



## The Contested Realm of Muslim Identity in Late 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal: A Comparative Analysis between *Islam Darshan* and *Johurnama*

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### Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of two distinct strands of popular literature within the Bengali Muslim literary and cultural milieu during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While most existing scholarship has attempted to categorize this community within simplistic divisions such as communal or syncretic, this study seeks to critically examine the sources underpinning such categorizations. To undertake such an inquiry, the paper delves firstly into "Islam Darshan," a self-improvement text utilized by the new cohort of Mullahs to bridge the *Atrap-Ajlaf* cleavage that emerged in contemporary Bengal. It analyzes the historical context surrounding its emergence, delving into its content and rhetoric, and explores why it may be juxtaposed with ideas of communalism. A critical analysis of their content juxtaposed with their historical role (bridging an *atrap-ajlaf* cleavage and addressing *bhadralok* mistreatment) may provide how their promotion of a certain ethos i.e., self-improvement was aimed at challenging certain elites' assumptions and at ameliorating their socio-economic condition. Further, the paper then moves on to examine *Bonobibi Johurnama* a localized *Kechha* (Bengali version of the Persian *quissa*) popular in the Sundarbans. Written in a mixed vocabulary referred to as *dobhasi* and published from the cheap presses of Bengal, these texts formed an important part of the non-standardized print culture of the Bengali Muslims. The paper attempts to elucidate how these texts propagated a 'syncretic' conception of Bengali Muslim identity through narratives of conflict with the 'cultural' other and the utilization of a mixed vocabulary.

**Keywords:** *Dobhasi* Literature, *Musulmani Bangla*, Bengali Muslim Literature, Modern Bengal



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## Introduction

Such an inquiry must commence with an enumeration of major historical developments surrounding Bengali Muslim society. This contextual understanding is pivotal for comprehending the emergence of the texts under scrutiny and why they represent two key categorizations of Bengali Muslim identity: Communal and Syncretic

We all know that Bengal (which includes the state of West Bengal in India and Bangladesh) houses one of the largest Muslim populations in the world. Interestingly, however, how such a huge native Muslim population in Bengal emerged is in itself a source of major debate. Richard Eaton has provided that the main reason was the merging of the agrarian and the cultural fronts turning our attention away from political or military factors for such a development (1993, pp. 2-5). Thus, he provides in Bengal, Islam spread and especially so in the forested tracts and riverine deltas that are Southern and Eastern Bengal because, pioneering Islamic leaders who were mostly non-state actors like Sufi Pirs and Mullahs incorporated local indigenous communities into the Muslim fold by propagating an Islamic devotional system which infused local traditions and customs (Eaton, 1993, pp.161-62). These developments also coincided with the extension of agriculture into new areas, the clearing of jungle, and the establishment of new settlements. Hence, we also see the rise of the notion that Islam in Bengal is the religion of the plough or the masses. The Muslim identity and religious life that soon emerged thus could never be termed as a complete rejection of one ethos for another; rather there was a form of negotiation among the converter and the converted.

However, in the 18th century, things began to change radically for this population with the emergence of a colonial administration whose attempts to make a survey and a census unleashed unintended social forces. After the 1857 revolt, the British government took significant steps to comprehend and effectively govern their subjects in India, including Bengal. These actions were driven by the desire to strengthen British control over India, transfer power to the British Crown, and foster cooperation with local rulers and landlords. (Cohn, 1987, pp.248). However, in doing so now one's caste or religious identities became important markers since the colonial state saw these to be the bedrock of South Asian society. What also became important was one's language. Bernard Cohen (1996, pp. 20-33) has shown languages came to be situated hierarchically. Thus, a language's value came to be understood by colonial gradation of communities with each language being fixed with a particular community and for a particular purpose. So, we see the existing Bengali dialect came to be regarded as a "vulgar" language, Sanskrit was termed the language of knowledge, and Persian was the language of the state.

Another pivotal development is the Islamic revivalist movements and their effect on Bengal. Starting from the late 1700s, these movements began with organizations and groups like *Tarikh-e-Muhammad* and *faraizis* and leaders like Dudu Miyan and Titumir, who attempted to mobilize the Bengali Muslims on certain political grounds for the first time as a community with unique interests separate from the colonial state and Hindu

