



Reception and Conception of Bengali Muslim Literary Works in the Colonial Period: A Critical Study

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Abstract

Meg Brown (1994) taking the concept from Hans-Robert Jauss' (1982) 'Reception Theory of translation' emphasises "the role of reviews in informing the public about recently published books and preparing the readership for the work" (Munday 154). She borrows the phrase "horizon of expectation" which is employed by Jauss (ibid. 24) to describe readers' general expectations of the style, form and content of a translated text and how the cultural norms, assumptions and criteria shape readers' understanding and judgement of any literary work. This paper discusses and interrogates the Bengali Hindu public opinion as reflected through the Bengali press that will throw light on the different discourses in the Bangla language. This is brought out by analysing the book reviews in two well-known Bengali Hindu periodicals during the time period 1880-1939 A.D., namely *Bharati* and *Parichay*.

Keywords: Reception Theory, Book Reviews, Print, Public Sphere, Bengali Muslim, Bengali Journals

Introduction

Public debates and opinions on Bengali Muslim literary works and the language they used started to appear in print from the early 19th century onwards. The language, themes and subject matter of these works claimed to represent the Bengali Muslims. While the entry of print played a vital role in spreading awareness among the Bengali Muslims, the role of print becomes utmost important in creating

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multiple visions of a community leading to different views and opinions in the public sphere. The Bengali Muslim intelligentsia did not disown the Bangla language instead nurtured it. However, the Bangla that was emerging from the portals of the Fort William College in the early 19th century was highly Sankritised/ Hinduised, a result of the British language policy. The kind of Bangla that was fit for the Bengali Muslims, the kind of vocabulary needed, questions on literary form, genres and aesthetics as well as other related questions became a matter of intense debate in the journals and the presses. The Hindu Bengali journals and newspapers made use of “pure” Bengali that was a product of colonial modernity and characterised as modern, formalised vernacular fit for public discourse. Anything otherwise was considered in opposition to the Bengali identity and culture. The Bengali Muslim literary works involved concerns about the spoken language of the Bengali Muslims, their local customs and practices and their identity as Muslims.

The British colonisation brought about a wide spread transformation of the Indian society, from political to economic as well as social changes. “The colonial policy reproduced a highly stratified system of admission to social opportunities” (Naregal 182) and due to “the absence of the representative channels, this challenge needed to be symbolically staged through available public arenas like the press” (ibid. 218). Journals became not only a medium to develop relationship and to communicate information but also to convey opinions among each other. The elitism of the colonial intelligentsia combined with their excessive conservative biases of their discourse came to reinforce each other. They “sought to derive its effectiveness mostly from an aggressive posture that conveyed an impression of absolute intolerance towards any alternative or oppositional point of view within the public domain” (Naregal 263). Naregal brings out this peculiar nature of the Hindu upper-caste intelligentsia’s dominance over the public sphere by the 1880s in her work. As a result, the cultural and ideological divisions became apparent and the alternative trajectories became noticeable in the public sphere towards the end of the 19th century.

The Bengali Muslims in response to the narrow categorisation developed a new narrative of themselves in which their Muslim-ness became central to their identity. The Bengali Muslim literati started to defend their rootedness to Bengal and claimed the Bengali language and culture as part of their heritage. They felt the need to create a modern literature in equal footing with their Hindu counterparts. However, there was diversity in responses and opinions not only to the dominance of the colonial rule but also to the creation of a standardised cultural order that was hegemonic in nature. The book reviews and criticisms published in the journals and periodicals help to reveal not only the responses of the audiences and the public opinion to the discourses that was adopted by the Bengali Muslim literati to negotiate their Islamic identity with the Bengali language but also points to the hegemonic nature of the men in power.

