

Political Development and the Muslim Community in Colonial Bengal, (1909-1947): A Study

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Abstract

Political development is one of the important phenomena in the contexts of political science or political society, where political development of Muslim community in Colonial Bengal is not an exception. During the colonial rule in Bengal the colonial masters processed a different development in that regards. The article explores the political development of the Muslim community in colonial Bengal between 1909-1947, with a particular focus on Muslim political engagement in electoral politics. Electoral politics constitutes a central feature of democracy, functioning as a mechanism for community development and inclusion within the power structure. It ensures the representation of diverse interests, facilitates political participation, and provides a voice to marginalized communities. Electoral politics ensures the representation of diverse community interests in decision-making processes. It encourages active participation in the electoral process by offering voting rights, providing a political voice, and ensuring representation or participation in political affairs. The study assesses the historical foundations of Muslim political engagement in the electoral processes. It also analyses the socio-economic, institutional, and ideological factors that shaped Muslim participation in the evolving electoral framework. By exploring the interaction between British colonial policies and Muslim political aspirations, the study highlights how electoral politics functioned as a space of both inclusion and contestation for Bengal's Muslim community.

Keywords: Electoral politics, colonial Bengal, Muslim political mobilization, separate electorates,

Introduction

Bengal was among the first regions in India to fall under British colonial rule. This region experienced significant structural transformations during the colonial period across political, economic, and social spheres. The process began with the British East India Company's victories at the Battle of Plassey (1757) and the Battle of Buxar (1764) secured its political dominance in the region. These victories ultimately led to the acquisition of the Diwani rights (1765), which granted the Company fiscal authority over revenue collection in Bengal. This marked the beginning of a transformative colonial rule that reshaped Bengal's economy, society, and system of governance. Under British administration, Bengal emerged as the principal political and economic centre of colonial India. Calcutta (now Kolkata) functioned as the administrative capital of British India until 1911. The implementation of the Permanent Settlement in 1793 institutionalized a landlord-based revenue system, fostering the rise of a

loyal zamindari class while intensifying the exploitation of the rural peasantry. Throughout the 19th century, Bengal witnessed the proliferation of political associations, social reform movements, and a vibrant nationalist press. However, genuine political representation for Indians remained largely absent. The legislative bodies consisted solely of British-appointed officials and had minimal Indian involvement.

Muslim Political Participation in Pre-Electoral Politics in Colonial Bengal

During the early colonial period, the governance system in Bengal and British India as a whole was characterized by extreme centralization, autocratic rule, and a complete absence of Indian representation in legislative or executive functions. The East India Company (EIC) established a military-bureaucratic state, which became even more rigid after the Crown took direct control following the 1857 Revolt (also known as the First War of Independence). This period marked the consolidation of British imperial authority with little regard for local political participation. The political system and administrative structure in early colonial Bengal:

- **Regulating Act (1773) and Pitt's India Act (1784):** The Regulating Act of 1773 established the office of Governor-General of Bengal and created a Supreme Council to support the officeholder in administrative functions. However, this council was composed entirely of British officials, with no Indian representation or public accountability. Legislative functions were limited and subordinate to the Company's commercial priorities.
- **Post-1857 Revolt and the Government of India Act, 1858:** After the 1857 Rebellion, the Government of India Act of 1858 abolished Company rule. Authority was transferred to the British Crown, and a Secretary of State for India was appointed in London, assisted by the Council of India. A highly centralized system emerged, with the Governor-General (Viceroy) at the apex, assisted by an Executive Council (still composed only of British officials). No legislative councils with Indian participation existed at the provincial level, including in Bengal. Decisions continued to be made by a small British elite, mostly military and civil servants.
- **Absence of Legislative or Representative Institutions:** Before 1861, there was no system of representative legislation in Bengal or elsewhere in British India. Laws were made by the Governor-General in Council, without any Indian consultation or participation. The entire administrative framework—from judiciary to revenue—was staffed and run by British officers. Indian elites had no formal political role, though some were informally consulted for revenue or local disputes. Indians were excluded from governance, both at the central and provincial levels. Early political organizations like the British Indian Association (1851) and the Madras Native Association (1852) emerged in protest, demanding some level of Indian participation, but these appeals were ignored by the colonial state.

