

**Re-writing South Asian History:
*Identifying the Problems with particular
reference to Bangladesh***

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The colonial legacy in the ‘history’ of South Asia cannot be denied but its reproduction in South Asia, including Bangladesh, is a complex and a profound one. Three sets of issues have come to inform and influence the post-colonial South Asian historiography. Firstly, South Asia has come to nurture several versions of history, mostly in the name of ‘national history,’ which, while glorifying the deeds of the majority section of the people, have tended to alienate many other nationalities and sub-nationalities, including the minorities, both within and beyond the national boundaries. Secondly, the plurality that exists within each and every country of South Asia has given rise to ‘histories’ which at times border on religious aspirations, at times on ethnic aspirations, at times on linguistic aspirations, at times also on a combination of them, and this despite the attempt at secularizing or decommunalizing the aspirations of the people in terms of political and economic demands. Thirdly, and this is a combination of the first two, the quest for ‘reason’ has been passionately pursued by all sections of people, mainly to arrive at the ‘modern,’ but interestingly all ended up in one way or other reproducing the ‘reason of the state’ often with consequences contradictory to ‘reason’ itself. It is in the light of the above three issues that problems relating to the task of re-writing South Asian history would be taken up, albeit with particular reference to Bangladesh.

The search for reason has been a key quest in modernity and the modernist discourse. Ever since Rene Descartes came up with his ingenuous formulation: *cogito ergo sum*, ‘I think, therefore I am’ (1637), there has been no turning back to human’s quest to reason each and every phenomenon on earth and when possible in matters related to heaven as well. But Cartesianism attracted many a mind craving for unrestrained

freedom, some even challenging the divine and all the paraphernalia related to the latter, including the Church. In fact, Benedict de Spinoza, again basing on reason and bordering on something akin to rational pantheism, went on to claim: “Nature is self-moving, and creates itself.” It did not take long for the critics, particularly the Church, to denounce Spinoza as “the prince of atheists, Christendom’s chief foe, the new Mahomet.” His Jewish background also unleashed a wave of anti-Semitic attack on him, particularly with the publication of *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in 1670, which was quickly dubbed as an instrument “forged in hell by a renegade Jew and the devil.” The roots of modern or post-Enlightenment anti-Semitism could otherwise be found in the very unfolding of reason during the early period of Enlightenment or what is now commonly referred to as the period of ‘radical Enlightenment.’

But the radicalism brought forth by Spinoza and a host of Spinozists needed to be tamed. Faith in the divine, if not on the Church, needed to be restored for the sake of societal stability and the power of the state. The person who could applaud ‘human reason’ without displacing the place of ‘belief’ was none other than the German philosopher and a Lutheran, Immanuel Kant. In 1784 he made a stunning submission:

Sapere aude! ‘Have courage to use your own reason!’- that is the motto of enlightenment.

That is, it is not enough just to have ‘reason,’ as the Cartesian dictum suggested, but one must also have the ‘courage’ to use one’s reason. His submission otherwise reaffirmed his earlier contention outlined in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) that ‘knowledge’ alone is not enough, there ought to be ‘room for belief’ in order to nurture and reproduce a moral dimension of freedom, immortality and religious fulfilment for man. Belief in the ‘existence of God and a future life,’ to which Kant remained firmly committed throughout his life, was brought back to the modernist discourse through the power of human reason itself. This was indeed a marked departure from the advocacy of ‘reason’ espoused by the scholars of radical Enlightenment.

Let me at this stage make a slight but relevant digression to further clarify the place of reason in the modernist discourse. Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), the Islamic ‘Sufi’ scholar who earned the honor of *al-Shaykh al-Akbar*, ‘The Greatest Master,’ pondered

exactly on the issue that brought Kant the much-acclaimed fame in the eighteenth century. According to Ibn Arabi, 'reason is innately constituted to set up distinctions and differentiations' and therefore the rational thinkers end up 'dissecting reality such that they lose sight of the underlying unity of all things.' This however could be overcome, to follow Ibn Arabi further on this, by perceiving God's presence in all things through a process of 'unveiling,' the latter 'rooted primarily in imagination.' That is, 'true knowledge depends upon seeing all things with both the eye of imagination and the eye of reason.' Kant too saw the limits of reason and went on to point out that the belief in 'God, freedom and immortality' cannot be rationalized: "I therefore had to annul *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*." Reality for Kant then becomes inclusive of the world of both phenomenon and noumenon.