zamindars. Questions of religious purification grew to be important; but the overall movement continued to be open and accepting in its character, at least till the 1880s-70s since it was mostly led by forces from below or the *Ajlafs* (Roy, 1999, pp. 45-56). Thus, one sees that social and economic factors were given equal importance. However, with the defeat of these leaders and the initial movement, one sees that the *Ashraf* Muslims slowly come into the movement viewing for the first time their incredible potential of political mobilization. The radical character of this movement also gradually reduced. What we gradually see is a shift in the movement, with the attention moving from the colonial state and the Hindu zamindars to the Hindus in general and from economic and social factors to religious and spiritual elements (Ibid, p. 57). This trajectory of development was extremely important for Bengali Muslims everywhere. The new preachers who now emerged from this movement began to promote a rather rigid and exclusive version of Islam. Language grew to be a key issue of self-identity as such preachers from an *Asraf* background began to propagate the sacred importance of Urdu and Persian (Ahmed, 1981, pp.106-132). Terming these languages as the only legitimate mediums for expressing Islamic ideas. So, we see that gradually the twin markers of a Bengali Muslim identity i.e., being 'Muslim' and 'Bengali' came to be regarded as incompatible and contradictory. This bridge again was further complicated by the fact that the Muslim population was not simply being divided among such *Ashraf* and *Atrap* cleavages or in other words among racial and class lines only. Internally the community was also further subdivided into various categories mostly analogous to the Hindu jatis. Moreover, the *Ashraf* elites themselves could be divided into three broad categories that are i) Urdu-speaking urban elites or Mughal *Ashrafs* ii) The mofussil gentry or the Urdu-Bengali speaking elites, and finally iii) The lesser *Asrafs*. The primary distinction could be made mostly between the first two and the last as the other two considered themselves superior (Ibid, p. 13). On top of that, various non-Ashrafs also at the turn of the 19th century claimed *Ashraf* status, which may include small landholders, village *Mullahs*, and *Khondokars* (Ibid, pp.8-9). It is during such a situation of conflict and contradiction that the traditional Bengali Muslim's cultural mediators i.e., the literati, came forward and attempted to address this conflict (Roy, 1987, pp.15-23). The two most important representatives of such an attempt are linked with the texts in question. That is a new generation of *Pirs*, like Abu Bakr (associated with *Islam Darshan*), and an older generation of scribes or the *Munshis*, like Mohammad Khater who wrote the *Johuranama*.

Against such a backdrop one also finds the rise of prints as an important vehicle for the articulation of ideas and formation of identities for various dominant groups like the *bhadraloks* or the *Ashraf* Muslim elites (Ghosh, 2006, pp.259-290). Moreover, at one end while the Bengali language itself was being standardized and Sanskritised, and becoming a medium for the newly emerging Bengali Hindu middle-class language to articulate their community consciousness the Muslim elites or the *Ashrafs* focused on the use of Persian and Arabic for such an exercise (Bose,2014, pp. 6-7). In such a context it is important to

remember that though Benedict Anderson (2016, pp. 67-82) has provided, print capitalism became a chief vehicle in which the colonial subjects began to articulate the political community of the nation, I feel that print rather did not only have a homogenizing role. As authors like Ayesha Jalal (2000, pp.48-50) have shown such theories about print capitalism often miss the historical specificities and contingencies. As, A. Bayly (2009, p.243) also provides that print increased the range of communication for not only dominant but almost all communities as well. Keeping such theoretical discourses in mind most scholars have concluded that only print could allow such a democratic space in Bengal where a non-dominant group like the Bengali Muslims could articulate their opinions<sup>i</sup>. Further justifying the importance of the texts in question which were both part of an emergent Bengali Muslim print culture

Finally, the author of this paper would like to define the two categorizations in question - 'Communal' and 'Syncretic'. Communalism in South Asia is a unique concept different from its actual English meaning. To be communal in South Asia, thus means to promote a socio-political ideology that propagates the exclusive interests of a particular religious community an individual belongs. It is understood to be divisive, with it often being linked to creating tensions, conflicts, and divisions along religious lines. This identification of an individual's or group's interests solely based on religious identity is often understood to lead to the prioritization of religious community concerns over national unity and is understood to be a major reason for the partition of the subcontinent in 1947<sup>ii</sup>.

While interestingly, such ideas of communalism are often linked with the partition of the subcontinent. The creation of Bangladesh is conversely linked with the ideas of syncretism. Syncretism in this Bengali Muslim context meant a Muslim identity that was unique and isolated. It also meant that their practices were seen to be a peculiar phenomenon where one sees essentially Hindu folk practices being utilized by a newly converted Islamic community. Leading to a notion that Islam in Bengal was different and unique and remained disconnected from the Islamic heartland of Arabia. Hence, there was no great influence of traditional Islamic practices on their social, cultural, and linguistic habits. This essential characterization was seen as the main reason for the breaking of East and West Pakistan in 1971<sup>iii</sup>.

### **Islam Darshan and The Pir**

We see that the 1800s saw crucial efforts in standardizing and Sanskritising the Bengali language by *bhadralok* intelligentsia and authors like Bankim Chandra and Rabindranath Tagore. Even though very different in their literary styles and themes, what unified them was the use of a new standardized diction which became coterminous with the "Hindu identity". The emergence of such a literary vocabulary however inevitably generated certain anxieties among the Bengali Muslim literati who were no longer okay with how the *bhadralok* intelligentsia used this new vocabulary to demonize the Bengali Muslims.

Especially with the rise of a new small middle class, the Muslims of Bengal began to construct their own self-identity and were no longer okay with such *bhadralok* mistreatment (Bose, 2014, p.10). We see hence growing calls within the Bengali Muslim literary milieu for the need for new and modern literature to address the backwardness plaguing the Muslim masses. Stress was thus put on the cultivation of a Bengali Muslim national literature. It was felt that without an improvement in the social basis beyond the small middle class such mistreatment would continue. So, we see Periodicals like the *Kohinur* state that:

. . . though the Moslem and Hindu communities were like the twin sons of mother India, while the Hindus were moving way ahead in their efforts of improvement, the Muslims lagged behind and would remain so until they paid heed to the cultivation of literature. (Islam, 1971, pp.236-27)

