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### A NEW KIND OF POLITICS; GAURAKSHA AND HINDU-MUSLIM COMMUNALISM IN BENGAL, 1890-1899

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**A NEW KIND OF POLITICS:  
GAURAKSHA AND HINDU-MUSLIM  
COMMUNALISM IN BENGAL, 1890-1899**

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## Glossary of non-English Words

*Anjuman*: Islamic organizations and associations

*Arya Samaj*: Hindu revivalist society established in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. They considered the Vedas as the only sources of truth in Hinduism.

*Ashraf*: upper class Muslims with a Persian, Afghan or Arabic lineage

*Atrap*: lower class Muslim converts in India

*Bhadralok*: English Educated Bengali with a taste for European culture and lifestyle

*Brahmin*: priest class Hindu in the caste system

*Dharma*: religion; but originally used as law that governs the universe

*Farai'di movement*: Islamic revivalist movement in East Bengal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century

*Gauraksha Sabha*: cow protection society

*Jotedar*: caretaker class for Zamindars; landowners with medium holdings

*Madrassa*: Islamic school

*Mahishya*: Sub-caste in the region of Bengal

*Maulvi*: Islamic scholar, one who completed education in a madrassa

*Mofussil*: the provincial or rural districts of India

*Namasudra*: Sudra sub-caste in Barisal region of Bengal

*Panchayet*: village council consisting of five members

*Pir*: Islamic holy man generally associated with Sufism.

*Raiyat*: tenant farmer

*Sabha*: assembly or association

*Samiti*: committee, trustee or association

*Shuddhi*: purification; conversion to Hinduism

*Sudras*: peasant class Hindu in the caste system

*Swadeshi*: translated self or own country; movement of economic resistance to the British Raj only purchasing and using Indian or home grown goods

*Swami*: Hindu ascetic and teacher

*Tabligh*: propagation of the message of Islam; conversion to Islam

*Ulema*: Islamic cleric and legal scholar

*Zamindar*: landowner, usually with aristocratic lineage

## INTRODUCTION

Why is the communal discourse in modern South Asian history primarily framed by the religious conflicts and identity politics between Hindus and Muslims? It is inaccurate to claim that Hindus and Muslims were people perennially antagonistic toward one another and that communal violence spawned from the innate tension that laid its mark on the 20<sup>th</sup> century South Asian history. While contemporary historians have refuted this primordial supposition illustrating religious identities of Hindus and Muslims, it still demonstrates strong resilience in continuing to explain instances of violence.<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, these religious identities are fluid social constructions. The leaders of India utilized religious symbols to construct and consolidate their group identities and interests. However, this is not the only way to achieve group solidarity. Frequently, grassroots and popular movements enable group cohesion and recreate new social perceptions that can challenge the dominant nationalist historiography. The subaltern historiography of South Asian history is a representation of this latter phenomenon, whereas the former postulation exemplified nationalist historiography.<sup>2</sup>

Patricia Gossman argues that the instances of communal outbreak were manipulated by Hindu and Muslim leaders for political purpose. “The communal riots that marked the pre-partition period in Bengal were not the inevitable result of

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<sup>1</sup> Gyanandra Pandey has done substantial work in this field, see his, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 27-65.

<sup>2</sup> See Sanjukta Das Gupta’s *Peasant and Tribal Movements in Colonial Bengal: a historiographic overview* in Rethinking Bengal Historiography, (New Delhi : Manohar Publishers & Distributors : International Centre for Bengal Studies, 2001), & Ranjit Guha’s *On some of Aspects of Historiography of Colonial India*, Selected Subaltern Studies, edited by Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ranajit, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 37-44.

constitutional changes that redefined the balance of power between Hindus and Muslims”.<sup>3</sup> These instances of violence began to capture the idea of an imagined community. The leaders needed to find a way to energize their respective religious communities by supplying threats to them by identifying the “other”. They did it to create their political base so that they could rally support when needed. Even the British authorities explained that these episodes of religious violence qualified as being communal. In fact, they propagated the idea of separate religious categories in the census in 1901. The British labeled each person and every household in Bengal and throughout greater India to be a part of one or another religious group. By doing so, they officially validated the claim of the elite leaderships of the Hindus and Muslims that they declared that Hindus and Muslims were different, separate, and distinct communities. Therefore, they needed to be treated legislatively and judicially as such. The cow protection movement, a religious revivalist movement of reformist Hindus of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was effective in fostering communal distinctions anew. However, it would be disingenuous to attribute to the movement historicity of communality. Cow protection riots in Bengal were sporadic in nature and local leaders and politicians were only partially effective in utilizing it for political purposes. The political systems of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were much more parochial than of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, mass mobilization by Gandhi would come several decades later.

While the peasant identity vacillated under the rhetoric of religious propaganda, it continued to assert itself in times of socio-economic strife. Nonetheless, a narrative of violence threatened the community. Local leaders were effective in drawing differences

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<sup>3</sup> Patricia Gossman, *Riots and Victims: Violence and the Construction of Communal Identity among Bengali Muslims, 1905-1947*, (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1999), 8.

during moments of both social and ideological crisis. The cow protection movement was a crucial movement; it was used as a unifying tool that transcended class, caste systems and regional boundaries. The movement emphasized the religious differences of Hindus and Muslims. Early communal conflicts, such as the cow protection movement, became effective tools for political mobilization because they cut “cleavages across rural relations and derived communal solidarity against threatened aggression”.<sup>4</sup>

With memories of the Sepoy Mutiny fresh in the minds of the British administration, they felt threatened by the cow protection movement. They thought it had the potential to become a mass movement that could attract large portions of the Indian population. Therefore, they wanted to control it by setting rules and procedures to prevent a unified opposition against the government. Queen Victoria acknowledged the threat posed by the movement in a letter to Viceroy Lord Lansdowne, “The Queen greatly admired the Viceroy’s speech on the cow-killing agitation. While she quite agrees in the necessity of perfect fairness, she thinks the Muhammadans do require more protection than Hindus, and they are decidedly by far more loyal. She thought the Muhammadan’s cow-killing is made the pretext for the agitation, it is, in fact, directed against us, who kill far more cows for our army than the Muhammadans”.<sup>5</sup> The Queen’s statement captures a fundamental aspect of British policy during this period. She acknowledges that there existed a grave potential for the Indian masses to unite under cow protection since it was not even mandatory for Muslims to slaughter cows for Bakr-id. As a result, the British chose to emphasize empowering Muslim communities in order to balance the dominance

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<sup>4</sup> Gossman, *Riots and Victims*, 8.

<sup>5</sup> T. M. Dharampaul, *The British Origin of Cow Slaughter in India, 1880-1894*. (Mussoorie: Society for Integrated Development of Himalayas, 2002), 69.

of Hindus in politics. This has been characterized as the British divide and rule tactic, employed to disrupt the communal cohesion of India.

