BENGALI TRANSLATION OF THE QURAN AND THE IMPACT OF PRINT CULTURE ON MUSLIM SOCIETY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Abstract. *How the printing technology brought about a change in the transmission of knowledge from sound to sight, how this phenomenon was related to the emergence of an educated middle class or whether it had anything to do with the development of individualism, are some of the relevant questions addressed in the present article. These would be studied in the context of the emergence of Bengali Quran since the late nineteenth century. In the European context, these issues have been addressed more or less adequately. However, the impact of print culture on South Asian Muslim society is an area where there is still much scope for investigation. Particularly Bengal, the homeland of one of the largest Muslim communities in the world, hardly received any attention in this respect. Bengal is important for another reason. Bengal Muslims are the only Muslims in the world, who in spite of being Islamized, have retained both their language and script. These are some of the reasons why Bengal (undivided) should be included in order to carry out any serious research on South Asian Islam.*

Keywords: *Bengali translation of the Quran, impact of print culture, Bengali Muslim middle class, nineteenth century.*

Introduction

How the printing technology brought about a change in the transmission of knowledge from sound to sight, how this phenomenon was related to the emergence of an educated middle class or whether it had anything to do with the development of individualism, are some of the relevant questions before a social scientist. Eminent historian F.C.R. Robinson has rightly indicated in his book *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia*[1], that in the European context, these issues have been addressed more or less adequately. However, the impact of print culture on South Asian Muslim society is an area where there is still much scope for investigation. In fact, Robinson himself is one of the pioneers in the field. But Bengal, the homeland of one of the largest Muslim communities in the world, hardly received any attention in his research. Bengal is important for another reason. Bengal Muslims are the only Muslims in the world, who in spite of being Islamized, have retained both their language and script. These are some of the reasons why Bengal (undivided) should be included in order to carry out any serious research on South Asian Islam.

Historian Amalendu De played a pioneering role in his effort to contextualize the process of translating the Quran into Bengali in a booklet entitled *Bangla Bhashai Quran Charcha* (Kolkata, 1999, written in Bengali). However, the connection between these translation efforts and the advent and utilization of printing technology has not been dealt with in his work. Muhammad Mujibur Rahman in his painstaking and descriptive work *Bangla Bhashai Quran Charcha* (Dhaka, 1986, in Bengali) tried to portray different initiatives relating to the translation of the Quran into Bengali in the colonial era. He wrote the book as a devout Muslim, and the analytical approach of a detached historian is often missing in his work. Moreover, he also ignored the significance of print culture in nineteenth century Bengali Muslim society. The present essay aims at filling up that lacunae, existing in this area of research.

Our focus area is the second half of the nineteenth century when an educated Bengali Muslim middle class started to emerge. Apart from the acceptance of printing technology in Bengali Muslim society, this period was characterized by pioneering efforts in translating the entire Quran from original Arabic to Bengali. Translation of the Quran continued during the twentieth century but the context was different due to the politicization of the Muslim society. For these reasons, the present discussion would be confined to late nineteenth century which is known in India as the century of religious debates and discourses.

For a better understanding of the problem, this essay unfolds in two parts. First part deals with the advent, utilization and impact of printing technology in Bengali Muslim society in a broader historical context. The final part is concerned with the Bengali translation of the Quran and its significance.

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1   Robinson, F. *Islam and Muslim History in South Asia.* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000.

1. Change in the Transmission of Knowledge: Underpinning the Quran-Centred Piety

In the modern era, printing technology played and still plays a significant role in promoting the process of Islamization by bringing about a change in the transmission of knowledge from sound to sight, i.e. replacing oral transmission by the visible printed word. However, it is useful to remember that Muslims did not adopt print until the nineteenth century. The importance which Islam attaches to the oral transmission of knowledge was manifested in the oral transmission of the Quran. This might have made Muslims reluctant to adopt print before the nineteenth century.

The question follows why did South Asian Muslims embrace printing in the nineteenth century? The answer is not difficult to seek. In a period of rapid economic and social changes under the colonial rule, when books were spreading European scientific, literary, philosophical and political knowledge, the ulama, who no longer received the patronage of the Muslim rulers, felt marginalized.[2] As in upper India, the Christian missionaries of nineteenth century Bengal frightened Muslims by attacking Islam on the streets and in the press. Moreover, Bengali Hindus and Brahmos, who started their quest for identity a few decades earlier than their relatively backward Muslim counterparts, were deriving inspiration from religion which found expression in various printed works. Under such circumstances, the Ulama realized that Islam could best be defended by the 'enhanced religious understanding of Muslims themselves' and that purpose could best be served by the proper utilization of the new technology of the printing press.[3]

The adoption of the printing technology by the ulama of Bengal was reflected in the growing numbers of *nasihat-namas* in Bengali and also in the translation of the religious texts, such as the Quran and Hadith into Bengali.[4] With the expectation of enhancing the religious understanding of the Bengali Muslim masses, who did not know Arabic, even the daily namaz was translated into Bengali.[5] But it is important to remember that the ulama adopted printing only to reinforce and improve the existing system of learning and not to transform them. They were not prepared to lose their monopoly over the transmission and interpretation of religious knowledge and hence Bengali *sirat* writer Abdur Rahim had to receive the approval of the ulama before publishing his *sirat.* (see the chapter on *sirat* – writers in my book[6]).

However, once the ulama adopted the new technology of printing, it started to change the pattern of transmission of knowledge threatening the monopolistic position of the ulama in the sphere of learning. For a long time it was held that Bengali was the

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2   Robinson, F. Islam and the Impact of Print in South Asia. In: Crook, N. (ed.). *The Transmission of Knowledge in South Asia: Essays on Education, Religion, History and Politics.* Delhi, 1996, p. 70–71; Robinson, F., *supra* note 1.

