as *Haram* and null, since marriage between

a Muslim woman and a non-Muslim was inadmissible. All of this was done without directly taking Mosharraff Hossein's name, but given that Hossein was present at this assembly in person, and enough heavy hints had been used to give away the identity of the apostate, he left the assembly deeply humiliated.

Mosharraff Hossein immediately wrote a letter to the *Akhbar'e Islamia*, letting them know that he took the threats and insults as a direct attempt at defaming him and terrorizing his family members. The comments had injured his feelings and his standing in society. As such, if an apology from Naimuddin and Qazi Sultan Ahmed was not printed in the *Akhbar'e Islamia* in its next edition, with a copy mailed to Mosharraff Hossein's lawyer Harachandra Chakrabarty at the Tangail Munsiff Court, Mosharraff Hossein would institute a case of criminal defamation against them both.

Since no such apology seemed to be forthcoming, the defamation case was lodged in due course, attracting a new wave of calumny against Mosharraff Hossein. The *Akhbar'e Islamia* reported that if young students went to Mosharraff Hossein to ask for free copies of the *Go-Jiban*, he was making them swear on the Quran that they would not eat beef ever again in their entire lives. It was also alleged, as 'alternative fact', that the Arya Samajists from the *Go-Rakshani Sabha* of Allahabad were actually bearing the legal expenses of the defamation suit on behalf of Mosharraff Hossein, who had of course written his editorials after being

paid by them to vilify Bengali Muslims. This rumor possibly stemmed from the fact that the cow-protection movement in Bengal quickly seized on Mosharraf Hossein's articles as a viable propaganda material against the Bengali-Muslim community, given that it had been authored by one of the most illustrious members of the Muslim intellectual elite. The copy of *Go-Jiban* I use for this paper was deposited at the Bagbazar Reading Library and contains an endorsement from Sriman Swamy as its frontispiece, dated 1889. Swamy praised Mosharraf Hossein as a true good man and an able servant of the Hindu community and encouraged him keep writing about the issue and also to act as an advisor to leaders of the cow-protection movement in Bengal.

Such blatant endorsement made the opponents of Mosharraf Hossein also impute that the Hindus of Tangail were sending money to him. The *Akhbar'e Islamia* asked true Muslims to risk their lives in protecting Bengali Muslim society and save the true-faith in Bengal – the language makes it clear that they wouldn't be very troubled if someone were to rid the earth of the novelist.

It was at this time that the *Sudhakar*, published from Calcutta, took up the cause of Moulvie Naimuddin against Mosharraf Hossein, and turned this case into a *cause célèbre* in the metropolitan center of Calcutta. It printed excerpts from the cross-examination from the ongoing trial regarding the defamation suit, but selectively. Only those sections of the transcript were printed where the plaintiff's witness was

forced to accept that in certain sections of *Go-Jiban*, Mosharraf Hossein had, strictly speaking, skirted the line of blasphemy, while trying to advance the cause of independent reasoning and common-sense in arguing against cow-slaughter. A short example of the cross-examination should suffice:

Ques. In *Go-Jiban*, is it not clear that the author wrote the pamphlet in an effort to gain trust, respect and material benefits from the Hindus? Can we not say that this desire led him to vilify Bengali Muslims and unjustly interfere in the rituals and practices of the Islamic faith?

Witness: Yes, such an inference can be drawn. In my opinion, certainly unjust interferences have been made in the practices of the faith, and the religion has been vilified.

Ques: If any true believer in Islam undertook such vilification and satire of the Islamic faith, could they, or could they not, be counted as an apostate (*Kafir*)?