This paper examines the book reviews in two well-known Bengali Hindu periodicals *Bharati* (*Bhāratī*) (Calcutta, 1877-1926 A.D.ⁱ) [1284-1333 B.S.ⁱⁱ] and *Parichay* (*Paricay*) (Calcutta, 1931-1943 A.D.) [1338-1350 B.S.]. The reason for selecting these two journals is that they were the most enduring Bengali journals of their time. *Bharati* and *Parichay* exhibit varied literary tastes and opinions of the writers, readers and the reviewers. The data was compiled from primary archival sources and then critically analysed. The reviews on works by Bengali Muslim writers reflect the reception of the works by the readers. In the beginning of the nineteenth century the works of the Bengali Muslim writers were encouraged and appreciated but by the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth century communal differences widened and that gets reflected through the book reviews in *Bharati* and *Parichay*. The book reviews inform about the variety of themes used, the language employed, the different genres used, the price of the books, the quality of paper used and the different publishing houses. The Bengali Muslim writers wrote not only on Islamic religious history and Islamic characters but also on broader themes on women's emancipation, women education, communal harmony, European history and many more.

***Bharati (Bhāratī)* (Calcutta, 1877-1926 A.D.) [1284-1333 B.S.]**

Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Bangadarsan* (*Baṅgadarśan* ⁱⁱⁱ) (Calcutta, 1872-1874 A.D.) is one of the well-known literary magazines written in Bengali during that time. It had a great influence on the emergence of Bengali identity during the beginning of Bengal nationalism. Based on its objectives other highly valued journals originated like *Jnanankura* (*Jñānāṅkur*) (Rajshahi, 1872-1875 A.D.), *Aryadarsan* (*Āryadarśan*) (Bowbazar, 1874-1885 A.D.), *Bandhaba* (*Bāndhab*) (Dhaka, 1874-1906 A.D.), *Jnanankura and Pratibimba* (*Jñānāṅkur o Pratibimba*) (Calcutta, 1875-1876 A.D.), *Bhramara* (*Bhramar*) (Calcutta, 1874-1875 A.D.), *Bharati* (*Bhāratī*) etc. Towards the end of *Bangadarsan* with all its literary discussions one notices the presence of the powerful Hindu orthodoxy. There was a need to bring about a reform against such orthodoxy and introduce thinking that was progressive in nature. In the year 1874 A.D. *Bangadarsan* was closed down. This gap was filled by the birth of *Bharati*.

Bharati first started publishing on 29th July, 1877 A.D. It was a monthly journal. It was Dwijendranath Tagore who gave the name *Bharati*. In the Preface of the first publication of *Bharati* he explained the objectives and the reasons behind giving that name to the journal. *Bharati* means 'education' and so it acted as a mouthpiece to discuss the varied aspects of the Bangla language. The main objective of *Bharati* was spreading knowledge and educating its readers regarding the Bangla language. *Bharati* encouraged the development of all kinds of knowledge both native and foreign. The journal became a landmark because it helped in the growth of Bangla language and literature. It encouraged the contributions by prominent women writers and editors. The editor of *Bharati* was Sri Dwijendranath Tagore. The journal showed a tremendous growth and an active spirit of observation and enquiry. It gave importance to the development of the vernacular tongue. After Dwijendranath Tagore, Swarnakumari Debi took over the post of the editorship in 1884 A.D. She was followed by Hiranmayi Debi, Sarala Debi, Rabindranath Tagore, Sourindramohan Mukhopadhyay and Manilal Gangopadhyay. *Bharati* had turned into an important Bengali monthly journal that was widely circulated as well as quite acclaimed. In 1894 A.D. it

merged with another periodical *Balak* edited by Jnanadanandini Debi and was published as *Bharati o Balak*. It continued for six years as *Bharati o Balak (Bhāratī o Bālak)* but was again published as *Bharati*. It became the longest surviving and well acclaimed Bengali monthly journal till the year 1926 A.D.

Following are the book reviews (described as Samālocanā) of the literary works of the Bengali Muslim writers published in *Bharati*. The year of publication is important as that highlights the transformation and rigidity in attitude towards Bengali Muslim works especially on their use of Mussalmani Bangla.

R^{iv}-1. *Biṣād Sindhu, Maharam Parba* [Vol. 10, Phālgun, 1293 B.S.:688] (1886 A.D.)

The story is written by Mir Mosharraf Hossain. The reviewer comments that it is almost a thousand years now that the Muslims have settled and established themselves in Bengal but the sad part is that the Bengali Hindus know very little about the Islamic religious history. If the Muslims start writing about their history in pure Bangla, then not only the crisis can be overcome but also both the communities would develop a kind of friendliness among them. *Biṣād Sindhu* has been well received by the readers. It is based on the Muharram episode. The language is clear, the story well organised and the characters are well drawn. The reviewer remarks that he has not come across any Muslim writer earlier who has written so well in Bangla. He also informs the readers that the second part would be written soon and that the readers would wait for it eagerly. In this manner the writer will inform and make the readers aware of the Islamic religious history.