Overall British policy in relations to the indigenous population of India was also shifting around this time. During the 1880's the Hindu elites were becoming politically conscious and were demanding representation in government under the auspices of the Indian National Congress. Simultaneously, Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan was a strong advocate for empowering of the Muslim people, who constituted a large minority in Northern India.<sup>6</sup> After the Age of Consent agitation in 1891, the British were looking for ways to obstruct the Hindu opposition by bringing the Muslims into the public arena.

At the end of the 19th century, before the first partition of Bengal in 1905, there was the beginning of the Hindu and Muslim formulations as socio-political categories. It was the consequence of three movements. They are the religious revivalism in the countryside by both the Hindus and Muslims, the communal orientation of the census and legal system by the British, and the rise of elite politics – to mobilize or manage the diverse groups of Bengal. The convergence of these three developments in the countryside produced mass movements and riots tinged by communal colors under the aegis of cow protection. The riots that ensued displayed brief manifestations of a new kind of politics based on religious identity that was gaining ground in India.

In the following sections, I first discuss the salient features of communalism in Bengal. Then, I address the changing social relations in the countryside under British laws that enabled the cow protection movement to be successful because it brought together local elites at religious centers. Afterwards, I move on to the birth of the cow

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<sup>6</sup> C. H. Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan*. (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 178.

protection movement by the grassroots activism of the *Arya Samaj* and explicate the subsequent Muslim and British reactions. Given that, the British feared the possibility of communal unity, they did their utmost to halt such cohesion in order to preserve the Raj from internal threats. Finally, I examine instances of communal riots resulting from the cow activism and its ramifications for the construction of a Hindu and Muslim identity that dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalist politics.

### **COMMUNALISM IN THE BENGAL CONTEXT**

Two types of violence characterized the rural countryside in the colonial period. First was the insurgent violence resulting from peasant uprisings and labor revolts, and the other was communal violence.<sup>7</sup> The former stemmed from economic hardships, while the latter derived from cultural clashes, prompted through the manipulation of religious symbols and institutions by interest groups. The sectarian violence that erupted throughout India in the 1930s and 1940s was a conflation of the two types of violence.<sup>8</sup> However, prior to the first Bengal partition, there were few instances of violence, given the status of Hindu-Muslim relations in the 1890s. One such instance was advent of the cow protection movement, which exemplified early stirrings of 20<sup>th</sup> century communalism.

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<sup>7</sup> Gossman, *Riots and Victims*, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Joya Chatterjee has written comprehensively about the communal violence in the decades before Partition, see her work, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition, 1932-1947*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 150-190.

Ranajit Guha highlights that colonial elite's mobilization of the subaltern did not align with their anti-imperial objectives.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the elite saw the necessity to engage in mass politics and needed to incorporate the subaltern into their agenda. Politicians utilized hostilities within and among communities to mobilize the masses. Many times, the local elites and landed magnates took advantage of existing grievances in the countryside and gave them a communal color. This way they were able to integrate local politics into the grand narratives of separate communities in India. The cow protection movement embodied the process because it was a manifestation of communal politics driven by, to a limited extent, elite interests combined with peasant unrest. The cow protection movement spread to the urban centers of Bombay, Benares and Calcutta but it aggressively spread to the countryside by powerful and polemical itinerants transforming religion into a socio-political issue.<sup>10</sup> The movement resulted in politicizing religious identities in rural areas.

The membership of ethnic or religious communities is too often assumed to be monolithic in character but it always consists of disparate sects. How the sects negotiated their position within the larger Hindu or Muslim community depended on culture and politics. Nevertheless, the fissiparous tendencies of a group are often a threat to its cohesion. At the turn of the 19th century, there were clear and visible signs of shifting social relations and consequent creation of new social categories in rural and suburban Bengal.<sup>11</sup> It should also be noted that Muslims in South Asia were never a unified group.

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<sup>9</sup> Guha & Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies: Introduction*, 3-31.

<sup>10</sup> Dharampal, *The British Origin of Cow Slaughter*, 93.

<sup>11</sup> Rajat Kanta Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest in Bengal 1875-1927*, (Delhi, India: Oxford University Press, 1984), 44-65.

The Muslims were a diverse community. They not only differed by regional, cultural and linguistic variations, but also Muslims of India followed a wide range of purist and syncretic rituals of Islam. There were sharp distinctions between Bengali Muslims and their Uttar Pradesh or Punjabi counterparts. In fact, even within Bengal there were substantial differences between the *ashraf* and *atrap* classes of Muslims. These kinds of differences of class and caste were even more pronounced in the Hindu community. Separated by castes and sub-castes, the Hindu caste identity epitomized different communities and what each of those identities strictly adhered to boundaries that distinguished them, i.e. *Brahmins* could not cohabit with *Sudras*. In the villages, caste identity was still a powerful force in social organization.

Asim Roy demonstrates that the cultural intermediaries like the local saints, *pirs*, and *swamis* played a critical role in creating a syncretic tradition among majority of peasant Muslims in rural societies of Bengal.<sup>12</sup> The general consensus among scholars is that Bengali Muslims were not politically aroused before the first partition of Bengal, although Bengali Hindus were far ahead in mobilizing through religious identity.<sup>13</sup> Between 1905-1911, Bengal remained partitioned as a consequence of the British act, the cleavage between the Hindus and the Muslims became sharper as the result of violent mobilizations and demonstrations under the *swadeshi* movement, which protested against the vivisection of Bengal through empowering indigenous culture and economy.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Asim Roy demonstrated the migration of Islam and the development of syncretic culture among various Muslim and Hindu communities, see *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 59-83.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 132.

<sup>14</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985),

The idea of the two separate religious communities originated with Orientalist historiography of India. The early scholarly works by Europeans such as Max Muller divided the history of India in three distinct periods. Ancient India was characterized by Hindu rule; the medieval period in India began with the Muslim conquest, and British rule in India was considered the modern era.<sup>15</sup> The British did not create the construction of communalism; they merely codified it with historiography, and then through the legal system. Gyanendra Pandey defines communalism as “a form of colonialist knowledge” that defined a primitive behavior characterized by religious bigotry and irrationality that the British thought was endemic to India.<sup>16</sup> This is the logic behind British jurisprudence and the historiography of the British policy to “divide and rule”. Because of the inherent assumption of separate religious communities, British policies, as we shall see, encouraged communal behavior.

The nationalist historiography emphasizes the role of the educated *bhadraloks* and *zamindars* in constitutional politics.<sup>17</sup> They used religious ideas and symbols to mobilize rural support for their political interests. The result of elite politics was the creation of communal divisions and subsequent outbursts of violent riots. However, the subaltern collective argues that most communal incidents were not simply manipulated by elites for the systematic construction of identity. In fact there were legitimate complaints and their manifestation was strategically utilized by the elites. The subaltern historiography highlights anti-imperialist protests and other popular uprisings that were not governed by

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<sup>15</sup> Gyanendra Pandey, "Questions of Nationalism and Communalism," *Economic and Political Weekly* (1987): 983-984.