Witness: Yes, that person is a *Kafir*.¹⁷

Naimuddin was portrayed as a true defender of the faith and the Muslim community. He was old, infirm, poverty-stricken – he was rich only in his true learning of the Islamic scriptures. The elite Mosharraf Hossein, a Sayyid, a member of the Bengali *ashraf*, was unjustly tormenting this man, who had only

¹⁷ Printed in the supplement to the *Sudhakar*, 27th December, 1889. Also, printed in the *Akhbar'e Islamia*. See ed. Mohammed Abdul Qayum (1990). *Samayikpatre Sahityik Prasanga*. Dhaka: Bangla Akademi Press. Pg.164-166.

protested against Mosharraf Hossein's transgressive and corrupted understanding of the Quran. By forcing him to pay Rs. 1000/- in the defamation suit, money that the poor Naimuddin did not possess, Mosharraf Hossein was compounding his *Gunahs*. The *Sudhakar* printed anonymous letters from well-wishers of Naimuddin from all over Bengal, and when Mosharraf Hossein and his brother stopped their subscription to the *Sudhakar*, it printed that news as evidence of their impious, intolerant, elitist and repressive characters.¹⁸ Mosharraf Hossein had to write to the *Akhbar'e Islamia* and the *Sudhakar*, protesting this incessant harassment and reaffirming his true faith as a Musalman. He also refused to accept the *Akhbar'e Islamia* or the *Sudhakar* as spokesmen of any kind of any imagined monolithic Bengali Muslim society, and strongly refuted their demands that he should burn the existing copies of *Go-Jiban*.¹⁹

The defamation suit drew to an inevitable negotiated settlement in 1890, with Naimuddin apologizing to Mosharraf Hossein in writing, retracting his personal attacks against him and his family, and asking the court's indulgence in forgiving him the money demanded by Mosharraf Hossein. The embers were stoked again by Reazuddin Mashaddi, Islamic scholar and contributor to the *Sudhakar*. In his pamphlet *Agni-Kukkut* or "Fire-bird", published in 1890, he saw symptoms of a

¹⁸ ed. Mohammed Abdul Qayum (1990). *Samayikpatre Sahityik Prasanga*. Dhaka: Bangla Akademi Press. *Sudhakar*, 8th March 1890. Pg. 173.

¹⁹ See ed. Mohammed Abdul Qayum (1990). *Samayikpatre Sahityik Prasanga*. Dhaka: Bangla Akademi Press. Pg.166-170.

greater malaise of social disharmony instituted by the “Cow-Protection” movement – that of Hindu majoritarianism, supported by British administrative laxness, which was aimed at the extinction not of cows but of Bengali and Indian Muslim society.²⁰ Any Muslim, like Mosharraf Hossein, who thought that Hindu-Muslim disharmony could be cured by voluntary acceptance of Muslims of a ban on cow-sacrifice, mistook a mere symptom for the deathly malaise. Reazuddin Mashaddi said:

I stand between my country (*Swadesh*) on one hand and those related to me (*Swajan*) on the another. My ethnic community (*Jati*) on one hand and my co-religionists (*Swadharmabalambi*) on another. In between them, a dispute grows, so who should I speak for?... Hindus of India wish to force the Muslims and Christians to live according to their wishes, interfering in many places in their social and religious rights.... A few undeserving Musalmans, instigated by the Hindus, seem to think refraining from cow-sacrifice and eating beef will solve all problems. O British Government of India! Are you blind? Your silent neutrality on governance now extends to non-interference in the torture of one section of your subjects by another

²⁰ Mashhadi, Reazuddin (1903). *Agni-Kukkut*. Calcutta: Shahenshah and Company. 2nd Edition. Pg. 6-10.

community? Tell me, how are Musalmans supposed to bear this unrighteous attack on their faith?²¹

In imputing British preference for Bengali Hindus, and demanding a ‘national’ status for the Muslim community, Mashhadi was in fact asking for equal political status for Muslims and Hindus in India. But even more importantly, he was placing the right to freely practice religious faith, both private and as a marker of communitarian identity, on par with that of racial or national belonging. This was a logical outcome of the analytic lens he used to examine the question of cow-protection and ban of beef, which he saw as the concerted effort by a powerful majoritarian community to dictate the lives and times of a minority community of faith - by attacking an accepted socio-religious custom, which was a marker of that community’s self-definition against the majoritarian Other. It is undeniable that Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s poison-tree was bearing fruit – the rise of the Hindu self as the only potential inheritor of Indian nationalist projects, was creating deep unease among religious communities against whom that self was imagined. This political use of the logic of religious differentiation, of course ran counter to the humanitarian and pacifist logic dictated by common sense, as used by Mir Mosharraf Hossein, which stressed the similarities of racial and geographical proximities between Bengal’s Muslims and Hindus.