This need for Muslim national literature was, however, not only stressed to counter attempts of degeneration on the Muslims by Hindu authors but also paradoxically partly in an attempt to emulate the success of the *bhadraloks*. Since their wealth and power stood in stark contrast to the vast masses of impoverished Muslim peasants in Bengal, the middle class felt only by emulating them could they also progress as a community. It is however crucial to understand that such calls which essentially necessitated a sort of 'self-improvement' of the Muslim masses were not any acts of genuine concern but rather efforts in earnest of a small emergent Bengali Muslim middle class to expand its power and base (Ibid, pp.3-10). Soon this precipitated the emergence of authors like Mir Mosharraf Hussein, who through his *Bisad Sindhu* attempted to formulate such a new literary language for the Bengali Muslims (Halder, 2023). Another important figure worth mentioning here is Kazi Nazrul Islam who became famous for both his poetry and prose which had a strong emphasis on social justice and Communal harmony (Bose, 2014, pp.84-125). However, while these new genres generated a lot of buzz among the literati and the emergent Bengali Muslim intelligentsia, such literature remained largely unpopular among the vast impoverished Muslim masses of Bengal. Their readership was limited to the urban, educated Muslim elites living in cities like Calcutta and Dhaka. We see that paradoxically the transmission of these newer Western and *bhadralok*-influenced genres remained restricted, due to both their form and language, from their intended audience i.e., the masses.

Against this backdrop, the rise of texts like *Islam Darshan* takes on particular significance. Since, unlike previously mentioned literary genres, these texts try to address similar anxieties while simultaneously trying to remain accessible and comprehensible to rural masses as well. Often sponsored by local zamindars, and landlords, or authored by local religious leaders and mullahs themselves, these texts circulated widely in Eastern and Southern Bengal, often serving as platforms where a nascent Bengali Muslim nationalism was expressed, debated, and formulated in rural areas (Dutta, 1999, pp.66-68). Interestingly, they drew heavy influence from Chartist notions of self-help popular in

Victorian Britain, where such texts were mostly aimed to provide instructions for the masses on how to ameliorate their financial situation and overcome social barriers imposed by their class origin (Ibid, pp.69-73). For the Muslims in Bengal, however, such literature now came to include themes ranging from those which were social and economic like the importance of Western education or the need to mobilize the poor peasants to religious ones which sought to get rid of certain "unislamic" habits among the Bengali Muslims. All of these issues were now clubbed together and pushed as being responsible for their impoverished condition. It is also worth noting here that, it was through them erstwhile 'local' affairs now steadily emerged as important national issues with many such texts being published by authors who also ran newspapers as well (Pandey,1990). It is hence this multifaceted ability that improved texts like the *Islam Darshan* at one end a very effective bridge between the rural and urban Muslim milieu, as well as between the *Ajlaf* and *Ashraf* communities. Hence, texts like the *Islam Darshan* became a crucial source for scholars studying a Bengali Muslim identity in twentieth-century Bengal. Crucially the feature that made these texts an invaluable source for understanding such an identity formation was their representation of the Hindu 'other'. This, however, had no direct representation, instead often one finds such a portrayal in a peculiar form or as highlighted by scholars 'as an internalised corrupting presence' (Dutta, 1999, pp.76-78). For instance, engaging in "un-Islamic" activities like usury or extravagant festivals was attributed to Hindu influence, highlighting the perceived negative impact of Hindu practices on Bengali Muslim life. This portrayal of the Hindu 'other' served to reinforce a distinct Muslim identity while also addressing social and economic challenges faced by the community.<sup>iv</sup>

Let us now study *Islam Darshan* and understand how these elements seem to unfold in this periodical. *Islam Darshan* was the mouthpiece of *Anjumane Waizine Bangla* whose chairperson was Abu Bakr. We find a vast number of such literature ascribed to him. Being one of the most popular *Pirs* or religious leaders of the Bengali Muslims he decided to rejuvenate *Islam Darshan* which had previously run out of print, but with a changed and distinctively nationalist orientation. The publication also prominently advocated the popular notion of self-improvement. These biases of the publication are readily identifiable, as they are explicitly outlined in their inaugural publication, where the editors stated:

. . . preexisting publications and periodicals which catered to the Bengal Muslims were not true to Islam and a literature which excludes the religion cannot be used to formulate the national literature of the Bengali Muslims; moreover, it further stated that in a condition where Hindu literature was constantly maligning the Muslim, it was not just enough to write counter Islamic literature which highlighted Islamic glory, but what was also required was to critically study and access among the mass of literature and select only those which had the potential to express the national aspirations of the Bengal Muslims, thus while it is required to maintain

communal harmony, true harmony could only be achieved if the inside self of the Muslims would be clear and pious and thus it is in such a quest that Islam Darshan will strive to achieve (Anisuzzaman, 1969, pp.317-318).

Hence, the message that emerged as crucial for the 'self-improvement' of the Bengali Muslims was the need to get rid of all internal contradictions. Interestingly, this included an attack on the cult of various regional pirs and practices which included Sufi norms of the be-sharia types or Shia origin. Though Abu Bakr welcomed all individuals to his fold Shia, Sunni, and Ahmadiyya, and allowed for the open interpretation of the Quran and Hadis, there was an emphasis on a particular version of Islam and its supremacy which the Sunni Hannafi ideals (Dutta, 1999, pp.99-100). Habibur Rahman's essay further illuminates this discourse, pinpointing the incorporation of "impure" practices such as Pir-Puja (saint worship), Gor-Puja (worship of burial sites), and Brikhyo-Puja (tree worship) as significant ailments within Bengali Muslim society. The essay also argued for educating the masses to abandon these practices (Anisuzzaman, 1969, p.319). Additionally, the *Darshan* also highlighted texts that were seen as embodying authentic Islamic knowledge, such as "Banga Nur" by Habibur Rahman, "Nuur" by the poet Ismail Hussain, and "Bhaskar" by Maulavi Nurul Hussain Kasimpuri, distinguishing them from the literature criticized for emulating un-Islamic, particularly Hindu, practices (Ibid, pp.324-326). Conversely, literature perceived as heretical, such as Kaikobad's *mahashahon*, faced censure for deviating from orthodox Islamic teachings (Ibid, pp.320-322). This delineation between accepted and rejected practices and literature reflects a concerted effort to forge a Bengali Muslim identity purified of syncretism and aligned with a particular interpretation of Sunni Islam.