<sup>16</sup> Gossman, *Riots and Victims*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Brian A. Hatcher, *Great men waking: paradigms in the historiography of the Bengal Renaissance in Rethinking Bengal: Essays in Historiography*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2001.

the manipulation of symbols by the elite.<sup>18</sup> The *Faraidi* Movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the *Namasudra* activism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century are two examples of anti-imperial subaltern movements.<sup>19</sup> These were local uprisings, which became incorporated into the grand narratives of Muslims and Hindus, respectively. In this paper, I explain that peasant agency was undermined in the cow protection movement as it was incorporated in the larger dichotomy of Hindu-Muslim social categories. It was first sustained by religious revivalist movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and by electoral politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. However in the 1890s, politics in Bengal still remained local. The affluent families in the countryside were the dominant force in infusing urban movements such as the cow protection with rural politics. As a result, they were transforming peasant unrests into communal conflicts.

### **ON THE STRUCTURE OF PEASANT SOCIETY**

By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the economic structures of the countryside were rapidly changing, which acted in conjunction with religious reforms and electoral politics. This occurred primarily as a result of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885. It was a land redistribution scheme. The act enabled the creation of a prosperous *jotedar* class. They held medium to large tracts of land but were subsidiary to the landed magnates and aristocrats. This new class of people became politically influential and social mediators in

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<sup>18</sup> Guha & Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies: Introduction*, 3-31

<sup>19</sup> Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, 74-9; also see Muin-uddin Ahmed Khan's *History of Fara'idi Movement in Bengal, 1818-1906*, (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1965), 25-31, 43-44, 104-123; & Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest & Identity in Colonial India: The Namasudras of Bengal, 1872-1947*, (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1997), 61-135 for a detailed account of each movement.

the countryside. They also had political aspirations at the local community level in winning district board elections. They gave financial support to the Hindu *sabhas* and Muslim *anjumans*. Thereby, the *jotedars* were able to marry their political aspirations with the reform agendas of local religious leaders. It enabled the politicization of Hindu and Muslim identities. Ultimately, economic changes of rural Bengal stemming from Bengal Tenancy Act transformed the socio-religious atmosphere in which cow protection and its consequent communal riots could take place.

Sympathetic legislators wrote the tenancy act to help poor and landless peasants acquire land. The act classified proprietors of land in three categories: tenure-holders and under-tenure holders, occupancy and non-occupancy tenants, and under tenants.<sup>20</sup> Surendranath Banerjee's Indian Association and Ameer Ali's Central National Mohammedan Association supported the act as a positive step toward empowering the depressed classes.<sup>21</sup> The sense of communal identity that took root with cow protection movement in rural Bengal could not happen without the restructuring of peasant relations and it occurred through the land redistribution initiative under the auspices of the Bengal Tenancy Act of 1885.

The Bengal Tenancy Act validated *raiyyats* right to occupancy of the land if they could prove occupancy for the previous twelve years. While the act attempted to resolve the deficiencies of the previous 1859 Act, it did little to address the problem of sharecroppers. After 1885, the numbers of sharecroppers outpaced any other rural agrarian demographic category. The law assumed that there was only one *raiyyat* for an

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<sup>20</sup> Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, 53-54.

<sup>21</sup> Leonard A. Gordan, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement, 1876-1940*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 31.

occupancy holding, which in reality was far from the truth. In many cases dealing with large holdings, it became very difficult to determine which *raiyyat* had occupancy rights to which part of the holding since they may have worked on a different plot each year. Multiple *raiyyats* may have customary rights to the same plot of land.<sup>22</sup> Rajat Kanta Ray points out that the greatest beneficiary of the 1885 Act were the *jotedars*. They were affluent cultivators with occupancy rights over their large holdings. They were able to expand their holding by collaborating with moneylenders who annexed the land from their indebted *raiyyats* who had proven occupancy over their land. In this way, “the increase in land transfers, and consequently, the increase in landless labor and sharecroppers in the first half of the twentieth century were attributable” to the land reorganization scheme of the Tenancy Act of 1885.<sup>23</sup>

In general, the relationship between the *zamindars* and *raiyyats* were tense and unfriendly. There is an important distinction that Rafiuddin Ahmed makes about the demographic constituency of Bengal’s rural population. While most of the *zamindars* were Hindu, there were also Muslim *zamindars* who exploited their Hindu and Muslim *raiyyats* indiscriminately. Similarly, there were many Hindu *raiyyats* but their narrative follows a different trajectory from that of the Muslim *raiyyats*. As the forbearers of rural traditions, the *zamindars* and *raiyyats* were the people most likely to be emboldened by religious revivalist movements. In response to cow protection, some *zamindars* objected to cow sacrifice in their lands. Similarly, the *raiyyats* began to object to paying fees for Kali puja and other idolatrous activities. Gossman argues that Muslims *anjumans* particularly conflated economic disparities and animosities with religious divisions in

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<sup>22</sup> Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, 54.

<sup>23</sup> Gossman, *Riots and Victims*, 31.

order to raise their status in the community for political power and position.<sup>24</sup> This was true in the 20<sup>th</sup> century at the height of the nationalist period, when communalism and violence took a turn for the worse. However, conditions were less volatile in the 1890's.

With the land redistribution executed by the Bengal Tenancy Act, the rural social structure was undergoing substantial transformation. Moreover, the fragmented peripheries were not immune to the socio-political and religious transformation sweeping through the urban areas. Unlike the urban centers, which had become politically charged and filled with clamorous voices of elite demands and interests, the politics of the rural countryside remained insular until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. New forms of community organizations based on religious revivalism were emerging as pan-religious movements began to seep into the countryside.

The *anjumans* for the Muslims and *sabhas* among lower caste Hindus were creating cleavages in local and village boundaries. The sponsors behind these institutions were rich local families who benefited from the land distribution and began to take an active role in their local communities and politics. The affluent families of the locality competed for political power by vying for positions in municipal and district boards. The most aggressive and successful of these vested special interest groups were some ambitious Muslims, *Mahishya* and *Namasudra* caste groups.<sup>25</sup> Their activities contributed to a heightened consciousness of the social position among the peasants and tied them to the larger imagined communities.

The formation of *anjuman* in the countryside was the product of the patronage of rich Muslim families. This group wanted to curb the power of their overseeing landlords,

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<sup>24</sup> Gossman, *Riots and Victims*, 32.