R-2. *Biṣād Sindhu, Uddhār Parba* [Vol. 12, Māgh, 1295 B.S.:596] (1888 A.D.)

The story is written by Mir Mosharraf Hossain. *Biṣād Sindhu, Uddhār Parba* describes the brutal killing of Hassan and Hussain by Yazid. The *Uddhār Parba* deals with the defeat of Yazid in the hands of the army of Hassan and Hussain and the safety of their successor Jainal. Like the first part, the second part is also written in the form

of a novel. The language of the first part is purer and clear than the second part. The readers are eagerly waiting for the release of the third part.

R-3. *Kārbālā* [Vol. 37, Śrābaṇ, 1320 B.S.:463] (1913 A.D.)

It is written and published by Sri Abdul Bari. It is printed at the Metcalf Press, Noakhali, Maijdi. The reviewer writes that it is a poem on the sad events of the Muharram episode. It is based on true historical facts for which the poem had to be limited within its boundary. The reviewer claims that the readers have felt satisfied reading the poem. The language used by the poet is good, serious and rhythmic. However, the use of Islamic cultural terms at places has hampered its poetic effect. According to the reviewer the use of Perso-Arabic terms like “lāyek” has spoiled the contents of the poem. The language should be as rich as the theme of the poem. The reviewer remarks that the correct use of vocabulary and a synthesis of thoughts should be made in order to make the poem a successful one. These factors should be kept in mind while writing the next volume so that he can overcome the shortcomings. If done so then only it can be hoped that a poem like *Kārbālā* will gain a high position in Bangla literature.

R-4. *Pradīp o Cerāg* [Vol. 41, Caitra, 1324 B.S.:1153] (1917 A.D.)

It is written by Mohammad Hedayetulla. It is published by R. Rahaman, The Mussalman Book Agency, Kolkata. It is printed at the New Age Press. This is a story book and it consists of three stories - *Pradīp o Cerāg*, *Masjid o Mandir* and *Dost o Duṣman*. The reviewer comments that all the three stories stress on Hindu-Muslim unity and amity as well as removing of the communal differences between them. The stories express communal harmony between the two communities. The work however lacks the art of storytelling yet it is a good read. The reviewer further discusses the plot of the three stories in brief. He remarks that the language used is good but the use of Mussalmani Bangla at places sounds quite odd. The writer is creative and needs to rectify the little errors present in the work. He hopes that this young Muslim writer will be successful in future.

Parichay (Paricay) (Calcutta, 1931-1943 A.D.) [1338-1350 B.S.]

Parichay is a Bengali quarterly magazine. The price of each volume is one rupee. Sudhindranath Dutta is its founder and the first editor as well. The two other later editors are Hirankumar Sanyal and Gopal Halder. The journal was published from Modern Art Press, Durga Pituri Lane, Calcutta. The main objective of the journal was to publish the earlier and modern writings in Bangla. The intention of the editor is to introduce the readers to the special gift given by writers of different languages in the past and in the present. The journal discusses literary works analysing them literally or linguistically. Book reviews and translations in Bangla are also present. *Parichay* helped in the promotion of the Bengali language. Different subjects like history, politics, economy, society and culture were dealt with so as to bring about advancement in the society. The most interesting part of the journal is its book reviews. The journal consisted of approximately 154 pages among which minimum 36 pages are devoted to book reviews approximately. Both native and foreign authors' works were reviewed by prominent people. It was a research-based discussion. The reviewers included Nirmalya Bagchi, Narayan Gangopadhyay, Narahari Kabiraj, Hirankumar Sanyal, Gopal Halder, Ashok Dasgupta, Radharam Mitra and Sunil Kumar Sen.