Thus, *Islam Darshan* provides a Bengali Muslim self that is very sensitive about its Muslim identity and obsessed with the notion of purity. While the cultural 'other' could be located as a Hindu whose cultural practices try to corrupt this purity of Islam. As mentioned earlier though these texts did not have any direct representation of the Hindu other, this internalized corrupting Hindu's presence it very susceptible for scholars reading such texts to read into them concepts of separatism and communal consciousness, subconsciously.<sup>4</sup> To further break down such assertions to understand this 'communal' rhetoric it is essential to first look into Abu Bakr's social origin. Who was he? Bakr, claimed to be the *Pir* of Assam and Bengal while his main seat of establishment was located in his native village of Furfura in Hooghly. Apart from the above-mentioned organizations he also headed others like *Ulemaye Bangla*, and *Tablighe Islam* among others, and taking together all such organizations he controlled, he could thus be credited for publishing over 2000 articles which were also often published in leading newspapers and periodicals Eastern Bengal. He was moreover extremely popular among the Bengali Muslim peasantry. His cult of following was so famous, that even North Indian Muslims who generally disliked such *Pirs* of Bengal often terming their practices as *shirk* or unislamic soon became his followers. Many such North Indian Muslim elites who often looked down

upon the Bengali Muslims now came to celebrate the festival of *Isal-i-sob* making an annual pilgrimage to his seat of power in Furfura Sharif (Dutta, 1999, pp.89-91). This re-orientation of dynamics I felt was a crucial part of the self-improvement ethos he wished to promulgate. Hence it is no surprise that publications sponsored by him in many ways wished to emulate and promulgate such an ethos which he attempted to live and preach. But the question remains, what was this ethos simplistically? Was it simply an acceptance of and want for incorporation into the more communally charged elite Muslim fold in North India? It is worth noting in this context that his extreme popularity among both the masses and the elites allowed him to play the role of a cultural mediator. Moreover, people like him who went on to redefine Islam in Bengal belonged to a class of lesser *ashrafs* or rural *ashrafs* who though often claimed they were descendants also from noble families of Arabia or Azam and knew the classical Islamic languages like Arabic and Persian. In reality mostly spoke in Bangla as it was their mother tongue. So, socially such rhetoric may come across as attempts to emphasise their superiority to the masses. People like Bakr were not that much different from them. They were rather less related to the upper *Ashrafs* in their social habits and especially so in their diction and language. Hence, socially they could be termed as more Indigenous than foreign<sup>vi</sup>.

When considering the background of Bakr, there is a need to re-contextualize the rhetoric of *Islam Darshan* and question its supposed Communal ethos. Starting with its notion of 'self-improvement' which may seem like emphasizing particularly negatively such practices not typically associated with the elite or Ashraf social milieu or conversely may seem like a strategy to distinguish between Muslim and Hindu communities by trying to get rid of any similarities between them.

However, the fact that such prescriptions were always linked with perceived economic repercussions. So, there is a common ground for uniting Bengal's Muslims—the shared experience of economic hardship. Such a notion makes even more sense when we see such efforts by Bakr from the point of a cultural mediator, aiming to bridge the Ajlaf-Ashraf divide growing ever so wide in twentieth-century Bengal. Moreover, in this attempt to propagate a kind of class consciousness that could unite the Muslims, His and *Islam Darshan's* choice of utilizing certain religious idioms and symbols was also not without precedence. It drew heavily from rhetoric pioneered by the revivalist leaders who thus formulated such a class - Class interrelation in Bengal (Roy, 1999, 39-55). However, does such a rhetoric which aimed to provide an alternative way of conceptualising a Bengali Muslim identity wished only to distance itself from the Hindu masses? It is important here to note that in a time when *Bhadralok* rhetoric vilified the Bengali Muslims as foreigners, the only path highlighted for countering them was not a complete rejection or giving up on their Bengali identity. This can be better understood by another article in *Islam Darshan* that provided as follows:

The mother tongue of Muslims of Bengal was and still is Bengali, even though there may be a few Urdu-speaking Muslims native to Bengal the vast majority spoke



Bangla hence there is no question that the literature of the Bengali Muslims would also be in Bengali. (Sinha, 2022, pp.131)

Thus, it becomes apparent that what this spirit of improvement warranted was not a separate identity but self-respect. *Darshan*, if truly stood for an uncritical acceptance of *ashraf* rhetoric or if it truly wished to emulate the Muslim elites in the North, would have prescribed a separate language like Urdu or Farsi. Instead, what we see is that it wished to foster a place within the Bengali language itself and carve within it a distinct Muslim space. The need for such a language was though paradoxically thought to be needed due to an otherizing *bhadralok* rhetoric but also features a remarkable attempt to imitate them. It is this imitation mixed with his heritage and the social milieu of post-revivalist Bengali Islam which results in certain exclusionary proclamations which in turn may have been read as communal rhetoric.