<sup>25</sup> Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, 71.

most of whom were absentee landlords; and they also sought to reduce government interference in collecting taxes and tribute. In order to do so, they endeavored to expand their political influence by capturing local and union boards. They collaborated with the local *ulema* and *maulvis* for political mobilization and Islamization of the peasantry. The local *anjumans* were dependent on the contribution of the rich *jotedars* who provided the funds for the operation of the local *madrassas* and mosques. The *maulvis* augmented the propagation of orthodox Islamic teachings to ignorant peasants. Their awareness campaign was effective in serving the interests of the *jotedars*. This allowed the community not only to become more religiously aware but ushered unity among rural Muslim peasants.<sup>26</sup> The funds of the *anjumans* were generated from student tuition in *madrassas*, price of leather from sacrificed animals and revenue from *anjuman* owned and operated bazaars. They also raised funds from membership subscription and grains donated by peasants.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, the British efforts to quantify the demography of their Indian empire were critical in dragging the countryside into the murky waters of identity politics. The first census in Bengal was conducted in 1872. Since the census operations contributed to the codification of fluid social categories by forcing people to consciously identify with a community, it demarcated religion —Hindus and Muslims— as the fundamental category for understanding the demographic composition of Bengal and India at large. Benedict Anderson elucidates the role of census in creating the national identity; however in the case of Bengal, the process followed a similar trajectory in constructing communal

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<sup>26</sup> Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, 74.

<sup>27</sup> Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, 74.

identities through the modern bureaucratic institutions of the British Raj.<sup>28</sup> Peasants were suspicious of the early census officials because they feared government intended to record demographic data in order to raise taxes on the poor. In some instances they even caused riots to obstruct the administration of the census. By 1901, the population of Bengal exceeded 78 million while it was nearly 300 million for all of India. The number of officials required “to carry out the census in 1901 was more than 400,000” which demonstrated the magnitude of personnel needed to conduct it.<sup>29</sup> The census process connected local leaders with urban intellectuals and movements as ideas and subsequently the politics of communal separation spread to the countryside. In effect, it began transforming rural identities by integrating them with urban ones.

Rafiuddin Ahmed shows the Islamization of rural Muslims in Bengal by the upward trend of social identification of the lower classes. They used the census to gain entry into the more respectable groups of society by changing their names or adding titles to their names to indicate their ancestral lineage to Islamic emigrants. In 1872, the number of people in Bengal, including in Sylhet and Cachar, with Muslims titles was 266,378, of which 232,189 were Shaikhs, 9,858 Syeds and 2,206 Mughals. By 1901, the number of Sheikhs alone inflated to 19,527,221 when the total Muslim population of Bengal was slightly over twenty five million. The census began a trend of association by title to uplift one’s social position.<sup>30</sup> As it turns out, the census had a similar affect on the Hindu caste identities.

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<sup>28</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 1983), Chap 10.

<sup>29</sup> Gordan, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement*, 36.

<sup>30</sup> Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1905*, ( Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988), 115.

Coinciding with the pan-Islamic revival, the British policies also garnered lower caste movements. In the 1901 census, the British government tried to establish a hierarchy of caste structure. The process rapidly turned for the worse as people were politicking for better caste positions and higher status while others, in the process, were denigrated to lower social statuses. In a demonstration of excess power, the British had politicized caste identity. Sir Herbert Risley, who was in charge of conducting the census, wanted to systematically rationalize the social structure of Hindus. In doing so, he formally codified it in the form of the census. This prompted caste associations to evolve along new principles and leadership.<sup>31</sup> Traditional local enclaves at the village level were known as *samaj*. However, an alternate form of association called *sabha* or *samiti* was nascent during this period. These were voluntary associations but unlike the *samaj*, these were not based on caste and locality alone. Modeled after European associations, they claimed to represent a caste group in its entirety – not only specific geographical sub-castes – with the intention of improving the social position of their caste group. The movement was combining and unifying caste groups in a radically modern way, by giving it numeric and demographic advantages for agitation. The *sabhas* or *samitis* were generally centralized in Calcutta with branches in the countryside seeing as their leadership was frequently English educated lawyers and bureaucrats.<sup>32</sup>

Even though it was formed for the benefit of the total caste, members used it to advance their personal standing in the caste and society at large. It became a vehicle for the rich and affluent. However, they also connected rural communities with the wider British Empire. Consequently, the *sabhas* undermined the traditional leaderships of the

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<sup>31</sup> Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, 42.

<sup>32</sup> Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, 43.

*samaj* (*samajpatis*) and furthered the vested interests of urban society. The redefinition of caste and community organizations through *sabhas* enabled the mobilization of rural caste members for political support. But this sort of self-proclaimed identification alienated non-caste members. In short, the *anjuman* and *sabhas* received patronage from the *jotedars*, who became prosperous and influential through the land re-distribution of the Bengal Tenancy Act.<sup>33</sup> The patrons of the local *anjumans* and *sabhas* worked with the religious leaders to enhance their social status in order to acquire the coveted positions in the local community and on district boards. These patrons became the glue connecting the urban and rural societies at the turn of the century.

Rajat Kanta Ray dates the emergence of *sabhas* with the turn of the century but I contend that associations were in the making even before then.<sup>34</sup> The *gauraksha sabhas* established for the protection of the cow among Hindus were exemplary of the earliest associations. They were voluntary and not confined by caste relations. In fact, Swami Dayananda, who was one of the movement's principal leaders, was also founder of the *Arya Samaj*, which rejected the caste system in Hindu *dharma* entirely.

Peasant mobilization was not limited to the activities of the rural *anjumans* and *sabhas*. There were other notable socio-political developments in the urban spheres to incorporate the peasantry. Throughout the 1880's, both The Indian Association and Central National Mohammedan Association supported the Bengal Tenancy Act as their

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<sup>33</sup> Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, 45

<sup>34</sup> For more on associations in Bengal, also see Anil Seal's *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 194-226.

community development work was closely tied with peasant movements.<sup>35</sup> The Indian Association was engaged in grassroots activism with the aim of empowering the conditions of the lower caste groups.<sup>36</sup> They later became the Bengali arm of the Congress for rural mobilization. The Central national Mohammedan Association was active in similar work of uplifting the Muslims of India. Its founder, Ameer Ali, believed that Muslims of India ought to be united as a homogeneous community.<sup>37</sup> The mobilizing efforts of these organizations also disrupted the power relations of the countryside. They collaborated with locally influential peasants, *jotedars*, who were becoming politically and socially active. While their activities were entirely socio-political in nature, their focus on specific religious groups, lower castes and Muslims, were vital to raising communal consciousness.

In the 1890s, electoral politics were in its nascent stages. Viceroy Lord Lansdowne expressed his concerns in his address to the Bengal Legislative Council in 1893 about the region's lack of a democratic tradition, "in many parts of India, any system of election is entirely foreign to the feelings and habits of the people".<sup>38</sup> The British did not know how the people would react to this peculiar system in India. When the electoral process was opened to the district and municipal boards for political contention, it attracted the local notables into politics. Gossman argues that it is these petty politicians who in close collaboration with the local *anjumans* and *sabhas* established their electoral constituents by espousing the religious differences. In the

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<sup>35</sup> Gordan, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement*, 31.

<sup>36</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Politics and the Raj, Bengal 1872-1937*, (Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Company, 1990), 41.

