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Review: 'Recasting the Region: Language, Culture and Islam in Colonial Bengal'

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Recasting the Region: Language, Culture and Islam in Colonial Bengal. By Neilesh Bose. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014. xix, 324pp. Rs. 1195(cloth)

The origins and growth of Bengali Muslim identity have been the center of several studies till date. Most have concentrated on the politics of Muslim separatism in the 1930s with the politicization of the eastern Bengal's peasantry and subsequent support for the Pakistan Movement. Neilesh Bose, in his *Recasting the Region: Language Culture and Islam in Colonial Bengal* shifts focus from politics to the Bengali literary sphere where Bengali Muslim intellectuals created a particular regional identity distinct from both mainstream Urdu Muslim and Hindu Bengali culture. This particular Bengali Muslim identity, Bose argues, was produced and established through writings of well known Muslim writers and activists, in Bengali language journals published and read in both Dacca and Calcutta but also in the *mofussils*, and through the functions of literary civic societies. Bengali identity that thus emerged in late colonial India was based not exclusively on religion but also on language and region.

The book is divided into six chapters, which attempt to re-periodize the familiar markers of 1905, 1947 and 1971 in understanding Bengal's colonial and Pakistan's post-colonial histories. Thus chapter one begins in 1911 with the establishment of the *Bengali Muslim Sahitya Samaj*, the first literary society for Bengali Muslims. This society clearly marked a shift within Bengali literary history as its members moved away from writing for a 'multi-religious Bengali reading public' to focusing on issues of social improvement of the Muslims in Bengal. In his second chapter Bose focuses on writers such as Kazi Nazrul Islam, who combined Bengali regionalism and Islamic universalism with ideas of social justice and Muzaffar Ahmad, a well-known communist and literary figure, to

establish the contours of this shift. Intellectual debates about Islam, identity, social justice continue into the mid 1920s with the establishment of the *Muslim Sahitya Samaj*, an organization primarily composed of writers, professors and students of Dacca University. These intellectuals, as Bose shows in his third chapter, offered a rational critique of Islam, assessed both Islamic texts and rituals and pondered on the connections between Islam and Socialism. He argues “Though the MSS and the mere presence of Dacca University represented an advance in educational activities by and about Bengali Muslims, the baggage of backwardness remained in the thought-worlds of Bengali Muslim writers” (113). This chapter is the most ambitious one in this book in its attempt to incorporate, along with the intellectual world of Dacca and Calcutta, the literary spheres in the *mofussils* which produced texts such as *Muslim Jati Tattva* (Muslim National Pride). Yet Bose hints at, rather than examine in detail, the tensions and connections between the urban centers and the peripheral literary worlds and leaves us wondering about their possible engagements.

Language, rather than Islam framed the conversations about cultural identity amongst Muslim Bengali intellectuals. Their project, Bose shows in chapter four was not to claim difference from the Hindu literati but to claim for themselves a separate but equal share in Bengali literary culture. Thus while intellectuals like Abdul Karim Sahityabisharad collected *punthis* (manuscripts) and attempted to recreate a Muslim literary past, other intellectuals like Abul Mansur Ahmed and Abul Kalam Shamsuddin emphasized “elements of a distinctiveness which included a highly particular focus on a Muslim social identity as a constituent part of Bengali Muslim identity, and therefore, greater Bengali identity.”(160)

In his last two chapters, Bose connects the regional, linguistic and religious identity with the rapidly changing political context of the demand for Pakistan. Here he argues that intellectuals such as Ahmed and Abul Hashim generated a Bengali version of the Pakistan demand, based on both religious identity and demands for social justice. Thus it is not surprising, that immediately after the creation of East Pakistan, there would be continued demands for Bengali Muslim linguistic and cultural autonomy which saw itself separate from Pakistan.

This is an important study of the contours of Bengali literary sphere in colonial Bengal. However I would like to point out two missed opportunities in Bose's analysis. First, the lack of a theoretical framework that examines the particularities of the colonial, post-colonial and Muslim public spheres limits the book to being an exposition, albeit an impressive feat in itself, of the works of Muslim intellectuals. Second, Bose's discussion is specifically focused on a male literary sphere even though evidence suggests that Muslim women, such as Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein, Mahmuda Khatun Siddiqua and Sufia Kamal to name a few, were writing in some of the same magazines and were concerned with similar issues. This aside, *Recasting the Region* provides a comprehensive and cohesive narrative of Bengali literary culture, and fills a much-needed gap within the scholarship and our understandings of the development of linguistic nationalism in this region.

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