3   *Ibid.*, p. 71.

4   Dey, A. Banglay Quran Ebong Muslim Dharmachintar Sekal – Ekal. In: *Saradiya Baromas.* Calcutta, 1996, p. 41–57; Dey, A. *Bangla Bhashai Quran Charcha.* Kolkata, 1999.

5   Khan, M. M. M. *Islam Kaumudi.* Khulna, 1914, p. 124.

6   Dey, A. *The Image of the Prophet in Bengali Muslim Piety.* Kolkata, 2005.

language of the *kafir*, so translating any religious text into Bengali was regarded as a *beshara* act.[7] So it is not surprising that, Girish Chandra, a Brahmo, was the first person to translate the entire Quran from original Arabic into Bengali. He was also the first person to write the historical biography of Muhammad in Bengali (1885). Brahmos were praised by some Muslim reformers for their pioneering role in the vernacularization of Islamic texts, which inspired many Bengali Muslim writers to follow suit.[8] This vernacularization process and the technology of printing made religious knowledge accessible to a large number of educated Muslims in Bengal, which also contributed to the development of community consciousness in the province. Such consciousness was further intensified by the multiplication of religious literature such as *sirat*s in Bengali, which popularized the image of Muhammad who would lead the community in tune with Quran.

The shift in the transmission of knowledge from sound to sight, which was made possible by the press along with the vernacularization process gave the Bengali Muslims ample opportunity to analyse and interpret the religious literature for themselves without the supervision of the ulama in general and the Urdu-based ulama in particular. We have to remember two important points regarding this development. Firstly, the rise of the individual as his own interpreter which diminished the monopoly of the ulama over transmission of knowledge,[9] should be related to a greater phenomenon, that is the growth of individualism in the newly emerging middle class Muslim society since the second half of the nineteenth century. It was the period when the individual was gaining greater control over his own life. The busy middle class, educated outside the madrasah, did not have the time, nor the attitude to rely on the ulama or the sharia – centred interpretation of religion for their spiritual satisfaction. They were in search of a personal role model to cope with the changing social, economic and political conditions under the colonial rule. That role model in the form of Muhammad was provided by the multiple copies of printed and user-friendly *sirat* literature. Developments such as this contributed to the emergence and enhancement of the Prophet-centred piety in South Asia and also signalled the changing source of authority in society form the ulama to the educated individual who would receive guidance directly from the printed Quran or *sirat*.

Another dimension of the printing technology and the growth of individualism was reflected in Bengali Muslim attitudes towards intercessory Sufism. Religious scriptures in the printed form were becoming more and more available in the vernacular language since the late nineteenth century. It created the opportunity for the educated Bengali Muslim middle – class drawing on his own individual resources to interpret and exteriorize religious knowledge without passively relaying on ecstatic and intercessory Sufism for spiritual satisfaction.[10] The educated Muslim middle-class criticism of

7   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 42.
8   Khan, M. M. M., *supra* note 5, p. 99.
9   *Ibid.*, p. 148–149.
10   Robinson, F., *supra* note 2, p. 73–89.

intercessory Sufism in Bengal was reflected in the novel Abdullah (1920).[11] However, it is useful to remember that, like the Barelwis of upper India who had a strong rural base,[12] the bauls (mystical singers of Bengal) in the Bengali countryside also continued to focus upon intercessory Sufism for the convenience of the illiterate rural masses. Of course *fatwas* were issued, as we know, to eliminate the bauls for their custom laden practices in an age of literal fundamentalism. The printing technology largely contributed to that literal fundamentalism when books were playing the role of ghazis,[13] by trying to wipe out custom laden practices from Bengali Muslim society. Pir Abu Bakr of Furfura (Hooghly) had a proper understanding of that changing circumstances, and, in a pragmatic way, he patronized religious literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[14] Bengali journals dealing with Pan – Islamic themes, such as *Islam Darshan*, also received his patronage.[15] This explains why some Bengali Muslim writers of the twentieth century were still respectful towards Sufism as a whole, if not towards the intercessory aspect of the latter.

We have discussed how the availability of religious knowledge in print, in the context of Islamic Protestantism, increased the responsibility of the educated Muslim individual to interpret and exteriorize such knowledge on his own. This new emphasis on individual responsibility made Muslims conscious about the importance of taking action in this world instead of passively submitting to contemplative and intercessory Sufism. This consciousness about taking action prompted the ulama to work side by side with educated Muslims in the *anjumans* (association)[16] which acted as links between the Bengali Muslims masses and organized politics as I have shown in my book. The diminishing influence of contemplative and intercessory Sufism among educated Muslims prompted them to derive emotional and spiritual satisfaction from the printed Quran and *sirats*. The self-confident educated Muslim middle-class individual started to undermine the authority of the *murshid* (Sufi spiritual guide) and shifted his attention to Muhammad as a source of authority in the temporal and spiritual world.