That the post-radical Enlightenment, particularly of the Kantian version, would base its understanding of reason on Islamic scholarship was too much of an idea for the post-theocratic 'enlightened' Europeans to digest. Two outcomes could easily be identified. Firstly, by the end of the eighteenth century a greater emphasis was given to the issue of *Sapare aude!* 'Have courage to use your own reason!' - without of course referring to the obvious that the 'courage' be used to bring back 'faith,' and for all practical matter the Christian ethos, into the Enlightenment and the modernist discourse. Modernity since the Kantian intervention no longer championed the cause of 'doubting' to the point of nurturing Spinozism or something bordering on atheism but had 'reason' and 'faith' conjointly informing and shaping the quest with the former itself making room for the latter. Kant is very explicit on this issue:

Solely by means of critique can we cut off, at the very root, *materialism*, *fatalism*, *atheism*, freethinking *lack of faith*, *fanaticism*, and *superstition*, which can become harmful universally; and finally, also *idealism* and *skepticism*, which are dangerous mainly to the schools and cannot easily cross over to the public. If governments do indeed think it proper to occupy themselves with the concerns of scholars, they should promote the freedom for such critique, by which alone the works of reason can be put on a firm footing.

Interestingly, the Kantian intervention not only suggests a place for 'faith' but also an active role on the part of the government to 'promote' such a thing. This was not

difficult to suggest in the light of the prevailing practices in Europe. In fact, in England, following Pope Clement VII's refusal to approve the annulment of King Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, the English Parliament, at Henry's insistence and through a series of acts not only separated the English church from the Roman hierarchy but also made the English monarch the head of the English church in 1534. The practice continues to this day. In France also the debate was on during Kant's lifetime and in 1790, following the French Revolution, the Catholic church was nationalized and brought under the control of the government. Indeed, the modern separation of religion and state, no doubt, a critical product of the Enlightenment, also saw the governmentalization of the Church, with the government incidentally carrying at times the burden of the latter!

But more importantly, at least for our discussion, the search for 'reason' came to be understood as very specific to the Enlightenment and the modernist discourse, including the place of Europe itself, and therefore lacking in other religions and cultures, particularly Islam and the non-European world. When it comes to Islam the Orientalists needed to be credited in large measure. By the end of the eighteenth century the Orientalists started dividing the Islamic scholarship into 'core Islamic thought' based on the practices of Muslim rulers predisposed to 'harsh legalism' and the 'abstract mystical philosophy' of Sufism 'indifferent to matters of religious law,' with the latter suggestively having 'an external origin in India or elsewhere'.¹ A key Orientalist, Lt. James William Graham, went to the extent of saying that the Indian subjects in fact regard the British as Sufis:

We are, generally speaking, at least in this country, looked upon as a species or one kind of *Sufi*, from our non-observance here of any rites or forms, conceiving a worship of the Deity in mind and adherence to morality sufficient. In fine, the present free-thinker or modern philosopher of Europe would be esteemed as a sort of Sufi in the world, and not the one retired therefrom.²

The idea was mainly to isolate Sufism from Islam to the point of making the latter thoroughly apathetic if not opposed to reason and free thinking. This had profound implications for the people of both Islamic and non-Islamic world. Islam in the modern West came to be understood as devoid of reason, while the followers of Islam, often naively if not shamelessly agreeing to the Western categorization of Islam, saw

modernity as anti-Islamic. Only now with post-structuralism advocating the limits of reason do we find a renewed interest in the Islamic scholarship in the West. In fact, often a parallel is now made between Ibn Arabi's understanding of 'Real' and Jacques Derrida's understanding of 'différance,' both trying to free their respective word/concept from the 'shackles of reason'.³ But the parcellized understanding of Islam already took its toll in the colonial world, including Bengal.