<sup>37</sup> Gordan, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement*, 65-66.

<sup>38</sup> Philips, C. H., *The Evolution of India and Pakistan*, 67-9.

process, they fanned the embering flames of communal tensions. This phenomenon was pervasive in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, in the 1890s, electoral politics were merely burgeoning. Politicians were not mobilizing for mass support. Their agenda was limited to local elections. The Indian Council Act of 1892 established the first elected seats for native Indians in the Bengali Legislative Council, which held its first election in the following year.<sup>39</sup> Throughout the electoral transformation of Bengal, what we observe is that the cow was used as a symbol of religious piety for competitions in elections and attaining social power. Thus electoral politics sparked communal tensions by utilizing the cow protection movement – to which we now turn.

### **EMERGENCE OF COW PROTECTION**

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, movements of religious awareness or revivalism were ephemeral, but in its final decades, Hindus were becoming organized along religious lines. Sacred symbols were used to mobilize the masses. Under the auspices of devotional practices over the cow, politics and cosmology intermingled. The symbol of the cow, as the venerated mother and nurturer of India, was not restricted by geography, language or caste. Therefore, it was transformed into a powerful tool for communal mobilization across the country.<sup>40</sup>

The origin of the cow protection movement can be traced to Swami Dayananda's *Arya Samaj*, which was a Hindu revivalist organization with the mission to purify the decadent practices of the *dharma* and return to the teachings of the Vedas. Dedicated to

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<sup>39</sup> Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, 130-1.

<sup>40</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition*. (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2004), 241.

both *Aryas* and non-*Aryas*, he extrapolated the veneration of the cow as the lifeblood of Indian society in his treatise *gaurakunanidhi* (Ocean of Mercy to the Cow) in 1881 and, in the following year, sought to establish a *gauraksha sabha* (cow protection society).<sup>41</sup> It started a vigorous movement against cow slaughter. The anti-cow killing movement began in Punjab. It quickly spread throughout northern India in the 1880's and reached Bengal later in the decade. The movement frequently brought riots and violence in its wake. There were traveling itinerants who spread the message about the venerable cow as the source of the life in India through lectures, cartoons and pamphlets in villages and local fairs. The message condemned anyone who strayed from the principles outlined by the preachers. One such pamphlet distributed in Faridpur in 1895 warned low caste Hindus that they must restrain themselves from selling cows to Muslims despite having heavy financial burdens. A Punjabi newspaper rebutted to the preachers' message and commented on the riots in Rohtak, "the cow slaughter has been practiced in India ever since the Mohammedan conquest and that the present agitation in favor of the preservation of [the cow] is due to the preaching of the *Aryas*, who go about exciting feelings of the Hindus".<sup>42</sup> The newspaper condemned the movement as essentially a mouthpiece for orthodox Hindus.

Despite Muslim criticism, the *Arya Samaj* was a reformist Hindu organization. It sharply reacted to contemporary Hindu practices of idolatry, polytheism, child marriage, dominance of Brahmins and caste system. What the *samaj* promoted was a return to the original teachings of the Vedas and proclaimed the supreme authority of the ancient texts.

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<sup>41</sup> Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 91.

<sup>42</sup> Shiv Kumar Gupta, *Arya Samaj and the Raj*, (New Delhi: Gitanjali Pub House, 1991), 65.

Therefore, even though the *Arya Samaj*, with its pan-Hindu revivalist agenda was in conflict with the orthodox Hindu associations, it found common ground with the orthodox Hindus for the “defense of the Hindu nation” in the cow protection cause.<sup>43</sup>

The openness and reformist character of the *samaj* morphed into orthodox militancy that trumpeted religious purification. Indian census data demonstrates this point. The 1891 census dramatically underscored Christian successes in converting Punjabi outcastes. With a 410% increase in ‘native’ Christians during the last decade, even the most confident *Aryas* felt a renewal of the “Christian threat”.<sup>44</sup> This is an illustration of how the census data was changing socio-political relations and fueling religious revivalism. In response to the census and to the proselytizing activities of Christian missionaries, the *samaj* was determined to regain the number of converted Hindus from the foreign religion. The “*Shuddhi* movement countered Christian missionaries’ aggressive evangelicalism and Muslims’ ‘*tabligh*’ with proselytizing initiatives of its own.<sup>45</sup> It confirmed the Hindu fears that Hindu nation was threatened, much like the religious rhetoric of the Muslim *ulema* in their pan-Islamic movement. Lala Lajpat Rai warned people to be conscious about the work of Christian missionaries who with the help of the British government were “collecting helpless children and converting them into its faith”.<sup>46</sup> His comment only demonstrated the heightened consciousness of the people’s religious beliefs and identities.

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<sup>43</sup> Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition*, 240; Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 66.

<sup>44</sup> Gupta, *Arya Samaj*, 68.

<sup>45</sup> Gupta, *Arya Samaj*, 69.

<sup>46</sup> Gupta, *Arya Samaj*, 69.

As a result, the *gauraksha sabhas* found support from Hindus from various walks of life. Information gathered from police investigations showed it was so appealing, the movement rapidly spread from Punjab to throughout northern India within a decade. It drew support from prominent community leaders such as landowners, government officials, teachers, bankers, and businessmen to finance its operations.<sup>47</sup> Cow protection became a common cause for many Hindus to re-assert their old religious rights, which particularly included the *zamindars*. Sir Anthony MacDonnell, officiating Lt. Governor of Bengal, observed that the agitation could not have the successes as it did without the ardent support of the landlords, and it would “not countenanced the unruly spirit which has shown itself”.<sup>48</sup> The Muslim newspaper *sudhakar* published the names of *zamindars* in Bengal who tried to thwart their Muslim tenants from sacrificing cows on their property. They were Raja of Bhawal, Babus of Bhagyakul, *Zamindars* of Vikrampuur, Kagmari and Muktagacha in Mymensingh, Narail in Jessore.<sup>49</sup>

There were numerous cases where Hindu *zamindars* forbade their Muslim tenants to sacrifice cows on their land countering the customs of Islamic religious observances. In 1895, a commissioner of Rajshahi observed that the Hindu *zamindars* were trying to prevent their tenants from killing cows.<sup>50</sup> In response to one *zamindari* encroachment, Khalilur Rahman, a local *maulvi*, “held a number of gatherings at which he delivered angry sermons against Hindu persecution. The poor Muslims serving Hindu families, about 297 in number, were induced to leave the service of Hindus and to earn a living in

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<sup>47</sup> Dharampul. *The British Origin of Cow Slaughter*, 115.

<sup>48</sup> Gupta, *Arya Samaj*, 66.

<sup>49</sup> Ahmed, *the Bengal Muslims*, 172.

<sup>50</sup> Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 172.

manufacture and shop-keeping”.<sup>51</sup> However, as we will see later, the movement of peasant labor in the mills and industries transformed communal relations in those spaces to negotiate their inclusion in the group identity.