In a period, when the transmission of knowledge was becoming a matter of individual responsibility, a section of the more pragmatic ulama, represented by Akram Khan and Muniruzzaman Islamabadi, tried to extend their influence in the Bengali Muslim society by patronizing religious publications. Ironically, such publications also created the environment for the emergence of some Muslims who asserted their right to interpret Islam for themselves, as opposed to accepting the interpretations of the ulama. Some educated Muslims of middle-class background, hardly had the time to follow the instructions of shariat in their daily lives. They were Muslims by culture. In Gour Kishore Ghosh's novel *Prem Nei*, the main character Safikul epitomized this new type of educated Bengali Muslim. These Muslims were not even prepared to accept *ijma*

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11   Qadir, A. (ed.). *Qazi Imdadul Huq Rachanabali, Vol – I.* Dacca, 1968, p. 3–12.
12   Daly Metcalf, B. *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860–1900.* Princeton, 1982, p. 267–296.
13   Robinson, F., *supra* note 2, p. 78.
14   Anisuzzaman, *Muslim Manas O Bangla Sahitya.* Calcutta, 1971, p. 383.
15   *Islam Darshan* (Calcutta based monthly journal), 1921, issue number one, front page cover.
16   Sarkar, Ch. P. *The Bengali Muslims: A Study in Their Politicization, 1912-1929.* Calcutta, 1991, p. 164.

(consensus), *qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) as sources of authority on the ground that these were not the sayings of Allah and Muhammad, but merely the interpretations of the *imams* (one who leads the prayer) and *maulvis* (Muslim theologian).[17] A section of the educated Muslim middle-class now preferred to use the Quran, hadith and *sirat*s directly as their sources of authority instead of going to the ulama. There is no doubt that developments such as this, greatly nurtured the emergence and sustenance of a Quran-centred piety in Bengal.

Thus the adoption of print played a significant role in changing the nature of the transmission of knowledge, which in its turn, reshaped the relationship between the ulama and the Sufis on the one hand, and the educated Muslim individual on the other. We have also seen a sort of symbiotic relationship between the growth of Bengali Muslim press and the growth of Pan-Islamic consciousness. At the same time we should not overestimate the role of the printing technology in Bengali Muslim society due to the prevalence of a low literacy rate in modern South Asia.[18]

2. Translation of the Quran into Bengali and Its Significance

In the early 1880s, Dr. James Wise, a medical practitioner based in Dacca, left an interesting account of the common Muslim population in nineteenth century Bengal. Majority of them were simple peasants ignorant of the basic tenets of Islam. Many of them even used to participate in Hindu festivals. However, the ulama, who represented the Islamic revivalist movements during the first half of the nineteenth century, tried their best to purge Islam of its un-Islamic elements by urging common Muslims to refrain from participating in Hindu festivals. Under the spell of the *Tariqa- i-Muhammadiya* and *Faraizi* movements the common Muslims in Bengal were asked to offer their prayer (*namaz*) in Arabic like 'true Muslims'. The Muslim peasantry in Bengal did not follow Arabic. From the accounts of Dr. Wise we come to know that in those days it was very difficult to find someone who can lead the prayer in Arabic.[19]

Several centuries had elapsed since the advent of Islam in Bengal. Many books had also been written in the Bengali language. Then why did the Bengali Muslims receive the first complete translation of the Holy Quran in Bengali only during the second half of the nineteenth century? Why similar was the fate of Bengali *tafsir* (commentary on the Quran) literature? Apparently we can identify two factors as responsible for this. Firstly, till the third decade of the nineteenth century, educated Muslims of Bengal used Persian and Urdu (Hindusthani) for official and cultural interactions. The Quran was translated into both these languages. Similar was the case with *tafsir* literature. *Ashraf* Muslims of Bengal in those days knew both Persian and Urdu and sometimes conversed with each

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17   Ghosh, G. K. *Prem Nei*. 3rd edition. Calcutta, 1983, p. 226−228.

18   Robinson, F., *supra* note 2, p. 90−91.

19   Wise, J. *Notes on the Races, Castes and Trades of Eastern Bengal.* London, 1883, p. 36; Dey, A. *Quran Charcha*, *supra* note 4, p. 1.

other in Urdu.[20] Mosharraf's father who represented this group, also knew Persian and Urdu but could not read and write Bengali.[21] Under such circumstances the educated Muslims in Bengal did not find it necessary to vernacularise the scriptures.[22] Later, during the second half of the nineteenth century when the educated Bengali Muslim middle-class started to emerge and the aristocratic Bengali speaking Muslims became more dominant, the importance of the Bengali language also increased in the Bengali Muslim society.[23] Secondly, for a long time, the Bengali Muslims regarded the translation of the Quran as a *be-shara* (against shariat) or irreligious act. They believed that the translation of the Quran would erode its sacred quality and the common Muslims would become confused by reading the translated version. It is worth mentioning that noted theologian Shah Waliullah of Delhi translated the Quran into Persian in the year 1737. One hundred and forty-four years after that endeavour, the Bengali Quran, translated from original Arabic by Bhai Girish Chandra Sen, was published from the district of Mymensingh. The second volume was published in the year 1882. Then appeared the third volume. The last two volumes were published from Calcutta.[24]

The entire Quran translated by Bhai Girish Chandra was published in the year 1886 which had one thousand copies. The second (1892), third (1908) and fourth (1936) editions had the same number of copies. When the first volume was published in the year 1881, one man belonging to the Muslim community even threatened to kill Bhai Girish Chandra. However, after the publication of the subsequent volumes, Bhai Girish Chandra was praised by some learned Muslims. When the fourth edition of Bhai Girish Chandra's Bengali Quran was published in the year 1936, eminent theologian and Muslim League leader Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan wrote its preface and showed his deep respect for Girish Chandra. In this way the Bengal Muslims became familiar with their Holy Book.[25]