Islamic revivalism in Bengal during the colonial period came more as a reaction to the Western domination. The core message of various revival movements in the nineteenth century was a return to an authentic version of Islam, an authenticity now defined in terms of the 'external' – the Arab culture and tradition. This is particularly prominent in the anti-colonial, but no less Islamic, movements of the 1820s, for instance, the *Faraidi* movement led by Shariat Ullah and the *Tariqah i Muhammadiyah* movement led by Titu Mir.⁴ Shariat Ullah studied Islam for ten years in Mecca and was influenced by Wahhabism, a puritan movement developed by Abdul Wahhab [1703-1792] in the Arabia.⁵ Shariat Ullah's son, Dudu Miyan, took a more militant approach in reviving Islam. He confronted the Hindu *zamindars* against their ruthless exploitation of the largely converted Muslim peasants. The *Faraidi* movement even denounced the Pirs (cult of the saints) and criticized the latter as contrary to Islam. It may be mentioned that the term *Faraidi*, derived from the Arabic *faraid*, the plural of *farida*, signified obligations commanded in Islam. In setting its goal for Islamic revivalism, the *Faraidi* leaders underlined five foundations of Islam: *Kalima* (the doctrine of the uniqueness of God), *Salat* (prayer), *Roza* (fasting), *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca) and *Zakat* (tax for the poor).⁶ This practically led to the separation of 'spiritualism [*roohaniyat*], mysticism [*tassawuf*] and piety [*taqwa*]' from what may be called 'ritualistic formalism' or 'legalism' in the understanding of Islam.⁷ In some cases this has reduced Islam, as Eqbal Ahmad used to say, "to a penal code and its history to a series of violent episodes."⁸ Islam in the nineteenth century colonized Bengal, for that matter, was different from the Islam of the relatively autonomous Bengal of the thirteenth century. Not only did the British redefine the meaning of Islam by keeping Sufism at bay but also the Islamic revival movements, aided no less by the doctrine of Wahhabism, constructed a highly formalized version of Islam devoid of spiritualism, piety and mysticism. In the field of education this had a

devastating impact in so far as the ‘history’ of the (Muslim or Bengali Muslim) people was concerned.

In the first place there was the deliberate displacement of the *madrasahs*, the Islamic educational institutions, in favour of modern secular education during the colonial period. This consisted not only in the forcible closure of some of the known *madrasahs* under the direction of the British⁹ but also the stopping of *maadat-e-maash* (allowances in the form of land grants) and the confiscation of *lakheraj* (rent free lands of the *madrasahs*) and making them rental, which practically contributed to the closing down of the *madrasahs* in large numbers in the nineteenth century. It may be mentioned that the first *madrasah* in Bengal was established by Sheikh Sharfuddin Abu Tawama in the middle of the thirteenth century at a place called Mograpara in Sonargaon near Dhaka, which later attained the status of what would now be an university but fell into decline following the British domination of Bengal.¹⁰

No less befitting however was the rendering of modern education in Bengal. The Enlightenment and the modernist discourse have already placed Islam, both as religion and civilization, in the medieval period. South Asian history came to be chronologized (interestingly by a person in the name of James Stuart Mill who never visited South Asia!) into ‘ancient,’ ‘medieval’ and ‘modern’ with the Hindus, Muslims and the British (or by implication, the Christians) corresponding to them respectively.¹¹ Muslims attending the modern educational institutions and tutored in modernity felt humiliated and sought the replacement of it by an authentic version of Islam, ironically to situate Islam and by implication themselves at the top! The governmentalization of education in post-colonial Bangladesh further contributed to the reproduction of this self-consciousness, which often slipped into being something of a self-righteousness of the Muslims.

Secondly, the colonial power established ‘modern’ *madrasahs*, indeed, modeled very much on its parcellized understanding of Islam, which further created grounds for dissension and conflict both within and outside the community. Guided by the colonial government and headed by a European, the Calcutta Alia Madrasah (established in 1781) set a new trend in the *madrasah* education in Bengal. It favored teaching Muslim law and jurisprudence rather than an all-round education of the Muslims. It may be mentioned

that the Calcutta Alia Madrasah was originally meant for the training of the British officials sent to administer colonial India. Only later did the colonial government allow the Muslim natives to study there, but then with the same intention of administering and supporting colonial India. But that is not all.