It should be noted that both Hindu and Muslim peasants, regardless of religion, continued to band together to resist exploitation by the landlords. This is one way the line delineating the communal identity acquired permeability and cross-communication and harmony was nevertheless observed depending on the grievance. Many times, the rural socio-economic grievances were framed along religious lines for political purposes. A sound illustration of this is the land question.<sup>52</sup> The exploitative landowners and oppressed tenants were represented in both Hindu and Muslim communities but the distinct categories of Hindu *zamindars* and Muslim *raiyyats* were made to emphasize the disparity in the ratio of landowner and peasants in each of the two religious communities. There were more Hindu *zamindars* than Muslims while the number of impoverished *raiyyats* was distributed rather even between Hindus and Muslims. The census data shows that in 1901, there were 1,076,361 Hindu landowners and 27,601,346 tenants, whereas Muslim landowners numbered 432,236 and tenants 19,653,115.<sup>53</sup> While Hindu peasants still outnumbered Muslims, the local *anjumans* did not hesitate to conflate the Muslims economic grievances with religious conflicts with their landlords.

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<sup>51</sup> Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, 73.

<sup>52</sup> Partha Chatterjee addresses this subject in *Bengal: The Land Question, 1920-1937*, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Company, 1984, see pages 184-187,192, 203-207.

<sup>53</sup> Census of India, 1901, Vol 5.

## BRITISH REACTION

The British were aware of the threatening nature of the cow protection movement. They were particularly fearful of the potential for the movement to amalgamate the Hindus from various castes and unite them under one banner. D. F. McCracken, Officiating General Superintendent of Thagi and Dacoity Department, pointed to “a new force [that] has arisen, and in considering the military requirement of the country for the preservation of internal order, this force has to be considered as an important factor”.<sup>54</sup>

Moreover, the government was suspicious of the *Arya Samaj*'s activities. Initially, *Arya Samaj* was not a political organization since its goal was to improve the social conditions of Hindus. However, its agenda and activities were increasingly becoming political. Macdonald was asked at an event at Lala Lajpat Rai's house, “Government unnecessarily considers *Arya Samaj* as the enemy, though it is engaged in improving the condition of the people in social and educational fields.” He replied that, “the natural consequences of both these things will be that there will be political awakening among the people without which they cannot succeed and they will imbue the people with ideas of political freedom”.<sup>55</sup> His comments proved to be prophetic as the *samaj* launched its campaign on cow protection. The British were aware of the power of religion as a political force against the government and were attentive to its activities. Subsequently, it is not unsurprisingly that the *Arya Samaj* collaborated closely with the Hindu *Mahasabha* at the high noon of nationalist politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The activities of the *samaj* on the cow protection agitation frightened the regime because the *samaj* and the movement acted as the glue that was unifying the diverse sects

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<sup>54</sup> Dharampaul. *The British Origin of Cow Slaughter*, 75

<sup>55</sup> Gupta, *Arya Samaj*, 64.

of Hindus, potentially against colonial ruler. The British officials identified incitement by *gauraksha sabhas*, cow protection societies, as the source of communal discontent. Sir Charles Crosthwaite, Lt. Governor of Uttar Pradesh, pointed out the coercive pressure it put on the people that “even well meaning Hindus could not dare to speak against these societies for fear of losing not only their popularity but their lives”.<sup>56</sup> Crosthwaite accused the Hindus and the cow protection societies of being seditious bodies, whereas he found the Mohammedans innocent in this process. Despite the Lt. Governor’s partiality, he was not wrong in pointing out the ramifications of the aggressive tactics of *gauraksha sabhas* and Hindu itinerant preachers who were changing the geo-politics of the countryside. Kimberley, the secretary of state, wrote to Viceroy Lansdowne stating that “the letter from Crosthwaite which you sent me shows plainly that *gauraksha sabhas* mean mischief and I am afraid we must look forward to the possibility of very serious troubles”.<sup>57</sup> The correspondence demonstrates the popularity of cow protection movements in Northern India and its subversive implications for the British Raj.

The British government rightfully recognized the pernicious nature of the movement as a “uniting force among the Hindus,” but they also understood that the movement would be a point of conflict “between Muslims and Hindus, which was always considered a useful instrument for the survival of the British Raj”.<sup>58</sup> In fact, the Muslims were the primary targets for the cow protection movement because of their practice of ritual cow sacrifice. It was a visible and predictable (yearly) ritual so it attracted the majority of the cow protection hostilities. In the countryside, Muslim peasants did not

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<sup>56</sup> Gupta, *Arya Samaj*, 65.

<sup>57</sup> Gupta, *Arya Samaj*, 65-66.

<sup>58</sup> Gupta, *Arya Samaj*, 67.

have the luxury to eat beef. For most of them, beef was eaten once a year for Bakr-id. The attack on the practice also polarized the Muslim community as they felt their religion threatened. It began to strengthen communal solidarity among the Muslims.

However, the British were fearful that with a possible change in cow protection rhetoric to target the imperial regime. The Muslims could unite with the Hindus because the cow was not required for slaughter for the Muslims. They could sacrifice any four-legged animal but the cow could be sacrificed by several people together. Most preferred the cow because it was a cost effective solution. Nevertheless, many during the period made this point not to sacrifice cows in support of communal harmony. Mir Musharraf Husain, a Muslim Bengali writer, published *Go-jiban* in 1888 appealing to abolish cow slaughter by reasoning that “even if they [Hindus] profess differing religious beliefs, in heart and action they are identical”.<sup>59</sup> The Muslim press condemned Husain for his work and he was forced to rescind his publication after a lawsuit was brought against him. While the Hindus were so aggressive in their cow protection movements, the Muslims continued this sacrifice as a political statement to defend their identity and tradition. It produced solidarity among Bengali Hindus and Muslims.

In the rural countryside the conflict over cow protection became an important issue for the communal identities. The violence that ensued in the 1890's in Bengal was made possible by the direction of religious identities that dominated the nationalist discourse in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The British quickly realized that the issue around the cow could quickly mobilize people for the political purposes of the Congress. Hence, they were skeptical about the true intentions of the agitation. H. J. S. Cotton, Chief Secretary

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<sup>59</sup> Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 175.

of the Government of Bengal, claimed that “in the manifestations now under notice the sentiment is ostensibly religious, but it is readily susceptible to manipulation for other ends...the Hindu reverence for the cow is one of the “magazines of physical force on which, it has been said, the forward party in Indian politics [i.e. the Congress] might rely in their contest with the government; and it would have been unwise in existing circumstances to ignore this aspect of the case”.<sup>60</sup>

Even though Congress was making friendly gestures to the Muslim community to participate in its political agitation, they were silent in the cow-protection controversies in 1893. As a young organization developing its network, it did not want to alienate its Hindu supporters. Congress neither supported nor was it involved in organizing *gauraksha sabhas* but their fear of alienating the Hindus effectively alienated the Muslims. The membership of Muslims in Congress was declining after 1893 following the Azamgarh incident, which were fierce riots that ensued for months in the Azamgarh district of the United Provinces. It was sparked by a controversial decision by a magistrate to register Muslims for cow slaughter. The incident made Muslims very suspicious of the purpose of the *gauraksha sabha*. Moreover, Congress made no effective attempt to bring alienated Muslims back into the fold following the Azamgarh riots.<sup>61</sup>

“After the Nagpur session of the Congress in 1891, the *gauraksha sabha* held a large meeting within the Congress pavilion, attended by Congress delegates and other visitors. Prominent cow protectionist leaders like Sriman Swami attended the Allahabad Congress in 1893, while other prominent Congress leaders like Tilak were closely associated with

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<sup>60</sup> Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 172.