In the first edition of the Bengali Quran, Girish Chandra mentioned in the translator's introduction that he did not take any help from the maulvis in order to translate it into Bengali from original Arabic. However, he admitted that he consulted authentic *tafsir* literature while reading the original Quran and then translated and published it.[26] Girish Chandra Initially maintained anonymity as a translator. Probably he feared that such an effort on the part of a non-Muslim would not be appreciated by the Bengal Muslims. Such a fear was not unfounded as it has been pointed out earlier that for a long time the Bengal Muslims regarded the act of translating the Quran as a *be-shara* endeavour. It has already been referred that after the publication of the first volume of the Bengali Quran, one Muslim man threatened to kill the translator. Due to the positive response of some learned Muslims, the anonymous translator could eventually gather enough courage to

20   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 2; Dey, A. *Samaj O Sanskriti.* Kolkata, 1981, p. 13.
21   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 2.
22   Mannan, K. A. (ed.). *Mosharraf Rachana Sambhar.* Vol. V. Dhaka, 1885, p. 92−95.
23   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 2.
24   *Ibid.*; Dey, A., *supra* note 6, chapter 2.
25   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 3.
26   *Ibid.*

publish his name in the subsequent edition. After renouncing his anonymity, Bhai Girish Chandra Sen expressed his mixed feeling in the later edition. He was happy because his prolonged and painstaking effort culminated in the publication of the Bengali Quran. At the same time he lamented the passing away of his mentor Kesab Chandra Sen, the charismatic Brahmo leader who inspired him to translate Islamic scriptures into Bengali. Indeed Kesab Sen would have been very happy to see the Bengali version of the Quran which was made possible by his meticulous and hard-working disciple Bhai Girish Chandra. [27]

In spite of the traditional reluctance of the Bengal Muslims to get the Quran translated into Bengali, there had been efforts to translate it since the medieval period. In the fourteenth century, there had been an indirect attempt to translate the Quran into Bengali. Shah Muhammad Sagir's *Yusuf Zuleikha*, which was composed in verses, can be cited as an example. During the sixteenth century, Syed Sultan's poetical compositions *Nabi Vamsa* and *Wafat-i-Rasul* raised some important questions such as: when the Muslims of other countries were being familiar with the Quran in their own languages respectively would it not be useful to make the essence of the Quran available in the Bengali language? Religious literature based on the Quran and Hadith (the sayings and teachings of the Prophet) had been composed in the medieval Bengali language. However, it is not clearly known whether there was any direct attempt to translate the entire Quran from original Arabic into Bengali during that period. Direct translation of the entire Quran form original Arabic into Bengali could take place only during the second half of the nineteenth century.[28]

So far as the direct translation of the Quran is concerned, Amiruddin Bosunia of the district of Rangpur (now in Bangladesh) played a pioneering role. However, his translation was only partial and was confined to the *Ampara* section only. In 1808, he translated that section of the Quran and also *tafsir* in *do-bhashi* Bengali (a kind of Bengali with a mixture of Arabic and Persian words) or in the style of *Punthi* literature. That simple Bengali translation in poetical form was published in 1866.[29] Eminent scholar Anisuzzaman has argued in his *magnum opus* entitled *Muslim Manas O Bangla* Sahitya that this *do-bhashi* or *punthi* style used to dominate Muslim-Bengali literature till the late 1860s. This genre was very popular among the illiterate or semi-literate Bengali Muslim masses. *Punthi* literature was often read out before the masses and in order to aid their memorization process this genre was often composed in verses. The use of this *do-bhashi* or *punthi* style was very significant. It confirms the fact that a section of the educated Muslims in nineteenth century Bengal became aware of the importance of familiarizing the Bengali Muslim masses with the basic tenets or Islam.[30] Apart from Amiruddin, Ghulam Akbar Ali and Khondkar Mir Waheed Ali also translated parts of Quran in verses. Brahmo scholar Bhai Girish Chandra Sen was the first person to

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27   Dey, A., *supra* note 20, p. 19−20.

28   Chattopadhyay, *Girish Chandra*, p. 7−8, cited in Dey, A. 'Girish Chandra', Kesab Sen passed away in January, 1884.

29   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 3.

30   *Ibid.*, p. 4.

translate the entire Quran from original Arabic into Bengali. Besides, he published *tafsir* in Bengali and wrote various other books relating to Islam and Sufism. Thus he was able to add a new dimension to the cultivation of Islamic theology in nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. From the time of Girish Chandra till 1947, many Bengali books relating to Islam were published, which included translation of religious scriptures and *tafsir*. Those religious literature made the Bengal Muslims aware of their historical past. Gradually, they also became conscious about their separate community identity. All these developments had far reaching consequences.[31]

The keen interest of the Bengali Muslims in translating the Quran or writing *tafsir* was quite natural. But the question is why did a non-Muslim like Bhai Girish Chandra undertake such a painstaking job? Was there any fundamental difference between his attitude and that of the Muslim translators? Did such translation activities create a congenial atmosphere for comparative theological discussions? These are some of the relevant questions which need to be addressed. It is useful to note that charismatic Brahmo leader Kesab Chandra Sen inherited his predecessor Raja Rammohun Roy's eclectic bent of mind. Like Roy, he tried to create a universal family of mankind by bringing different religions closer to each other. Sen inspired his companions to establish a creative link between all religions. With that aim in mind, he selected four dedicated scholars. He entrusted the task of studying Islam to Bhai Girish Chandra Sen (1835–1910). Being proficient in Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic, Urdu and Bengali, Girish Chandra was suitable enough to translate Kesab Sen's syncretistic ideas into a reality. By preparing the ground for comparative religious studies, Kesab Sen and his associates wanted to promote a better understanding between different communities especially the Hindus and Muslims.[32] The temperament of celebrating the composite culture was very important in a plural society like India. However, that positive trend faced and is still facing stiff challenges from different quarters. But that is another story.