The first head Maulvi of the Madrasah, Mulla Majid-ud-Deen, while making the syllabus of Calcutta Alia Madrasah was influenced by the *dars-i Nizami* system of *madrasah* education. It may be mentioned that Majid-ud-Deen was a direct student of Mulla Nizamuddin, the founder of the *dars-i Nizami* system. The system was originally promoted during the reign of Emperor Aurangzeb, one of the most bigoted Mughal emperors. In fact, Aurangzeb not only had his father, Emperor Shahjahan, restrained within the premise of the palace but also had his eldest brother, Dara Shikoh, the heir apparent, summarily tried and killed on account of heresy. Furthermore, the exhaustive digest of Islamic Law, *Fatawa-i Alamgiri*, which was known for its harsh legalism, including 'rigid and stern' position on heresy (*kufir*) was compiled at the directive of Aurangzeb. According to one critic, "Aurangzeb's superfluous adherence to the letter of the law was a subject of many jokes among the nobles. When he was about to depute an army against rebels in the South (who were incidentally Muslims), one of the nobles remarked in his presence, 'His Majesty! Why send an army? Tell the Qazi Sahib, he may be able to crush the enemy with a *fatwa!*'"¹² In light of this it can easily be deduced that the *dars-i Nizami* system of Mulla Nizamuddin, a direct beneficiary of Aurangzeb, promoted a legalistic version of Islam mainly for reproducing the power of the state. Islamic education, including the teaching of the 'past,' 'present' and 'futures', otherwise became correlated with the reason of the state.

Instructed by Lord Hastings, Majid-ud-Deen made the syllabus giving priority to Islamic law and jurisprudence in line with the *dars-i Nizami* system. In imparting education the *madrasahs* of Bengal followed the *dars-i Nizami* system, particularly during the colonial period and also during the Pakistan period of Bangladesh. However, the government-funded *madrasahs* replaced the *dars-i Nizami* system in post-independence Bangladesh. I will have more to say about this shortly. According to the *dars-i Nizami* system, a student needed to complete his studies at the age of 17/18 to be

able to read and understand any of the ninety-nine proscribed books, which, apart from being all written in Arabic and Persian, included nothing on ‘mysticism.’

When it comes to the Bengali Muslims searching for authenticity there is hardly a difference between the modern secular education and the modern *madrasah* education imparted by the colonial power, only that the search for authenticity in the former is more sophisticated than the latter. However, a more noticeable difference is found in terms of the students getting into such education, indeed, with diminishing job prospects, a fewer of the meritorious students enter the *madrasah* education, and this includes the Qawmi *madrasahs* as well. I will have more to say about the latter shortly. Suffice to point here is that in both secular and *madrasah* educational institutions, Islam began to be understood in its legalistic version or something that is very ‘rigid and severe,’ which only helped to reproduce religious intolerance and fundamentalism. In Bangladesh often this invited violence when the post-1971 Bengali Muslims, somewhat insecure of its newly found identity and falling back on the question of authenticity, started objecting to the life and living of the non-Muslims, including the non-Sunni Muslims, the Ahmaddiyas.¹³

Madrasah education changed considerably following the independence of Bangladesh. There are now two types of *madrasahs*: Alia and Qawmi. The former offers both religious education and modern general education and is under the management of Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board (BMED), an autonomous body since 1979 but largely funded by the government.¹⁴ The Board is also responsible for establishing *madrasahs*, appointing teachers and making the curriculum for all Alia Madrasahs.¹⁵ Qawmi Madrasahs, on the other hand, are non-government or private *madrasahs*. Only last year a private body called Befaqul Mudarressin of Bangladesh Qawmi Madrasah Education Board was formed to coordinate the education of all Qawmi Madrasahs. It may be mentioned that in 1971 there were approximately 1,351 Madrasahs with 300,000 students in Bangladesh. Currently there are 25,201 Alia Madrasahs with 3 million students and 8,000 Qawmi Madrasahs.¹⁶ There is hardly any credible information on the number of students in Qawmi Madrasahs; a guesstimate would be nearly a million.

But apart from the steep rise in the number of students in Alia Madrasahs the curriculum of the latter also changed considerably. Following the independence of