Thus, we see that the *darshan* prescribes a 'Musalmani' Bangla not to foster any separatist or communal ethos but to similarise with how the Hindu *bhadraloks* have created through their literary language a space for the Muslims of Bengal to express their own identity (Sinha, 2022, pp.121-126). In simpler terms, it meant that to express fundamental Islamic concepts like *haj*, *zaqat*, *namaz*, and *roza* one must not use *upabash*, *prarthana*, *tirtha* etc but rather the actual Islamic terms only (Ibid, 2022, pp.134-135). Such a call wished to provide the masses a path to redeem themselves as Both Bengalis and Muslims. This was understood to be the key to their social and economic improvement. Such an exercise becomes even more clear in another article of the *Darshan* titled 'The Hindu-Muslim language unity' where the authors lament how instead of this perceived differentiation in expression the Muslim elites have sought to foster a separate language altogether. The Hindus have sought to get rid of all words used by Muslims and created the Bengali language infused with Sanskrit which lies beyond the scope of the Muslim masses. The Muslims as a reaction have sought to get rid of all Sanskrit words and form their *musalmani bangla*. While the author professes his disdain for both measures, he provides that the need of the hour is to formulate a language that can enable exchange between both Hindus and Muslims. This would require both Hindus to discard new and unnecessary Sanskrit words as well as Muslims to give up difficult Farsi and Urdu terms. Only this will allow the Muslims to proclaim with pride that *Bangla* is their mother tongue just as the Hindu proclaims today (Sinha, 2022, p.132)

### **Johuranama and the Munshi**

In this chapter, the author has tried to analyze what has been categorized as an alternative source for understanding the Bengali Muslim identity which is the localized *Keccha* through the example of the *Bonobibir Johuranama*. He has tried to question notions of syncretism as a conceptual category that is often attached to a Bengali Muslim identity understood from studying these texts.

The *Johuranama* was written by Munshi Mohammad Khatter in 1871 a form known popularly as *payar* and *tripadi* (a format traditionally used to write the *Mangalkavyas* in Bengal) with a reference to the author (*Bhanita*) at the end of each of the eleven chapters. Written in what came to be known as *Musalmani Bangla*<sup>vii</sup>. This story can be roughly divided into two parts; the first part narrates the birth of *Bonobibi* and his brother *Shah Jalangir* as well as how they came to establish control over the *Athero Bhatti* (colloquial name for the area of lower Bengal along the Sundarbans). This section known as *Narayanir Jang Pala* (War with Narayani) also describes the war fought between *Narayani* (mother of the popular local Hindu deity *Dokkhin Ray*) and *Bonobibi* as she arrived in the Sundarbans, ending finally in how peace was subsequently established by Bonobibi in the lands as she defeated ended *Ray's* tyrannical rule (Dāsa, 2004, pp.35-38). The text provides that *Bonobibi*, was sent by Allah himself to help the people of the *bhati* and that now by cementing her control over *Dokkhin Ray*, both Hindus and Muslims could live in peace and prosperity (Mandal, 2016, pp.14-15). In the second part, known as *Dhone Dukher Pala* the story introduces several non-divine or human characters and describes their interaction with the divine figure of *Bonobibi* and her brother. The two most important characters around whom now the plot revolves are *Dhona Mauley* and *Dhukkhe Shah*, who along with five other men travel inside the forest in Sunbdarban in a quest to collect honey and timber. However, repeatedly failing to get a hold of such rich resources of the forest pushes *Dhona* to sacrifice *Dhukkhe* to the evil tiger god *Dokkhin Ray*. *Ray* also coming in his dream demanded a sacrifice for a share of the honey and wax of the jungle which he owned. In the end, *Dukkhe* is however able to save his life as *Bonobibi* and her brother *Shah Jolongi* come to his rescue just as he is about to be devoured by the tiger god. Subsequently, *Shah* decides to teach *Dokkhin Ray* a lesson so that he may never mess with the devotees of *Bibi*. Moreover in the end (in a narrative sequence similar to the *Mangalkavyas*) *Dukkhe* is rewarded for the devotion he has shown towards *Bonobibi* and receives a boon, whereby he now becomes the *Chaudhury* or the head of his village. He also receives treasures in the form of *mohurs* (*gold coins*) and wood. Soon becoming a wealthy man he also constructs a new grand house fulfilling his mother's lifelong dream. In fact, he even goes on to marry *Dhona's* (who decided to sacrifice him) daughter, cementing his status as the head of the village (Ibid, p.33). The story finally ends with a proclamation that this experience convinced *Dukkhe* to spread the glory of *Bonobibi* or his *Johura*.

It is important here to note that at the beginning of the text (in the colophon), the author Munshi Khater provides that he himself had no intention to write this story, He explicitly mentions that had no such enterprise planned out. Rather, it was the persistent requests from the people of the Sundarbans that compelled him to do so. They expressed a desire to have a written copy of *Bonobibi's Johuranama*, enabling them to access and read the story at their convenience, without the need to consult scholars like him each time. In response to their repeated requests, Munshi Khater took it upon himself to pen the story

in *tripadi* and *payer* form, ensuring accessibility for all to study and pray. This unique and direct connection with the masses makes *musalmani Bangla* texts like the *Johuranama* another very valuable source in studying and understanding a Bengali Muslim cultural identity.