Hindu and Brahmo scholars who had knowledge about Islamic theology did not necessarily share the attitude of Muslim theologians. Hindus and Buddhists who embraced Islam in Bengal, carried with them many un-Islamic beliefs and practices. Muslim reformists during the nineteenth century wanted to purge Islam of its un-Islamic practices through the process of Islamisation. It was also necessary to ensure community solidarity among the Bengal Muslims. But due to the paucity of Bengali books on Islam and Islamic history, this problem could not be solved during the nineteenth century. The only channel through which the basic tenets of Islam and Islamic history could be conveyed to the illiterate or semi-literate agrarian Muslims of Bengal was the Imam of the rural mosque. Many imams were not capable enough to perform that task. Under such circumstances, Muslim theologians and writers during the nineteenth century put emphasis on the spread of Islamic ideals and Islamic history among the Muslim masses. They were more interested to familiarize the common Muslims in Bengal with the basic tenets of Islam as prescribed in the Quran and Hadith. They showed little or

31   Dey, A., *supra* note 6, Chapters 2 and 3.
32   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 4.

no interest in the spread of comparative religious studies. So it is not surprising that when Rammohun Roy's Persian treatise "*Tuhfatul – Muahhidin*" (Meaning '*Gift to the Monotheists*') appeared in 1804, it had no significant impact on contemporary educated Muslim society.[33]

In this booklet, Rammohun expressed his views by citing from the Quran and the hadith. Since he was proficient in Persian and Arabic languages, he could delve deep into Islamic theology. As a rationalist thinker he could not accept the views of those who claim infallibility for their own religion and denounce other religions which do not hold similar views on certain issues. He pointed out that their forefathers, like other human beings, could also have committed mistakes. Roy argued that no religion is infallible. He observed that lack of rationalism breeds fanaticism, malice and hatred and vehemently criticized those who carry out homicide or persecution in the name of religion. Roy's religious ideas, especially his discussion on Islamic theology clearly revealed that he analyzed religion from liberal, humanistic and rationalistic perspectives.[34]

In 1884 Maulvi Obeidullah translated Rammohun's *Tuhfatul-Muahiddin* from original Persian into English. Jyotirindra Nath Das translated it into Bengali from that English version in the year 1949.[35] Apparently during the nineteenth century, there was hardly any effort on the part of the Bengal Muslims to translate it into Bengali to make it accessible to the Bengali Muslim population. It confirms the claim of historian Amalendu De that the educated Muslims of Bengal in general were disinterested in comparative theological discourses during the nineteenth century. They did not appreciate Roy's rationalistic, humanistic and eclectic approach to theological studies.[36]

Amiruddin Bosunia's effort to translate the Quran prior to Bhai Girish Chandra's endeavour has been mentioned earlier. Attention of the Bengali Muslim writers was drawn towards Amiruddin's partial translation of the Quran in *do-bhashi* Bengali from the beginning of the twentieth century. They praised Amiruddin for his efforts. In the religious gatherings (*Majlis*) of nineteenth century, knowledge about Islam used to be imparted to the Bengali Muslim masses in that poetical *do-bhashi* style. So it is not surprising that Amiruddin's translation of the *Ampara* section of the Quran in that style created ripples in Bengali Muslim society and for a long time his partial translation of the Quran and his *tafsir*s enriched the genre of Bengali Muslim religious literature. Partial translation of the Quran in *do-bhashi* Bengali during the late 1860s by Ghulam Akbar Ali and Mir Waheed Ali respectively, further strengthened that process. Ghulam Akbar Ali included many Arabic and Persian words in his poetical work.[37]

Interestingly, unlike other Muslim communities in the world, the Bengali Muslims have retained both their language and script in spite of being Islamized. At the same time this process of incorporating Persian and Arabic words converged with Bengali Muslims quest for Islamic identity. Even today, the percentage of Arabic and Persian words is

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33   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 4.
34   *Ibid.*
35   *Ibid.*
36   *Ibid.*
37   *Ibid.*, p. 6.

much higher in the Bengali language prevalent in predominantly Muslim Bangladesh than that of West Bengal which has a dominant Hindu population. Mir Waheed Ali's partial translation of the Quran in versical form provides useful information about contemporary Muslim psyche, beliefs and practices. We gather form this work that during the nineteenth century, many superstitious beliefs and practices engulfed Bengali Muslim society. Many pseudo *alim*s (plural Ulama) were spreading many beliefs and practices which had nothing to do with shariat.[38] In the year 1872, Nasiruddin Ahmad's *Niama-i-Khuda* (Gift of God) was published which included discussions on some particular *surah*s. Six years later, Kari Nasiruddin and Sadiq Ali jointly wrote a book entitled *Jeenatul Kari* which was published from Jessore (now a district in Bangladesh). It is actually an instruction relating to the recitation of the Quran. In 1879, the first volume of Quran-Sharif was published in Bengali. That partial translation of the Quran was done by Rajendranath Mitra.[39]

This is the history of Quran-centred literature in Bengali prior to the publication of Bhai Girish Chandra Sen's Bengali Quran. Execepting the scholarly translation of the Quran into Bengali by Girish Chandra, all other Quran related works in Bengali as mentioned above, clearly indicate that the initiative relating to the translation of the entire Quran from original Arabic into Bengali was lacking. The same was true about Hadith literature. As a result, proper knowledge about classical Islam or Islamic history did not prevail in Bengali Muslim society. Many of these writers also tried to secure their material interest by spreading superstitious beliefs and fanaticism among the Bengali Muslim masses. In a near recent work on the subject, Muhammad Mujibur Rahman argues: "In order to make money, some staunch *mullah*s tried to popularize their books among the innocent Bengali Muslim masses by including fantastic and imaginary stories in their works which were hardly in tune with the shariat".[40]