Bangladesh the Alia Madrasahs replaced the *dars-i Nizami* system in large measure and had it replaced by a curriculum prepared by the Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board. This included, apart from the teachings of Arabic, Quran, Hadith (Prophetic traditions), Aqaid (Code of Islamic religious beliefs) and Fiqh (Jurisprudence or Law of Islamic conduct), courses on Bengali, General Mathematics, Social Science, General Science and English. The sudden rise in the number of students in Alia Madrasahs could otherwise be explained from the fact that since the Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board has included all the subjects of modern secular education, save the subject of 'Fine Art,' there is now an even competition of the *madrasahs* with the former when it comes to pursuing higher education or seeking jobs in the market. Moreover, unlike the students of modern secular education, *madrasah* students have the added benefit of coming out with a religious education, and that has attracted many parents in sending their children to the *madrasahs*. But what is noteworthy is that the students of Alia Madrasahs, largely in view of the post-independence curriculum change, are now doubly informed by the 'modernist' understanding of Islam and the world. Not only does the curriculum continues to have courses predominantly on the legalistic version of Islam, like Aqaid and Fiqh, devoid of spiritualism, piety and mysticism but also continues to view Islam from the standpoint of modern history, with 'the medieval period,' as indicated earlier, as the foundation, glory and decline of Islam!¹⁷ Intolerance emerging from a doubly informed 'modernist,' particularly in the case of a Muslim, can hardly be exaggerated. Education imparted in Qawmi Madrasahs is certainly no better.

The 'democratization' of education also meant the continuation of the Qawmi Madrasahs. These *madrasahs*, as indicated earlier, are private and non-governmental and remain outside the purview of Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board. Three characteristics are very specific to the Qawmi Madrasahs. Firstly, they continue to follow the *dars-i Nizami* system or a modified version of it.¹⁸ The subjects mostly include, the memorization and recitation of Quran, Tafsir (Explanation of the Quran), Hadith and Aqaid. They also continue to teach Urdu and Farsi (Persian), although some basic introduction is now given in Bengali and English. It may be mentioned that the Alia Madrasahs focus on teaching Bengali and would not teach Urdu and Farsi as a rule.¹⁹ Secondly, Qawmi Madrasahs mainly use a subject-based system rather than a grade-

based system, and therefore there is no 'clear time-sequence' attached to its education.²⁰ In fact, some Qawmi Madrasah students end up memorizing only the Quran for several years and therefore job prospects for them become very limited. Most of them later end up teaching the Quran and basic education on Islam in *pre-primary* madrasahs called Furkania/Hafizia and Maktab/Nourani with very low salary. And finally, given that they are privately run the Qawmi Madrasahs tend to depend for their funding on local charity, commercial ventures and also the diaspora, including Muslim foundations based in the Middle East.

Let me at this stage very quickly reflect on the impact that the diaspora is having on education as it further complicates the task of re-writing South Asian history. The post-national Bangladeshi diaspora, particularly in the Middle East, could not help but be attracted to a puritan version of Islam and in turn help promote the Wahhabization of Bangladesh. Indeed, if any group that has come to aid religious education in Bangladesh in a substantial way beyond what is given by the government it is the diaspora that had once left the country in search of 'modernist' goals. The figures are revealing. In 1999 the number of primary schools stood at 65,610. This is down from 78,595 in 1996. The number of Alia Madrasahs, however, increased from 14,414 in 1989 to 25,201 in 2004.²¹ Support from the state as well as from the members of the diaspora, indeed for quite different reasons, is what is making religious education and the organization around it turn into a formidable power in the country. But this trend, albeit with different religious communities, is also evident in other South Asian countries. For instance, India Development and Relief Fund, a US charity based in Maryland, has funded organizations and people championing the cause of Hindutva for many years, which, according to some critics, has helped reproduce many of the sectarian communal violence in India.²²

Bangladesh's relationship with its diaspora is no different. I have often maintained that there are two types of Bangladeshis. One, 'good but impatient' and therefore they leave the country and join the diaspora. Two, 'bad but also impatient' and they continue to remain at home and make a mess of the country. The first category of Bangladeshis, that is, the Bangladeshi diaspora, could again be divided into two. The *relatively rich* and they end up selling or renting their properties in Bangladesh and taking the money abroad. In their case the drainage of material wealth is added to the

drainage of brain, leaving the country doubly impoverished, which only helps to reproduce the radicalism of mediocrity, including fundamentalism. The second group in the Bangladeshi diaspora is the *relatively not so rich*. They work in low paid jobs but regularly send money back home, often with a call for maintaining a strict religious code in the family, including the dress to be worn in public. This is a feature that has been found globally, from Kuwait to Kerala, Jordan to Jakarta. Given the non-commercialization of Zakat and little or no knowledge of Islamic banking opportunities, coupled with the factor of doing something noble for the homeland, the diaspora also end up sending money to mosques and *madrasahs*. In the process they end up reproducing puritanism and by implication the power of fundamentalist forces. Diaspora is now having a whole different meaning not only with respect to its role in the host country but also in terms of its relationship with the home country. I must quickly add that the power of petro-dollars and the empowered status of some of the Middle Eastern countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, made the confluence between the ‘ritualistic formalism’ of the locals, diaspora and Wahhabism all the more easy if not deadly.