The colophon provides:

পূর্বদেশ বাদাবন সেথা হইতে লোকজন  
 আইসে যারা কেতাব লইতে  
 হামেসা খায়েস রাখে জেদ করে কহে মোকে  
 এই পুথি রচনা করিতে  
 কহে সকলেতে ইহা বন-বিবির কেচ্ছা যাহা  
 বিরচিয়া ছাপ যদি ভাই  
 সে হইলে দেশে দেশে পুথি মোরা অনায়াসে  
 সকলেতে ঘরে বৈসে পাই  
 শুনিয়া এয়ছা কথা দেলেতে পাইয়া ব্যথা  
 ভেবে গুণে আখেরে তখন  
 বন- বিবির কেচ্ছা যাহা আওয়াল- আখেরে যাহা  
 একে একে কৈনু বিরচন

(Pūrbadēśa bādābana sēthā ha'itē lōkajana  
 ā'isē yārā kētāba la'itē  
 hāmēsā khāyēsā rākhē jēda karē kahē mōkē  
 ē'i puthi racanā karitē  
 kahē sakalētē ihā bana-bibira kēcchā yāhā  
 biraciṅyā chāpa yadi bhā'i  
 sē ha'ilē dēsē dēsē puthi mōrā anāyāsē  
 sakalētē gharē baisē pā'i  
 śuniṅyā ēyachā kathā dēlētē pā'iyā byathā  
 bhēbē guṅē ākhērē takhana  
 bana- bibira kēcchā yāhā ā'ōyāla- ākhērē yāhā  
 eke eke kainu Birachan) (Khater, 2009, p.1)

So far I tried to provide a background and break down the orientation of the text. Now we must move on to study how *Musalmani Bangla* texts like *Johuranama* formed the basis of a syncretic reading of the Bengali Muslim identity. I felt that the two most important elements for such a reading of these texts are—i) How interaction between different cultural and religious representatives are narrated and their use of a mixed symbolic iconography and iii) its hyper-local temporal setting. Before moving on to highlighting and breaking such narratives however I feel it is important to clearly identify the main representative of Hinduyani culture. The most important character in this context is

*Dokkhin Ray*. Who is *Dokkhin Roy*? In the *Johuranama*, He is introduced to *Bonobibi* by *Bhangar Shah* as the lord of the *Athero bhatīs*. He then provides to *Bibi* that all the resources that the *Bhatīs* and its jungle possess are controlled by *Ray* including salt, wax, wood, etc. Then *Shah* provides that to get control over the entire *bhatīs* she and her brother first would be required to defeat him (Ibid, pp 10-12). In the story, as *Bonobibi* arrives at the *Sundarbans* she instructs his brother *Shah Jolongir* to sit down and recite the *azaan* so that their arrival may be noticed by *Ray*. Subsequently, *Ray* sends one of his lackeys, interestingly named *Sanatan*, to investigate who had entered his lands. This informer relays to *Ray*, a curiously symbolic message i.e., that a brother and sister have arrived in the forest described as wearing black *Jubbās* and chanting the name of Allah (almost in a *Vaishnavite* fashion of *Dhikr*) and had planted their own Flag (Chanda, n.d., pp 51-58). The enraged *Dokkhin Ray* then calls on his followers that the time has come for them to fight against this intruder, whom he refers to as *Jobon* (yavana). (Khater, 2009, p.13)

In the ensuing conflict, it is however *Dokkhin Ray's* mother, *Narayani* who ultimately confronts *Bonobibi*. In a remarkably magical and mystical sequence of events the story provides how both use their magical powers to fight each other, so while *Narayani* ushers in the *Deo*, *Dano*, *Bhoot*, and *Dakini Jogini* (creatures from the underworld), *Bonobibi* uses the power of *Kalemas* (The six *kalemas* or *Kalima* are 6 Islamic prayer phases recited by Muslims and is a unique tradition among the Muslims of South Asia, which may have evolved from practices of *Vaishnavite* traditions). However, matched almost equally with *Narayani*, *Bibi* looks up towards heaven and calls for divine help (Khater, 2009, pp.14-15) (Chanda, n.d., pp.53-55). The selection of words attributed to her in this context is also curious as it goes like this:

কুওতের দোওয়া লিয়া, লহে তারে উদ্ধারিয়া, যেন হৈল বোন বিবীর গায়

(*Ku'ōtēra dō'ōyā liyā, lahē tāre ud'dhāriyā, yēna haila bōna bibīra gāya*) (Khater, 2009, P. 14)

This term *Ku'ōtēra dō'ōyā* literally translates to a prayer for power and energy or *shakti*. The use of such a word again points to a possible seepage of another popular *Hinduyani* devotional practice i.e., the worship of *Shakti* prevalent especially in Bengal. The story then goes on to narrate how, now with renewed energy blessed by *Parameshwar Bibi* to is able to finally defeat *Narayani*. Curiously in a major turn of events, facing imminent death, *Narayani* decides to tone down her initial aggressive stance. Referring to *Bibi* now as her *Shoi* (sister), she thus wished to end the hostilities prompting in turn *Bonobibi* to embrace her in her arms. *Narayani* then even goes on to proclaim her as, the new *Ishwar* (suzerain) of the *bhattīs* (Khater, 2009, p.15). As she goes *Bonobibi* then receives the *nazrana* (homage) of all the forest dwellers and subsequently travels through her new kingdom letting everyone know that now she is the new *raja* of the *bhati*. However, ultimately, she again decides to give away *Kedo Khali* (a mythical estuary of this new kingdom) to *Dokkhin Ray* so that peace and harmony may prevail (Ibid, p.15). In the subsequent portion of the text, we find again another narrative of conflict between