Bengali Muslims became familiar with the entire Quran through Girish Chandra's translation and its popularity was confirmed by the three consecutive editions. The efforts of translating the Quran into Bengali prose and verses were accentuated by the publication of Girish Chandra's Bengali Quran. The Christian missionaries also took the initiative of translating the Quran into Bengali. In doing so, their principal motive was to strengthen their proselytizing activities by establishing the superiority of Christianity as compared to Islam. Under such circumstances, Bengali translations of the Quran done by the Christian missionaries were not appreciated by the Bengal Muslims.[41] A section of the Bengal Muslims even became suspicious about Girish Chandra's motive behind the Quran translation. Since many Muslims purchased his Bengali Quran, he could recover the money which he invested for its printing and advertisement. He was accused of giving the copyright of his Bengali Quran and the money which he gained by its sale, to the Nababidhan Brahmo Samaj (an association of the Brahmos or Hindu monotheists). Some Muslims went to the extent of claiming that the money which he gained by the

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38   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 6.
39   *Ibid.*, p. 6, 7. Also Rahman, M. M. *Bangla Bhashai Quran charcha*. Dhaka, 1986, p. 494−95.
40   Rahman, M. M., *supra* note 39, p. 492; Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 7.
41   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 7; Rahman, M. M., *supra* note 39, Chapter IV.

sale of the Bengali Quran among Muslims, was actually spent to spread Brahmo ideas. As a result some Bengali Muslims became Brahmos. A few Muslim essayists tried their best to expose some defects in Girish Chandra's Bengali translation of the Quran. Of course some others hailed him as a pioneer in the field as has been discussed earlier. But by the end of the nineteenth century, some Bengali Muslims became very sceptical about the efforts of the non-Muslims to translate the Quran into Bengali. They feared that the main purpose behind such translation activities was to distort the essence of the Quran in the translated version.[42] Hindu revivalism during the nineteenth century and competitive spirituality expressed by the Christian missionaries, particularly those engaged in translating the Quran, were largely responsible for this Muslim scepticism. Under such circumstances, there were efforts within the Bengali Muslim society to protect the Muslim masses from the influence of the Brahmo Samajists, Arya Samajists and the Christian missionaries. In that context it was also natural of the Bengal Muslims to rely more and more on the Bengali translation of the Quran done by the Muslims themselves.[43]

So far as the Bengali translation of the Quran by the Mulsims is concerned, Maulana Muhammad Nayemuddin (1838-1908) played a pioneering role. Mahmud Ali Khan Panni, the landlord of Korotia, and Syed Nawab Ali Chowdhuri, the landlord of Dhonbari patronized the development of a Quran-centred piety, Islamic culture and Islamic literature in the Bengali Muslim society. After receiving the patronage of the landlord of Korotia, Muhammad Nayemuddin began to translate the Quran into Bengali. Three volumes of his translated Quran were published in 1887, 1889 and 1891 respectively. Later on, Nayemuddin's endeavour inspired many other Bengali Muslim writers to translate the Quran and to publish *tafsir* literature in Bengali. Side by side mosque-centric imams and madrassah based ulama made sincere efforts to familiarize the Bengali Muslim masses with the basic tenets of Islam in tune with the Quran and Hadith. Indefatigable Muslim preachers such as Munshi Meherullah of Jessore,

Sheikh Zamiruddin of Nadia, and Maulana Anisuddin Ahmad played a significant role in frustrating the proselytizing activities of the Christian missionaries so far as the Bengali Muslim society was concerned. A section of the conservative Muslim writers in Bengal formed a group which was popularly known as the *Sudhakar* Group. It was so named because its mouthpiece was a vernacular weekly paper the *Sudhakar* (The Moon).[44] In order to protect the Bengali Muslim masses from the preachings of the Christian missionaries, Brahmos and the Arya Samajists, Muslim writers belonging to the *Sudhakar* Group published pamphlets and wrote essays. In other parts of India too, Muslims reacted in a similar fashion against the activities of the Christian missionaries and the Arya Samajis. In Bengal, the Christian missions expressed their hostility towards Islam by circulating numerous anti-Islamic pamphlets and vernacular Quran.[45]

42   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 7−8; Rahman, M. M., *supra* note 39, p. 495.