A collective impact of the above characteristics can hardly be exaggerated. In fact, like the modern secular education and the modern Alia Madrasah education, the Qawmi Madrasah education tend to reproduce a ‘parcellized’ or ‘modernist’ understanding of Islam, and therefore ends up with students no less rigid and intolerant on issues of religion. But more critically, the students of Qawmi Madrasahs end up acquiring an education with a minimum level of quality and almost zero prospect in the job market. It is this condition that pushes many of its students to a militant version of Islam or fundamentalism. This however does not discount the role of modern secular education and modern Alia Madrasah education in the reproduction of ‘parcellized’ Islam and fundamentalism.

Education in Bangladesh, particularly for the Muslims, has come to be a breeding ground for Islamic militancy and fundamentalism. Students coming from all shades of education – modern secular, modern Alia Madrasah and the no less modernist but now truncated, Qawmi Madrasah – have fallen prey to fundamentalism and are involved in violent activities, possibly with some difference in the number and degree of participation. To single out the *madrasahs*, even the less qualified and poorly run Qawmi

Madrasahs, would be as wrong as putting the blame on the unemployed youth or the Muslims for all the terrorism in the world. But that the Islamic militancy in Bangladesh is informed by a precise, if not distorted, understanding of Islam remains apparent from the target of the bomb attacks. Three such targets include: religious shrines; *jatras* (folk theatre), fairs, and cinema halls; and the non-Sunni Ahmaddiyas.²³ In fact, with respect to the religious shrines, the Jamaat-e-Islam leader and a Member of Parliament, Delwar Hussain Sayeedi, once urged the members in a public gathering to ‘resist these traditions’ and to consider them as ‘*haraam* (prohibited) and anti-Islam’.²⁴ The same is the case with the *jatras*, as one activist of an Islamic militant group commented, “A jatra show...was attacked to frighten people to restrain them from staging such shows.”²⁵ And as for the Ahmaddiyas there has been mounting pressure from various Islamic groups to declare them as non-Muslims. It may be mentioned that religious activities of the Ahmaddiyas are already banned in the Middle East and since 1984 also in Pakistan, allegedly under pressure from Saudi Arabia.

One cannot rule out the Wahhabi connection or a puritan version of Islamic reformism reproducing Islamic militancy in Bangladesh. One report indicated that some of the Islamic militant groups aided no less by Indian, Pakistani and Afghan Muslims, received funds from the Middle East, including Saudi Arabia, to carry out their activities.²⁶ The limits of the state in overcoming this menace can hardly be minimized not only because the state is culpable in reproducing the parcellized understanding of Islam but also because the latter has increasingly become synonymous with the reason of the state. Put differently, it is this complex composition of things that have come to reproduce several versions of ‘history’ – secular, Alia and Qawmi, each of which at the same time found itself tainted with the will of the majority and the reason of the state. This has, in turn, helped to reproduce intolerance and conflict not only within the territorial boundaries of Bangladesh but also as a reaction across the borders in the region. But then, similar nurturing of education, including the discipline of history – secular as well as religious - is to be found in other countries of South Asia as well.

Concluding remarks: *What is to be done?*

There is no short cut to the task of re-writing South Asian history. Protracted interventions are required and that again at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels.

Three tasks could easily be identified. Firstly, linearity of thought, modern or otherwise, needs to be abandoned, and greater options ought to be made available in the understanding of 'past,' 'present' and 'futures.' Colonial modernity has created a historiography that has come to reproduce not only conflicts within the diverse groups of people in colonized societies, including Bangladesh, but also intolerance between the members of diverse civilizational quests and religious beliefs. But that is not all. Modern historiography has no other option but to define Islam, for instance, from the standpoint of the 'modern' and hence puts the followers of Islam into a dire situation of having to constantly race for a place in the 'modern.' And since this has to be done without compromising on the religious identity the race has often been in the form of reformist movements or revivalism claiming authenticity or a puritan brand of Islam. Modern historiography, in this context, is otherwise responsible for reproducing Islamic fundamentalism.