²¹ Mashhadi, Reazuddin (1903). *Agni-Kukkut*. Calcutta: Shahenshah and Company. 2nd Edition. Pg.109-110.

Conclusion:

What can this brief, forgotten local interlude in the history of Bengal tell us about the idioms of identity, of definition of self and community of Bengali Muslims in the latter half of the nineteenth century? Certainly, there is a suppressed tension in the controversy, one that pitted Mosharraf Hossein, whose *Bishad-Sindhu* was a potent symbol of the syncretic, popular, poetic version of folk-Islam, against the reformist Ulema. This folk-Islam was a living tradition of popular articulation and understanding of the spaces and environs of subaltern piety. The reformist section of Bengal's Muslim intellectuals, who stressed the authority of the Quran, advocated a purge of all syncretic elements of this living tradition of Bengal Islam, as a necessary step towards progress and modernization.

Articulated through differences of ideological engagements between the Hindu "Other" and the Muslim "Self", the apologias of the kind we see in the *Sudhakar*, *Akhbar'e Islamia* and the pamphlets penned by Mosharraf Hossein and Mashhadi, sought to delineate and ascribe primacy to *Swajati* vs. *Swadesh* – imagined community vs. idealized nation. By examining the use of textual analyses of sacred customs and rituals in the pamphlets, this paper offers an understanding of the liminal spaces of intellectual discourse aimed at the Bengali Muslim social

imaginary, and in the process, complicates the notions of “good” vs. “bad”

Muslims in colonial India - an understanding that did not depend only on colonial classification, but also on internal divisions between Bengal’s elite and non-elite, between the *ashraf* and the *atrap* Muslims. This is exemplified in the rhetoric that attributed true Islamic piety to those like the rustic arbiter of religious faith, Moulvie Naimuddin. Mosharraff Hossein’s intellectual project of valorizing folk-Islam and reimagining of the pivotal moment of the battle of Karbala into a personal experience for Bengali Muslims, his Sayyid *ashraf* status and his close intellectual association with the Hindu intelligentsia, rendered him and his liberal understanding of Islam completely suspect to the arbiters of Muslim-ness among the provincial and rural Muslim population. Mosharraff Hossein had to learn the bitter lesson about the increasing impenetrability of the definitions of what constituted a good Musalman in eastern Bengal of this period

The defamation lawsuit brought into sharp focus the limits of intellectual reinterpretation of Islamic texts based on common-sense and contemporary socio-political needs of Bengal’s Muslims. The cross-examination transcripts, with their close examination of the language used by Mosharraff Hossein and his understanding of the Quran as illustrated by the examples he used in *Go-Jiban*, highlight an immense anxiety about textual purity and validity of textual exegesis. The transcripts, pamphlets and newspaper reportage point to a deep rift between

the two major communities of faith, which were already beginning to define self and other in adversarial terms. But the *Go-Jiban* controversy also highlights a significant rift between traditionalists and modernists within the same communities of faith, with this major difference – the traditionalists, often marginalized, posited a more liberal stance on creative accommodation of social and political differences. The close legal juxtaposition between personal libel and religious blasphemy that the defamation lawsuit presented, also points to a clearer and closer association between personal faith and public political communitarian identity.

The accidental survival of archival ephemera such as the provincial and community-specific periodicals and pamphlets *Go-Jiban*, *Agni-Kukkut*, the *Sudhakar* and the *Akhbar'e Islamia*, shed light on ordinary life and the intellectual exchanges of the non-elite sections of South-Asian society, which enriches our understanding of communitarian identity-based politics at the non-central, non-elite levels of local and vernacular *ecumenes* in the late nineteenth century in colonial India. Closer examination of such archival ephemera, of pamphlet and periodical literature often destabilize accepted categories of historiographical analysis of religious communitarianism and communalism in colonial India. Above all, such analysis also illumines, perhaps inevitably, the tenaciously long lived tragic genealogies of the ideologies of national belonging and otherness defined in religious terms, with eerie resonances for present-day post-colonial India.