43   Dey, A., *ibid.*, p. 8; Rahman, M. M., *ibid.*, p. 493−494.

44   Dey, A., *ibid.*, p. 8; Dey, A., *supra* note 6, Chapters 2 and 3.

45   Dey, A., *ibid.*, p. 8, 9.

There is no doubt that the proliferation of anti-Islamic propaganda literature was possible due to the optimum utilization of printing technology by the Christian missionaries in nineteenth century Bengal.[46] In order to counter that theoretical assault on Islam, Maulana Abu Muhammad Abdul Haq Haqqani (1850-1915) published *tafsir* in Urdu. No other book in those days could challenge the anti-Islamic propaganda literature with so much zeal. So it is not surprising that the *Sudhakar* Group got the *Muqaddima* section of Haqqani's *tafsir* translated into Bengali. It was published in 1888 under the title *Eslam Tattva ba Mussalman Dharmer Sarsangraha* (Essence of Islam). That publication was possible due to the collective efforts of a few learned Muslims in Bengal. Initially, Muhammad Reyazuddin Ahmad took the responsibility of editing it. Later on Maulana Ahiduddin and Sheikh Abdur Rahim (1859-1931) became involved in the process of editing that book. So far as its Bengali translation was concerned, Pundit Reyazuddin Ahmad Mashadi (1859-1918) also played a significant role. The Book *Eslam Tattva* made important contributions to the process of Islamization and the development of community solidarity among the Bengal Muslims. In this context it is useful to remember that efforts were also made to establish the superiority of Islam as compared to other religions. Bengali translations from Haqqani's *tafsir* was serialized in Sufi Madhu Mian edited monthly "*Pracharak*" (Preacher) with the purpose of proving the superiority of Islam in the hierarchy of religions. Eventually, those serialized translations could be published in the form of a book (1901). In order to translate Haqqani's *tafsir*, Sufi Madhu Mian received the active cooperation of Maulana Muhammad Moniruzzaman Islamabadi (1874-1950). In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Haqqani's *tafsir* became a handy weapon in the hands of the ulama to combat the anti-Islamic propaganda of the Christian missionaries. That translation created a fertile ground for the emergence of a shariat – centred piety in colonial Bengal.[47] Sufi Miajan Kamali translated from one Urdu book to publish his Bengali book entitled *Quran o Hadither Byakhya* (Interpreting the Quran and Hadith) in the year 1893. In that endeavour, he received the patronage of the Muslim landlord of Korotia. Bengali Muslims became so conscious about the Quran during the late nineteenth century that if there was any objectionable element in the translated version of the Holy Book, it was immediately and inevitably followed by strong protests from the Bengali Muslim society, for example, in 1891, when Philip Biswas' translated Quran was published, the Muslim community vehemently criticized it. Eventually the British Indian Government was forced to confiscate the book. How the Bengali Muslims gradually became conscious about their religion in the second half of the nineteenth century was reflected in various essays which were published in contemporary Bengali periodicals and also in the efforts to translate and understand the Quran.[48]

A few educated Muslims in Bengal who had leadership potentials, established many associations in the nineteenth century for the uplift of Muslims who constituted

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46   *Supra* note 6, Chapters 2 and 3.

47   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 9.

48   *Ibid*., p. 9, 10; Rahman, M. M., *supra* note 39, p. 98, 101−102.

a backward community in Bengal.[49] Muslim theologians, writers and influential government officials expected their community to take the advantage of "New Learning" (Western education) to ensure material progress. At the same time they were keen to consolidate the Islamic base of their community. They had the example of "Young Bengal Movement" before them. After being exposed to Western education, a group of young Hindus became ultra radicals and turned hostile towards traditional Hinduism. Muslim leaders in nineteenth century Bengal did not want young Muslims to emulate the "Young Bengal Group". They strongly believed that western education and religiosity should coexist in Muslim society and acted accordingly. There was also a realization among a section of the Muslim intelligentsia that apart from following the Quran and hadith, the base for studying *ijma* and *qiyas* should be expanded.[50] However, the question of *ijtihad* did not receive adequate attention in the Muslim society of colonial Bengal.[51] In medieval India, the political prowess of Islam was not threatened by the advent of Western political dominance. Under such circumstances a section of the Muslim intelligentsia felt relaxed enough to rely on *ijtihad* or experimentation. In that environment of extensive and intensive religious (Islamic in our case) studies, there was a growth of Islam – centric liberalism, humanism and rationalism, that was conducive to the development of healthy intercommunity relationships.[52] Examples from medieval Indian history confirm the fact that even after remaining faithful to one's own religion, a person can show respect to other religions as well. By putting emphasis on comparative theological studies, some thinkers in medieval India even tried to remove the ignorance of the common people. Instead of reviving this rich tradition, Bengal Muslims, in general, tried to establish the supremacy of Islam in the sphere of religions during the nineteenth century. Their prime concern was to save the Muslim society form the influence of other religions. It is in this context that the evolution of Muslim psyche in colonial Bengal should be studied.[53]

A considerable section of the Indian Muslim population continued to identify themselves as a distinct community even in the early twentieth century. The Quran was still being translated into Bengali during the early twentieth century. However, the advent of Muslim League in 1906, and the politicization of Bengal Muslims in the 1920s and 30s as shown in Gour Kishore Ghosh's famous novel, *Prem Nei*, provided a new context for that translation process which can well be a part of another long essay.[54]

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49   Dey, A., *supra* note 6, Chapters 2 and 3.

50   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 11. Ijma – "The consensus of religious scholars … on a subject not directly ruled upon in the Quran." Qiyas – Analogical reasoning in tune with the principles of rules given in Quran or hadith. Maqsood, R. W. *A Basic Dictionary of Islam*. New Delhi, 1998 (rpt. 2000), p. 103, 176.

51   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 12. Ijtihad – "The exercise of reason in order to try to find an appropriate ruling on a matter not directly ruled upon in the Quran." Maqsood, R. W., *ibid.*, p. 103.

52   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 12. How Ijtihad gradually lost its importance in colonial India has been discussed in Muzaffar Alam's *The Languages of Political Islam in India*. New Delhi, 2004.

53   Dey, A. Banglay Quran, *supra* note 4, p. 12.

54   *Ibid.*; Dey, A., *supra* note 6, Chapters 2 and 3.

Conclusion

The present essay analyses the impact of printing technology of Bengali Muslim society with particular reference to the translation of the Quran into Bengali. The publication of religious literature in general and translated Quran in particular received the patronage of influential Muslim individuals, that has been studied in the context of Pan-Islamism in Bengal. The busy and emerging educated Muslim middle-class which increasingly came under the spell of individualism, preferred to have direct access to religious literature in the form of Bengali Quran, *tafsir* or *sirat* instead of approaching them through the ulama and Sufis. This active interest in religion or printed religious literature culminated in the emergence and sustenance of a Quran – centred as well as Prophet – centred piety in Bengal which has been discussed in the broader context of Islamization.