There is also the point of modern historiography, particularly in the statist narratives of World-history, making the 'person' insignificant if not invisible. The latter must now speak, act and even imagine in and through its community, which, if we are to follow Rabindranath Tagore, could only mean the loss of *antaratma* - the person's inner self.²⁷ In fact, it is this construction of (colonial or modern) historiography devoid of the person's inner self that prompted Tagore to reprimand it in the strongest words possible, "*dur hok ge tomar itihās*" (Off with your history)!²⁸ Given the primacy of 'inner self' in various religious traditions, including in what has come to be known as Sufism, there is not only greater commonality but also greater hope for creatively devising an alternative historiography, with the 'person' at the centre, and making it acceptable to a cross section of people of diverse religious faith.

Secondly, curriculum development. This has almost become a cliché by now. But the fact remains that the sponsors as well as the critics of curriculum development have always focused on the word 'curriculum' and not on the compound word, 'development.' Put differently, the development of curriculum is tied up not only with the development of the state but also with the larger developmental world-view called modernity. If the *dars-i-Nizami* system under the sponsorship of Emperor Aurangzeb vindicates the former, albeit more in the sense of reproducing the power of the Mughals, then the

British establishment of Alia Madrasah and the reintroduction of the *dars-i-Nizami* system have only helped to reproduce both colonial power and colonial modernity. The post-colonial continuation of Alia Madrasah education, particularly during the Pakistan period of Bangladesh, had the blessing of the state, and therefore it is no wonder that during the liberation war of Bangladesh many of the *madrasah* graduates were found hostile to the idea of a sovereign republic having a claim more to language than religion. But once the new state has come into being it did not take long for the latter to revamp the *madrasahs* in the light of its own requirements.

The new curriculum of BMED is a good indicator of that. While partially replacing the *dars-i-Nizami* system, the BMED curriculum continues to highlight the reason of the state, indeed, an Islamic one, only delivered this time in the vernacular (Bengali) and adding courses on modern general education. The BMED ought to be commended for having non-Muslim writers like, Tagore, Promath Choudhury, Michael Madhusudan, William Shakespeare, John Donne, even Winston Churchill, at various levels of Alia Madrasah education, but the question remains, where is Rumi, Hafez, Khayyam, or for that matter, Ibn Khaldun or the Great Master, Ibn al-Arabi? One excuse that the BMED is likely to provide is that since they are promoting Bengali and English languages having Persian or Arabic writers would not be of much help. But this would be to view language devoid of political connotations, which in the case of Bangladesh would be less attractive a proposition given that its birth and the unfolding of the nation are very much tied to language. Moreover, most of the works of Islamic ‘Sufi’ scholars are now found in both Bengali and English, at times in translations of high standard. Indeed, the ‘parcellization’ of Islam that we have referred to earlier would diminish considerably if the *madrasahs* start redesigning their curricula free from ‘harsh legalism’ and having courses on the age-old understanding of Islam based on spiritualism, piety and mysticism. There is also the problem of the Qawmi Madrasahs, because most of them continue to render education, as indicated earlier, in the *dars-i-Nizami* system or a version of it. But given its private or non-governmental structure, it has a greater chance, and this may sound somewhat ironic, of introducing a *post-modern* curriculum and making a difference to the *madrasah* education.

Finally, a thorough degovernmentalization of schools, particularly in Bangladesh, is required for the reproduction of fresh, bold and creative thinking. Since public education, both secular and religious, has become state or more precisely government education, at times, even regime-centric education, it is time that the idea of *civic* or *post-political education* be given a serious thought. There is evidently a need to overcome the majoritarianism that is so much tied up with public and governmentalized education. In fact, majoritarianism has not only come to define the core of 'national history' and has in turn alienated the minorities, both religious and linguistic, but also ended up reproducing animosities in the region, with the minorities often finding their grievances more receptive across the borders. Degovernmentalization of schools therefore ought to be encouraged at both national and regional levels.

Tagore's experience at *Shanti Niketan* is a good example of the first. Its replication at this stage, however, would require greater imagination and a serious investment in alternative ideas and structures. It may be mentioned that while Tagore's school at *Shanti Niketan* was a success the same cannot be said of his university, the *Viswa Bharati*. Education at the tertiary level is more complex and therefore is a daunting task when it comes to the issue of degovernmentalizing and making it free from majoritarianism. At the regional level, the idea of *South Asian University* with issue-based faculties spread throughout the region could be a way out. Since most of the conflicts in this region, including religious ones, have come up in the wake of our construction of the nation, there is now an urgent need to go beyond the nation and help organize a *post-national* education, including a *post-national* history. This would of course require the democratization of the senses both at national and regional levels. The task is immense, so is the challenge!