<sup>61</sup> Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition*, 233-4.

the local *gauraksha sabhas*".<sup>62</sup> This estranged the Muslims from Congress politics even more.

As demonstrated, officials in British India were justifiably concerned but they were relieved that the focus of the movement was primarily on Muslim ritual sacrifice of cows for Bakr-id and not on the British government, who slaughtered far more cows for its armies. Earl of Kimberley, the Secretary of State, wrote to Viceroy Lansdowne, "that a set off to the gravity of the matter is that this movement [anti-cow-killing riots] makes all combinations of the Hindus and Mohammedans impossible and so cuts at the roots of the Congress agitation for the formation of a united Indian people who are to force us to surrender power into their hands".<sup>63</sup> The Secretary of State understood the improbability of unification and mobilization in India's pluralistic society. Therefore he concluded that communal violence was inimical to the political mobilization of the Indian National Congress.

### **CUSTOMS AND INNOVATIONS: ENFORCING THE LAW**

British officials needed to balance caution with authority to address the cow protection movement, given its delicate nature and explosive potential. Charles Crosthwaite, Lt. Governor of Uttar Pradesh, recommended legislation to counter the anti-cow killing agitation to Viceroy Lord Lansdowne. He advised the administration to be assertive and decisive in dealing with the new challenge presented by the Hindus.

However, the viceroy had a different opinion. He observed that "the magnitude of the

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<sup>62</sup> Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition*, 242; Also see Dharampaul, *The British Origin of Cow Slaughter*, 110.

<sup>63</sup> Gupta, *Arya Samaj*, 67.

danger arises from this [movement] that the agitation has supplied the whole of disloyal elements to be found in the Indian community with a popular backing which they could not have obtained from any other source. The movement is *prima facie*, a legal and blameless one... and cannot be interfered with so long as its operations are ostensibly restricted to lawful subjects... I am decidedly opposed to the adoption of Sir Charles Crosthwaite's recommendations for an alternation of the law of conspiracy. This proposal is, I am afraid, to see, more or less condemned by the whole of local government".<sup>64</sup>

Viceroy Lansdowne chose to exercise caution in dealing with the cow protection movement. He relayed his reproofing approach to Kimberley, "Any attempt to raise [the issue] would certainly get us into hotter water both in this country and at home".<sup>65</sup> He feared a confrontational approach by the government would incite people to unite under this issue against them. Nevertheless, the viceroy did intend to impede the movement by other means. He outlined an alternate strategy. "There are numerous means to dealing with itinerant preachers and with societies as well as supporters and promoters of the movement under various clauses of the criminal procedure and Penal Codes and under Act of 1861".<sup>66</sup> He wanted to use existing criminal laws and penal code to curtail the movement as legislating laws to punish dissidents would only arouse anti-British unrest. The British problem was that the activities of the *gauraksha sabhas* were conducted legally so there were no grounds to aggressively restrain the *sabhas* activities without fanning the flames of discontent among the Hindus.

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<sup>64</sup> Gupta, *Arya Samaj*, 65-66.

<sup>65</sup> Gupta, *Arya Samaj*, 65.

<sup>66</sup> Gupta, *Arya Samaj*, 66.

In light of existing unrest in Bengal, the British administration ultimately decided to avoid giving unwarranted incentives to agitators for anti-British mobilization by applying their time-tested policy of status quo. They proposed to enact a law on customs and innovations to intercede the movement in order to reduce instances of violence. It was “based on the axiom which has generally governed our [British] action where questions of religious toleration are involved...that what is customary should be allowed to continue and that innovations should not be permitted”.<sup>67</sup> As was convention of the British, they intended to maintain the existing state of rural traditions. This implied that the areas where cow slaughter was traditionally accepted and practiced will be allowed to continue but in areas where the practice did not occur, it was forbidden to innovate. In the process, the government legalized the controversy of cow protection.

Queen Victoria also stepped in to give suggestions in favor of procedural legalization. In a letter to the Viceroy in 1893, she advised that there needed to be arbitration bodies established consisting of “influential and impartial people of both religions [who] can lay down rules to avoid these outbreaks and outrages; it is to be (hoped?) that much evil may be averted”.<sup>68</sup> In accordance with the Queen’s view, the government issued a Circular to establish Hindu-Muslim *panchayets* in villages to mediate conflicts in concurrence with the following guiding principles. First, cows should be taken to the slaughtering place discretely. Second, cows should not be slaughtered in public places or places where it might attract unwarranted attention. Third, shops must have licenses to sell beef. Fourth, for sacrificial killings, Muslim household will need to

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<sup>67</sup> Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 172.

<sup>68</sup> Dharampaul. *The British Origin of Cow Slaughter*, 428.

acquire a license from the local magistrate. The law was clear but its application created new sets of problems, which led sometimes to violent outbreaks.<sup>69</sup>

Viceroy Lansdowne expressed his reservations in the effective implementation of the guiding principles described in the circular. He recognized the possibility of conflict the circular could generate. He appreciated that the first proposal, to take cows to the slaughter house discretely, could be very difficult to enforce given that in many places there was only one main road. Thus, in his speech on cow-killing in 1893, he recommended caution and contemplated ways to modify the rule in order to ensure it did not give “Hindus a right of watching the roads, and compelling every passing driver to satisfy them that this cattle were not intended for slaughter”.<sup>70</sup> He commented that proposals two and three should be left in the hands of local officials for rulings. The final proposal was the most controversial. Lansdowne thought “any attempt to register and substantiate customary rights would not only be impossible in practice, but would probably lead to a revival of the excitement” surrounding the cow protection movement.<sup>71</sup> The irony here is that once the law came into force, the problems and reservations Lord Lansdowne outlined in his speech became painfully evident. Authorities found it difficult to implement and enforce the customs and innovations law in unique local contexts.

The *de jure* clarity of the law dissolved under specific local cases brought against the district courts. Generally, public opinion was favorable to the circular but there were angry flare ups over specific interpretations of its clauses. A riot broke out in

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<sup>69</sup> Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 172.

<sup>70</sup> Dharampul. *The British Origin of Cow Slaughter*, 439.