Islam's traditional emphasis on the oral transmission of religious knowledge was responsible for the delayed acceptance of printing technology in Muslim society. Eventually, during the nineteenth century, when the Christian missionaries, the Brahmos and the Neo-Hindus were spreading their respective ideas through printed literature, the Bengal Muslims, like their co-religionists elsewhere in India accepted printing technology to survive in that era of religious competition. Acceptance of printing technology led to a change in the transmission of knowledge from sound to sight.

Ashraf Muslims in Bengal, who could generally communicate with each other in Persian and Urdu, considered the translation of the Quran from original Arabic into Bengali as a *be-shara* act. So it is not surprising that the Bengal Muslims had to wait till the second half of the nineteenth century for the first complete translation of the Quran from original Arabic into Bengali which was carried out by a non-Muslim, Bhai Girish Chandra Sen. Later on many Muslim writers tried to emulate Girish Chandra so far as translation of the Quran and *tafsir* literature into Bengali was concerned. However, their purpose behind such initiative was quite different. Through such endeavours, they tried to establish the supremacy of Islam as compared to other religions, whereas the eclectic mind of the Brahmo scholar Girish Chandra aspired to explore the commonalities among different religions with the purpose of creating a common platform for comparative theological studies. This syncretistic trend which earlier received the patronage of Prince Dara Shukoh, Raja Rammohun Roy and the charismatic Brahmo leader Keshab Chandra Sen, was not appreciated by an influential section of India's Muslim population which later on culminated in the emergence of separatism in Indian society and polity. Rise of Hindu radicalism during the twentieth century also contributed to the failure of that eclectic experimentation which aimed at strengthening India's composite culture.

Our study of print and Quran translation enables us to trace the evolution of Muslim psyche in nineteenth century India, and particularly Bengal. In the context of the political dominance of the West, Bengal Muslims, like their co-religionists elsewhere, were prepared to accept western learning only for material uplift. Vernacularization of scriptures and their proliferation through the press were meant for reaching out to the Muslim masses to secure community solidarity in the face of new challenges. Unlike

Rammohun Roy or Keshab Sen, Muslim elite had no interest in the spirit of *ijtihad* or spiritual eclecticism.

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KORANO VERTIMAS Į BENGALŲ KALBĄ IR SPAUSDINTINĖS KULTŪROS ĮTAKA XIX A. MUSULMONIŠKAI KULTŪRAI

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Santrauka. *Socialinių mokslų tyrėjui svarbu kelti klausimus, kaip spausdinimo technika paveikė žinias, kai jų sklaida nuo garsinio kodo perėjo prie spausdintinų ženklų; kaip šis reiškinys susijęs su išsilavinusios viduriniosios klasės atsiradimu ir ar tai susiję su individualizmo užuomazgomis. Žymus istorikas F. C. R. Robinson savo knygoje „Islamas ir musulmonų istorija Pietų Azijoje" (Niu Delis, 2000) taikliai pastebėjo, jog Europos kontekste šie klausimai jau beveik atsakyti. Tačiau spausdintinė tradicija Pietų Azijos musulmonų*

visuomenėje – vis dar atvira tyrimų erdvė. Šiuo aspektu visai netirta Bengalija, kurioje gy-
vena viena didžiausių pasaulyje musulmonų bendruomenių. Bengalija išsiskiria ir dar kitu
bruožu. Bengalijos musulmonai vieninteliai musulmonai pasaulyje, kurie po islamizacijos
išlaikė ir kalbą, ir raštą. Dėl šių priežasčių Bengalijoje (neskaidant jos į dalis) verta pradėti
išsamius Pietų Azijos islamo tyrimus. Amalendu De, istorikas, pirmasis aprašė Korano verti-
mo į bengalų kalbą proceso kontekstą knygoje „Bangla Bhashai Quran Charcha“ (Kalkuta,
1999). Tačiau jo knygoje nėra įžvalgų, kaip šie vertimo bandymai susiję su spausdintinių
technologijų probrėkšmiu. Savo kruopščioje studijoje „Bangla Bhashai Quran Charcha“
(Dhaka, 1986) Muhammad Mujibur Rahman stengėsi išvardinti visus Korano vertimo į
bengalų kalbą bandymus kolonijiniu laikotarpiu. Tačiau knygą jis rašė kaip giliai tikintis
musulmonas, o nešališko istoriko pozicijos jo darbe neįžvelgiame. Jis neatsižvelgė ir į spausdi-
nimo tradiciją musulmoniškoje Bengalijoje XIX a. Šis straipsnis siekia užpildyti šioje srityje
susiformavusią spragą.

Straipsnyje susitelkiama į antrą XIX šimtmečio pusę, kai ėmė formuotis išsilavinęs vi-
durinysis musulmoniškosios bendruomenės sluoksnis. Atsiradus spausdinimo galimybėms, tuo
pat metu Bengalijos musulmonai ėmė versti Koraną iš jo originalo kalbos – arabų – į benga-
lų. Todėl autorius ir pasirinko analizei XIX a., kuris Indijoje vadinamas debatų ir diskursų
amžiumi.

Straipsnis dviejų dalių. Pirmoje aprašoma spausdinimo technologijų pritaikymo pra-
džia, naudojimas ir įtaka Bengalijos musulmonų bendruomenėje pateikiant ir platų istorinį
kontekstą. Kitoje dalyje aprašoma Korano vertimas į bengalų kalbą ir jo svarba.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: *Korano vertimas į bengalų kalbą, spausdintinės kultūros įtaka,*
Bengalijos musulmonų vidurinioji klasė, devynioliktas šimtmetis.

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