Parichay gained an important place in the world of journals during the colonial and post-colonial periods in Bengal. *Parichay's* aim was to introduce world literature to the people of Bengal and it has been successful throughout. As a progressive journal it has gained success and popularity. From 1342 B.S. onwards *Parichay* had become one of the longest surviving Bengali monthly journals. The following are the book reviews (titled as *Pustak Paricay*) from *Parichay*. The reviews in *Parichay* show a similar reaction as witnessed in *Bharati*.

R-5. *Śirṇī Darjīr Śāstar* [Vol. 3, Śrāban, 1340 B.S.:159-160] (1933 A.D.)

It is a collection of tales from the village of Pabna written by Professor Muhammad Mansuruddin, M.A. It is published by M.C.

Sarkar and Sons. Professor Muhammad Mansuruddin is a well-known name in Bangla literature. The readers are grateful to him for his earlier collection of Baul songs titled *Hārāmanī*. He has been attracted to the tales and poems of rural Bengal. This led him to bring out this collection with the blessings of Professor Muhammad Shahidullah and Abinandranath Tagore. The reviewer Sri Prabodchandra Bagchi considers this work to be of immense importance as it brings out the creativity and rich culture of the rural people of Bengal. He things this work important from the point of language study and anthropology because for a comparative study of the different dialects of Bengal it is required. He observes that Professor Mansuruddin is the first person to publish such a work. The reviewer comments on the language used. He says that if Mansuruddin has written the book in his own language then the usefulness lessens from the point of view of linguistics. The reviewer further remarks that Mansuruddin has written the book in Persian style that is writing from back to front. He thinks that the writer has unnecessarily used Arabic and Persian words like “duniyār tāmām” in his work. The reviewer questions would the use of such Perso-Arabic words enhance the beauty of Bangla. In India the Brahmi script is used, so is there any need to transgress it? In his earlier work *Hārāmanī* he did not deviate in this manner.

R-6. *Sojan Bādiyār Ghāṭ* [Vol. 4, Kārttik, 1341 B.S.:331-333] (1934 A.D.)

Sojan Bādiyār Ghāṭ is written by Jasimuddin. It is published by Gurudas Chattopadhyay and Sons. It is reviewed by Abdul Qader. The reviewer mentions that the earlier work of Jasimuddin which has been published is *Naksikāthār Māṭh*. Here the poet is very skilful. But in *Sojan Bādiyār Ghāṭ* his skilfulness is not completely visible. In *Naksikāthār Māṭh* the plot and characterisation is incomparable whereas in *Sojan Bādiyār Ghāṭ* the plot and characterisation are not well made. There are different minor characters and events that he has given which has made the plot disorganised. In *Naksikāthār Māṭh* Jasimuddin is seen as a story-teller at some places where as in *Sojan Bādiyār Ghāṭ* he is found doing that often. In *Naksikāthār Māṭh* Jasimuddin’s love for humanity can be seen whereas in *Sojan Bādiyār Ghāṭ* his socialist, feminist and humanist viewpoints gets

displayed. Through his modernism he has influenced the hearts of the readers. This he has done through the use of ornamental language.

The reviewer mentions that Jasimuddin's work upholds the beauty of rural Bengal. The picture he draws in *Sojan Bādiyār Ghāt* of the prayer gathering "nāmājer mahfil" and other rural settings brings him close to the readers. His characters are life-like. But the reviewer remarks that the language used is not proper, yet the work is still worth mentioning. The hero and heroine named Sojan and Dulali's characters are well formed. Through their tragic tale of love, Jasimuddin brings out the happiness, pain and sufferings of the rural people. This part, the reviewer hopes will be liked by the Bengali readers.

Conclusion

Tracing the transmission and reception of literary texts written by Bengali Muslim writers from 1880-1939 A.D. leads to many broad observations. Firstly, there is a kind of "internal power play" that emerges through this discussion. The book reviews present and analysed in *Bharati* and *Parichay* reveal the critical attitudes and responses of the readers to the growing Bengali Muslim literary consciousness. These Bengali Hindu journals acted not just as a commentary on the literary works produced by the Bengali Muslim writers but were greatly influential in validating and encouraging new tastes and linguistic choices among the readers. Those literary works were considered legitimate that carried the stamp of official recognition and could be circulated among the public authoritatively. The standard norms were laid down by the Bengali Hindu intelligentsia that resulted in the construction and shaping of the Bengali literary and intellectual culture. They had the power in their hands to regulate production as well as the circulation of knowledge.