*Dokkhin Ray* and *Shah Jolongir*. The story provides that *Bibi*, angry at *Ray* for attacking his follower *Dukkhe*, instructs His brother to kill him. *Dokkhin Ray*, however fleeing for his life, comes to *Bada Khan Gazi* for help. *Gazi* who is also a Muslim Fakir saves *Ray* from the hands of *Shah Jolongir* by reminding *Bibi* that *Ray* is also her son since his mother in defeat had referred to her as her sister. This narrative also ends on a similar note, with *Bibi* in the end declaring that from now on people should know she has three sons- *Dukhe*, *Bada Khan Gazi*, and *Ray* (Mandal, 2016, pp 78-79).

What emerges in both these narratives of interaction with the *Hinduyani* cultural other is a scenario where; while there is conflict and the eventual defeat of this entity, however, this never creates a hostile situation; rather on the contrary, this *hinduyani* representative is always incorporated into a new Islamic order. We also see a curious deployment of various words usually understood as co-terminus with a Hindu religious and devotional expression. There also appears a meta-narrative that heavily incorporates a devotional ethos similar to what one finds in the Mangalkavyas of Bengal. Such apparent borrowing of ideas and words as well as the trajectory of encounters with the cultural other coupled with their subaltern status and direct linkage with the masses (suggested by the proclamation in the *bhanita* or colophon) it becomes apparent why such texts became the cornerstone of scholarly work arguing for the syncretic nature of the Bengali Muslim identity.

However, I wish to highlight here a few important observations which may question such a reading of the *Johuranama*. Firstly, I felt there is a need to contextualize the importance of the word *Jobon* or *Yavana* used by *Dokkhin Ray* to refer to *Bonobibi*. Such a nomenclature was initially used in South Asian literature and especially so in Brahmanical texts to describe all foreigners. However, in 19th-century colonial Bengal, this term had assumed a different and often politically charged meaning. Thus, words like "yavana" no longer just represent a simplistic term for the outsider. It became much more value-loaded and came to be used in a derogatory sense to demean the Muslim community as uncivilized barbarians (Islam, 1971, p.151). That is why we see contemporary Bengali Muslim periodicals time and again complain about the problematic usage of this word by the *bhadralok* intelligentsia. In 1905, Kohinur pointed out, that the use of the term "yavana" was viewed as an attempt to expel Muslims from India through the power of the pen rather than the sword (Ibid, p.152). Similarly, in 1918, *Al-Eslam* listed two primary reasons affecting Hindu-Muslim unity: Hindus' unfair portrayal of Muslims in literature and the unfair treatment of Muslim subjects by Hindu zamindars (Ibid, pp.159-160). This sentiment persisted even in 1920 when *Banga Nur* highlighted that more than cow sacrifice, the main source of friction between Hindus and Muslims stemmed from the use of terms like "yavana" and "mleccha" (Ibid). When we juxtapose such complaints with Eaton's (pp.125-129) observations regarding the origin of the Muslim population in Bengal. It becomes apparent that, unlike the *Asraf* community, such a tag of foreign descent was not a source of pride, to the Bengali Muslims but rather a source of

humiliation and anger. Increasingly so after a hugely popular and radical revivalist movement had enhanced their sense of community consciousness and belonging to Bengal.<sup>viii</sup>

It is also worth noting here that such a categorisation of Bengal Muslims as *yavanas* however had little to no precedence in Bengali literature before *bhadralok* authors like Bankim Chandra started writing. If this was not the case, it would be obvious to find such prior references in older Indic texts like Krishnaram Datta's *Ray Mangol*. Since even though this mangalkavya also provided an altercation between *Dokhin Ray* and *Bada Khan Gazi* it never used the term Yavana to describe the cultural other or the Muslims (Sen, 2019, pp.86-93). It is only with the rise of the Bengali Bhadrals and their literary culture that Muslim personages were referred to as *Yavanas* or *Mlechhas* in Bengal in a derogatory sense. This is corroborated in contemporary periodicals as well. Like the proclamation by *Islam-Pracarak* in 1903:

Everyone beginning from Isvar Gupta, Rangalal Bandyopadhyay, novelist Bankim Chandra, the poet Hem and Nabin Chandra to the disciples of their disciples does not hesitate to diabolically abuse the Moslem race and glorify their ancestors. It seems as if Hindu authors, orators, poets, and novelists have been born to only slay the *Yavanas*. The first thing it seems the Hindu author had to write when taking up his pen is *yavana* otherwise his pen simply does not move. Consequently, no matter how much the Moslems may object, the Hindus will be unable to abandon the word, Yavana. (Islam, 1971, pp.198-2021)

The use of such a term in *Johuranama*, thus, not only signifies the highlighting of this *bhadralok* slur but is also curiously then deployed to inversely justify the re-ordering of a cosmological hierarchy. So, while in *Ray Mongol* both *Bada Khan Gazi* and *Dokhin Ray* are accorded equal status as brothers in the end. The *Johuranama* establishes a clear hierarchy with *Bono Bibi* situated at the top and *Ray* given a Vassal status below her.