Muslim Political Participation in Colonial Bengal:

The province of Bengal has a diverse population, with Muslims comprising a significant proportion that experienced a sharp decline in socio-political standing after the collapse of the

Mughal administrative system. Muslims in Bengal were largely marginalized within the colonial bureaucracy and the emerging Western-style education system. This marginalization was further reinforced by colonial economic policies like the Permanent Settlement of 1793, which disproportionately benefited Hindu zamindars and excluded many Muslims from landowning elites. The electoral system in colonial India evolved gradually, shaped by shifting patterns of imperial control and the emergence of Indian political consciousness. The political development in India under colonial rule began with the East India Company's control from 1757 to 1858. After the 1857 Rebellion, the British Crown took direct control from 1858 to 1947. During this period, limited political reforms began with the Indian Councils Act of 1861 and 1892, which expanded legislative councils to include Indian members, though these were primarily nominated rather than elected, and their roles remained advisory. The nominees included British officials (primarily British bureaucrats), Indian elites (such as landowners, nobility, and prominent figures from the upper caste communities), and representatives of various religious and social communities. Although the Indian Councils Act of 1861 did not establish a systematic framework for electoral representation, it laid the foundational groundwork for subsequent reforms to address the representation of various communities. Following legislation, such as the Indian Councils Act of 1909, the Government of India Act of 1919, and the Government of India Act of 1935, aimed to expand electoral rights and representation more systematically. There are key milestones in the introduction of electoral politics in colonial India:

- **Indian Council Act (1861):** Introduced nominated Indian members in legislative councils (e.g., Zamindars, Lawyers). No Election yet.
- **Local Self-Government (1880s):** Municipalities and District Boards allowed limited elected representation, but the franchise was restricted to property-owning elites.
- **Indian Council Act (1892):** Introduced Indirect Election. It was the first step toward limited electoral representation in colonial India. Members were still nominated, but provincial legislatures could now recommend names to the Viceroy.
- **Morley-Minto Reforms (1909):** Direct elections in India were first introduced by the Indian Councils Act of 1909, also known as the Morley-Minto Reforms. The reforms are most famous for establishing separate electorates for Muslims.
- **Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms (1919):** It introduced electoral politics, laid the foundational framework for electoral representation, and expanded the franchise. It established a bicameral legislature at the center.
- **1920 First Elections:** The first elections under the Government of India Act 1919 were held in 1920-21 for the Provincial and Central Legislative Councils.
- **Government of India Act (1935):** Voting rights expanded to about 15% of the population. This Act expands and modifies the electoral system.
- **1932 Communal Award:** It extended separate electorates to Dalits (Depressed Classes)

- **1937 Elections:** Congress won most general seats but refused to govern; the Krishak Praja Party–Muslim League coalition formed government.
- **1947: India gains independence,** and the electoral system is continued with modifications.

The development of electoral politics in colonial Bengal was significantly shaped by the socioeconomic conditions of Muslims, British colonial policies, and the emergence of communal representation. It reveals how colonial legislative reforms, particularly the introduction of separate electorates through the Morley-Minto Reforms (1909) and later expansions in the Government of India Acts (1919 and 1935), institutionalized communal representation and reshaped the political landscape of Bengal. The political awakening of Muslims in colonial Bengal was not an abrupt process, but the outcome of prolonged socioeconomic marginalization, cultural negotiation, and reformist efforts. This awareness emerged through the formation of socio-political organizations, intellectual movements, and institutional responses to the changing realities of colonial rule and the dynamics of colonial governance in Bengal. The late 19th century saw the emergence of political associations that laid the groundwork for organized political participation. Key organizations included:

- **British Indian Association (1851):** Dominated by Hindu zamindars and elites, it advocated for landlord interests but largely excluded Muslim representation.
- **Indian National Congress (1885):** Initially inclusive in rhetoric, its Bengal branch remained predominantly upper-caste Hindu in composition and agenda.
- **Mohammedan Literary Society (1863):** One of the earliest signs of political awakening among Bengal's Muslims was the formation of the Mohammedan Literary Society in Calcutta (est. 1863) by Nawab Abdul Latif. It aimed to promote Western education among Muslims and address their socio-political backwardness relative to the Hindu bhadralok. The society provided a platform for discussing legal, educational, and political issues affecting Muslims and fostered a modern Muslim intelligentsia in Bengal.
- **Aligarh Movement (1875):** The Aligarh Movement, led by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, had a transformative impact on the Muslims of Bengal, although its center was in North India. The movement promoted modern education, especially in English and the sciences, through institutions like the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental College (1875), which later became Aligarh Muslim University. It emphasized loyalty to the British as a strategy for Muslim upliftment and discouraged involvement in the Indian National Congress, which was seen as dominated by Hindu interests. In Bengal, this movement inspired leaders like Syed Ameer Ali, who founded the Central National Muhammadan Association (1877), one of the earliest all-India political platforms for Muslims. Ameer Ali also advocated for legal reform, education, and political representation for Muslims, while maintaining a separate Muslim identity in public life. According to Francis Robinson in *Separatism Among Indian Muslims* (1974), the Aligarh Movement laid the ideological groundwork for Muslim political separatism by articulating the need for Muslim-specific institutions, a sentiment echoed and adapted by Bengal's Muslim elite.

- **Formation of the All-India Muslim League (1906) in Dhaka:** The culmination of early Muslim political consciousness was the formation of the All-India Muslim League on December 30, 1906, at Ahsan Manzil in Dhaka. The meeting was convened following the success of the Simla Deputation (1906), which had petitioned the British Viceroy for separate Muslim electorates, a demand that would define communal politics in the coming decades. The choice of Dhaka as the venue reflected the increasing political assertiveness of Bengal's Muslim elite, particularly after the partition of Bengal in 1905, which had created a Muslim-majority province of Eastern Bengal and Assam. Many Bengali Muslims saw this as an opportunity for political and administrative empowerment. The League's primary objectives were to promote loyalty to the British, protect Muslim interests, and ensure separate political representation. Though initially a conservative elite organization, the League laid the foundation for the broader mobilization of Muslims in electoral politics.

The political awareness among Muslims in colonial Bengal grew out of their marginal position in the colonial socio-economic structure and was catalysed by reformist movements and organizations. The Mohammedan Literary Society, the Aligarh Movement, and the Muslim League's founding in Dhaka collectively represent a Muslim political identity and intellectual awakening to political organization. These developments laid the groundwork for later electoral successes and the eventual Muslim separatist politics in colonial Bengal. Historian Ayesha Jalal, in *The Sole Spokesman* (1985), emphasizes that the formation of the League in Bengal signified a decisive moment in Muslim political identity formation, marking the start of organized Muslim efforts to shape their role in colonial India's electoral framework. The evolution of Muslim political participation in colonial Bengal was shaped by three interrelated factors, namely, institutional frameworks established under colonial rule, the socio-economic positioning of the Muslim community, and the broader socio-political dynamics of the period. These dimensions collectively played a pivotal role in shaping the patterns and nature of Muslim political engagement during the colonial period.

Conclusion:

The evolution of electoral politics in colonial India was heavily influenced by the socioeconomic conditions of Muslims, British colonial policies, and the rise of communal representation. From 1861 to 1947, colonial legislative reforms, especially the introduction of separate electorates under the Morley-Minto Reforms (1909) and their expansion in the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935, formalized communal representation and reshaped India's political landscape. The political awakening of Muslims in colonial India was not sudden but resulted from long-term socioeconomic marginalization, cultural negotiations, and reformist movements. The Mohammedan Literary Society, the Aligarh Movement, and the founding of the Muslim League in Dhaka collectively symbolize a Muslim political identity and intellectual awakening toward political organization. These developments laid the foundation for later electoral victories and the rise of Muslim separatist politics in colonial India. This study emphasizes how colonial electoral mechanisms played a crucial role in shaping Muslim political consciousness and influencing India's broader constitutional development.

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