Secondly, major cultural shifts are noticed in the linguistic development after the coming of the British in India. The establishment of the British power in India did alter the notions of political space, subjectivities and collective identities particularly focusing on Bengal and South Asia in general. They displaced and appropriated the existing notions of authority, self-identity and

collective belongings. The colonial rulers played a crucial role as they occupied a representative position in the spread of modern discourses and the cultural norms that were laid down by them resulting in drawing of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. The literary production and reception were both interlinked with the political practices of the British that is in the alteration of textual norms, the redistribution of the sites of textual production, its network of dissemination and how readers may evaluate and assess a literary work. Efforts were made towards standardisation of Bangla in order to rapidly transform indigenous textual traditions that were already present in Bangla.

Along with this is witnessed a kind of calculative part played by the Bengali Hindu intelligentsia in the establishment of a Bangla public sphere in Bengal where critical exchange was possible only through the vernacular. The entry of the British produced a class of English educated Bengali babus who occupied the forefront of the public sphere activities. These Bengali babus were bilingual viz. in English and Bangla. They nurtured and cultivated their mother tongue Bangla side by side to English. These privileged babus backed by the support of the English reshaped the native vernaculars. Definitive arenas were set that determined access and marginality by other subordinate groups.

Thirdly, the press and print played an essential role as a medium for social and cultural reform. Print became vital in the dissemination of new ideas among the common people as well as in making Bangla literature gain more readers. The press became a common site where these intellectual elites established a sphere of critical discussion. They became the spokespersons of a hegemonic discourse. The press turned into an arena of political contestation where the individual and group identities got reshaped.

Fourthly, the society became stratified and displaced based on language. There developed an altered communicative and cultural practice that led to crucial hierarchical ideological divisions based on language in Bengal. The fact that gets established is that there took place decisive shifts in the structure of cultural production as well as

in the norms for articulating the possibilities of contestation and containment.

As a result of Sanskritisation, both Persian and Arabic words that had entered the Bangla vocabulary due to the spread of Islam started to be considered artificial and foreign and were eventually dismissed by the 20th century. There took place a process of de-familiarisation and there was no development of alternative critical discourses. However, the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia created their own kind of Bangla literature making use of an alternative Islamised and spoken Musalmani Bangla as a reaction against the Sanskritised Bangla that was followed by the Bengali Hindus.

The Bengali Muslim writers/translators found themselves in a peculiar situation. They were excluded from the process of building and transmitting a literary tradition in Bangla. Yet the Bengali Muslim writers challenged this hierarchy and the process of exclusion by their use of greater lexical influences from Persian and Arabic in their literary works. The Bengali Muslim writers/translators became negotiators/mediators in the dissemination and representation of knowledge as well as in the preservation of native beliefs and practices of their community. They aimed for a wider readership through the newspapers and the press and spread modern rationalist discourses to enlighten the people of their own community. Their main aim was the development of a collective self-identity through a counter-discourse that would counter the hegemony and the discrimination that they faced. Thus, literary writing and translation was used strategically by them as a medium for remaking of the native linguistic forms. But unfortunately, polarisation of ideas took place between the two communities that affected the growth and development of the vernacular discourses also.

Therefore, what comes out is that there was a turn to orthodoxy and an increased reluctance towards egalitarianism. Sign of intolerance is brought out clearly in excluding the minority voices from the primary arenas of the Bangla public sphere. The literary works did no longer reflect heterogeneity rather exclusion and the way the politics of language worked during colonial period. The

literary criticisms point out how the Bangla language was shaped. The literary productions emphasised certain literary styles and tastes at the cost of others. The mixed diction present in the Bangla language was eclipsed by the Sanskritised Bangla which came to be accepted as the standardised one. The alternative mode of literary transmission was completely weakened. For a better understanding and a truer picture of the development of the Bangla language this needs to be taken into account.

Endnotes

- i. A.D. - Anno Domini
- ii. B.S. - Bengali Satabdi
- iii. Modified Roman symbols are used to transliterate the Bangla letters. Diacritics have been used for special characters.
- iv. R – Review. The book reviews have been literally translated into English by me.

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