Another important observation that questions this notion of syncretism and especially the ideas of an isolated Bengali Muslim culture is the kind of sacred geographies incorporated into them. So, while it is established that *Bonobibi* is the main vehicle through which this idea of Islam is expressed. Her firm rooting within a local environment does not mean she possesses no links with a wider Islamic pantheon. So, while the story states that *Bonobibi* was born in the forest, her parents are said to be from Mecca. Thus, her mother *Golal bibi*, who was the second wife of his father (again in a narrative a reader may find similar to the epic Ramayana) is forced by his "wicked" first wife to send *Golal bibi* to exile in the forest and it is here that both *Bonobibi* and his brother *Shah Jalangir* is born; Moreover thereafter the animals in the forest like deers, which help them grow up also are stated to have been working on the instruction of prophet Mohammad who is again moved by their situation from Arabia (Khater, 2009, pp. 5-6). The way they gain their mystical power is also interesting: The story provides that they travel to Mecca and become a *mureed* (disciple) to a saint who is referred to as the son of Hasan. It is thus he who gives *Bibi* the

divine message to again travel back to the *athero Bhatīs* with an instruction to help out anybody who would call her as their mother (ibid, pp.9-11).

Through such an origin story of *Bonobibi* one can see how notions of an isolated and unique Bengali Muslim identity which is regional and syncretic may be put to question. Rather than an acceptance of *hinduyani* symbols and elements, throughout this text, it is often subverted to promote an Islamic cosmological order. This order also draws active legitimacy from the wider Islamic world especially the sacred geography of Mecca by fusing it with the jungles of Sundarbans. She represents Islam and the Islamic tradition which gives equal importance to local values and symbols, and by upholding such symbols she is elevated to the status of a Pir who is beyond even the confines of a particular religion and seeks to represent universal qualities like love, empathy, integrity, etc.

### **Conclusion**

In the above analysis, the paper has undertaken a comparative examination of two prominent literary genres within the Bengali Muslim community. Firstly, the paper has scrutinized Islam Darshan, an instructional text widely embraced in 20th-century Bengal, aiming to deconstruct its perceived 'communal ethos'. Contrary to viewing it solely as 'communal', it presents an alternative conceptualization of Bengali Muslim identity. Although borrowing rhetoric from earlier revivalist leaders, its application in bridging the Ajlaf-Asraf gap risks misinterpretation, potentially fostering division. Secondly, it has delved into another prevalent literary form known as punthis, focusing on Bonobibir Johuranama. It serves as a source for a 'syncretic' interpretation of Bengali Muslim identity. However, juxtaposed with contemporary historical realities, the validity of such syncretism may be questioned. By revisiting these ideas and categories, the paper aims to highlight the ongoing debate and contestation surrounding Bengali Muslim identity until at least the early 20th century.

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I, Subhrodal Ghosh, declare no conflict of interest.

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### **END NOTES**

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<sup>i</sup> See Ghosh, A. (2006). *Power in print: popular publishing and the politics of language and culture in a colonial society, 1778-1905*. Oxford University Press. Also see Banerjee, S. (2019). *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth-century Calcutta*. Seagull Book and for specific effect of

print and Islam in south Asia see Robinson, F. (2003). *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>ii</sup> See Chandra, B. (2008). *Communalism in Modern India*. Har-Anand. Chandra, B. (1989). *India's Struggle for Independence, 1857-1947* (B. Chandra, Ed.). Penguin Books and Bandyopadhyay, S. (2004). *Caste, Culture and Hegemony: Social Dominance in Colonial Bengal*. SAGE Publications.

<sup>iii</sup> See Roy, A. (1983). *The Islamic syncretistic tradition in Bengal*. Princeton University Press. and Ahmed, R. (1981). *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906 A Quest for Identity*. Oxford University Press.

<sup>iv</sup> See Emdad Ali's *Koo Riti Barjan* and its part of *Tash Khela Haram (card games are un-islamic) as an example (Bhandariya, P.O.Bhandariya, Barisal, 1922)*

<sup>v</sup> Dutta, P. K. (1999). *Carving Blocs: Communal ideology in the early twentieth-century Bengal*. Oxford University Press. (He provides that the hindu become both the origin and beneficiary of muslim misery, but he is not projected as the antagonistic other but as a contaminating presence in the self)

<sup>vi</sup> See Ahmed, R. (1981). *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906 A Quest for Identity*. Oxford University Press were though he does not mention Bakr specifically he does provide that it was Traditional Village Mullahs who often claimed such status this coupled with the fact he, Bakr owned land led me to categorise him as such

<sup>vii</sup> The term Musalmani Bangla was first coined by James Long in *A Descriptive Catalogue of Bengali Works*, 1855. In reality this meant a vocabulary containing both Urdu and Bengali words and a form incorporating both Persian and Sanskrit literary traditions.

<sup>viii</sup> See R. Ahmed *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906 A Quest for Identity*. Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1981. (he provides in the introduction how a notion racial purity and foreign descent was the bedrock of Asraf claims of hierarchy over the local converts) Also Roy Asim's, *The Bengal Muslim 'cultural mediators' and the Bengal Muslim identity in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.* *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 10 (1): 11-34. 1987 (provided how a community consciousness developed among the bengal muslim masses due to the revivalist movements)

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