Notes & References

- ¹ Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1997), p.19.
- ² Ibid., pp.14-15.
- ³ Ian Almond, *Sufism and Deconstructionism: A comparative study of Derrida and Ibn Arabi* (London: Routledge, 2004).
- ⁴ Bernard Hours, *Islam and Development in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: Centre for Social Studies, 1995), p.11.
- ⁵ M.A. Rahim, *The Muslim Society and Politics in Bengal* (Dhaka: The Asiatic Society, 1978).
- ⁶ Razia Akhter Banu, *Islam in Bangladesh* (Leiden: IAS, 1992), p.36.
- ⁷ Eqbal Ahmad, "The Conflict Within," *Dawn*, 15 February 1998.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ A good example would be the *Madrasah-i Rahimya* of Delhi which was closed down in 1857 and the property auctioned to a Hindu raja who put up an inscription there saying: 'Madrasah Rai Bahadur Lala Ram Kishan Das.' See, Farhan Ahmad Nizami, *Madrasahs, Scholars & Saints: Muslim Response to the British Presence in Delhi and the Upper Doab 1803-1857*, Doctoral dissertation, Oxford University, 1983, p.19.
- ¹⁰ Abdalla, Amr, ANM Raisuddin and Suleiman Hussein, *Bangladesh Educational Assessment: Pre-primary and Primary Madrasah Education in Bangladesh* (Washington DC: United States Agency for International Development, 2004), p.15.
- ¹¹ James Stuart Mill, *The History of British India* (London, 1817).
- ¹² Khurram Ali Shafique, *DAWN The Review*, December, 2000, p.4.
- ¹³ Religious bigots recently declared the Ahmaddiyas 'non-Muslim' and want the government to do the same.
- ¹⁴ Parween Hasan, *Report of a Sample Survey of Madrasahs in Bangladesh* (Dhaka: The British Council, 1999).
- ¹⁵ Abdalla, *et.al.*, *op.cit.*
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ This is best exemplified in the course material on 'Islamic History' of Alia Madrasahs. See, BMEB (Bangladesh Madrasah Education Board), *Curriculum and Textbooks* (Dakhil Class IX and X), Curriculum and Textbook Wing, 2000-2005.
- ¹⁸ Sirajul Islam, *Banglapaedia* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society, 2003).
- ¹⁹ Abdalla, *et.al.*, *op.cit.*, pp.8, 16-17.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p.7.
- ²¹ Abdalla, *et.al.*, *op.cit.*, pp.2, 16.

²² J.C. Robert Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.63.

²³ See, Rosaline Costa, ed., *Growing Fanaticism and Extremism in Bangladesh: Shades of the Taliban*, Dhaka, Bangladesh Awami League, 13 February 2005, <<http://www.albd.org/aldoc/growing/growing.fanaticism.pdf%20>>. See also, Imtiaz Ahmed with Farid Ahmed Bhuiyan, "Weapons Technology and the Reconceptualization of Terrorism," in Imtiaz Ahmed, *op.cit.* I have deliberately left out the 'leftist forces,' although they have also suffered bomb attacks, mainly because the puritan version of Islamic revivalism is less clear here, not to mention the 'leftist forces' had their own share of violent in-fighting and despised by right wing secular forces as well. Opposition political parties, particularly the Awami League, also maintain that they have become targets of fundamentalist forces. Although this cannot be ruled out but it too remains less related to Islamic puritanism, and the party too faces intra-party and inter-party animosities not all of which are religious in character. But the attack on shrines, *jatras*, movie halls and the Ahmaddiyas does indicate puritan Islamism to say the least.

²⁴ Costa, *op.cit.*.

²⁵ *The Daily Star*, "JMJB attacked *jatra*, arrested activist says," 5 February 2005.

²⁶ *The Daily Star*, "Govt finally cracks down on militants," 24 February 2005.

²⁷ For a close exposition on Rabindranath Tagore's views on colonial or modern historiography, see Ranajit Guha, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.90-91.