<sup>71</sup> Dharampul. *The British Origin of Cow Slaughter*, 440.

Murshidabad over the definition of a ‘public road’ in 1895.<sup>72</sup> In 1896 in Hughly, the cause of the Rishra Serampore cow-killing riot between the Hindus and Muslims of the Hastings jute mill was on the disagreement over case of innovation. Muslims in the village openly announced their intention to sacrifice a cow for Bakr-id. In response, the Hindus submitted a petition to the government. The local magistrate was called upon to deliberate whether cow slaughter was customary in the area and he sided with the Hindus. Mr. Lister, sub-divisional officer, then arrested eight to ten people who were still planning to sacrifice cows at the Rishra Mosque and placed the building under police authority.<sup>73</sup> The Imam of the mosque began to incite Muslims from the surrounding villages to mobilize and he also sent a letter to Calcutta for support. On the day of Bakr-Id, Hindus and Muslims did not go to the mills. It was a tense day as the police was patrolling throughout the town and succeeded to prevent any riots from breaking out.

Lyall, the Secretary of the Government of India, commented on the general euphoria over Hindu revivalism and general decline of anglophiles which “in recent years have brought about a considerable change, and European habits are no longer paraded as they used to be”.<sup>74</sup> It exemplified the change in perception that embodied a new kind of politics. Since the fiery debates surrounding the Ilbert Bill, which concerned the right of native judges to try Europeans in some cases, the British support among the *bhadraloks* had been wavering.<sup>75</sup> It only increased the anxiety of the British officials as they openly extended their patronage to the Muslims communities. The sense of imperial favoritism,

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<sup>72</sup> Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 173.

<sup>73</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History, Bengal 1890-1940*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 192.

<sup>74</sup> Gupta, *Arya Samaj*, 66.

<sup>75</sup> Gordan, *Bengal: The Nationalist Movement*, 31.

which Sayyid Ahmed Khan was advocating for, exacerbated conflicts between communities. It also led to the division between Hindu and Muslim elite interests and the Muslim breakaway from Congress. In a cow case in Mirzapur, “the prosecution and conviction of Munshi Inderman led to the [Muslims] to believe that the British government was on their side. Mr. Dale, the Magistrate, ordered to restore the cow to the owner, Akbar Ali Khan, on condition that he should not slaughter it, as it had been intended. The Muslim community was visibly dissatisfied. Akbar Ali Khan appealed to Dale’s successor, Mr. Cadell who undid Dale’s decision. The High Court did not entertain the appeal and Akbar Ali Khan was allowed to slaughter the cow.” The Allahabad High Court also, in a case, decided that “every Mohammedan is at liberty to kill cattle, but that he has no right to expose beef with the object of offending the feelings of Hindus”.<sup>76</sup> The second provision was frequently neglected in subsequent disputes.

Dipankar Gupta notes that there was communal friction owing to the “two communities were now legally equal and in competition over legitimate authority.”<sup>77</sup> The legal system, as with the ruling on customs and innovations, assessed the issues of the two communities uniformly and it resulted in conflating potency of religious rituals and practices into one legal domain. Until now, the religious rituals were never evaluated under one umbrella of knowledge. By virtue of British sympathies being with cow slaughter, the courts frequently ruled in favor of the Muslims. The decision of the Allahabad court to protect Muslims’ right to sacrifice cows led them to believe that they

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<sup>76</sup> Gupta, *Arya Samaj*, 67-68; Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 92.

<sup>77</sup> Dipankar Gupta, "Communalism and Nationalism in Colonial India." *Economic and Political Weekly* (1993): 339-341.

had every legal right to kill cows. The legal battles heightened communal tensions and were an effective result of British “divide and rule” strategy.

### **RIOTS, CLASHES AND COMMUNAL REACTION**

Through the use of religious symbols the masses were manipulated to believe they were part of a larger struggle. The elite pressure groups were able to leverage the rural base to demand electoral concessions from the British Raj. The *anjumans* and *gauraksha sabhas* helped paint local disagreements with communal colors. This further emphasized the myth that Hindus and Muslims were a historically separate people. The cow protection movement would never have generated such intense fervor without the religious propaganda of the *anjumans* and *gauraksha sabhas*. The interplay of religious and political dimensions of the cow protection movement spawned communal conflicts in villages and rural regions, particularly in the second half of the 1890’s in Bengal.

The most ferocious violence over cow-killing occurred around the suburbs of Calcutta. The politics and insular attitudes of the city overflowed into the surrounding areas. These riots frequently involved mill-hands working the jute or textile factories up river from the city. The mills recruited large numbers of people from both Muslim and Hindu communities. As a result, mills became the epicenter for violence. However, the riots and clashes spilled into the neighboring villages as well.

The strength of the communal feeling at the time was reflected by three Hindu-Muslims riots that broke out in 1896 at Titaghur, Garden Reach, and Serampore. The riots were spurred by the ongoing issues of cow killing during Bakr-Id. Hindus considered the act of killing sacrilege whereas Muslims thought it to be holy ritual. In

1896, the Bakr-Id riot of Titaghur began with Mahomed Hossan, an upcountry bricklayer working at the construction site of the Stand Jute Mills. While he was bringing his heifer for sacrifice, the heifer was stolen by four Hindus who opposed to cow sacrifice for Bakr-Id. The decision of the district magistrate favored the Hindus and it was construed as political favoritism by the Muslims. Therefore, Muslims within the community took a keen interest in the case and were upset that Hindus were stealing their property. The issue divided the neighboring Titaghur Paper Mills and the Titaghur Jute Mills along religious lines. The word spread that at the Titaghur mosque where 300 Muslims congregated for the prayer; and a clash between 300 Hindus and 180 Muslims broke out, with Muslims calling out to “beat the bloody Hindus”.<sup>78</sup> It is surprising that the owner of the cow was not involved in the proceedings outside the court and would have preferred to find a replacement for his stolen property. Under the prevailing circumstances, the two communities were looking for a reason to fight. The army intervened to quell the consequent riots.<sup>79</sup>

A second instance was another Bakr-id riot in the lower Hooghly area, which also involved Hindu and Muslim migrants. On the day of the sacrifice, to retaliate the act, some *chamars* and *dosadhs*, low-caste upcountry Hindus, killed a pig within the premise of the mill. The next day, the mill had a shortage of yarn which gave the workers a three hour break. During the break, the Muslims standing outside the mill asked the mill manager, “Who killed the pig?” Once they realized it was done by a group of Hindus on the same day as Bakr-Id, passions inflamed and Muslims refused to return to work until

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<sup>78</sup> Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, 191.

<sup>79</sup> Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 177.

the issue had been resolved and pig removed from the mill premises.<sup>80</sup> They became angrier and disaffected that Hindus were allowed to sacrifice in the mill when they were disbarred from doing the same.

The practice of eating beef within the Muslim community was rare. Most ate beef only once a year for Bakr-id. However, Muslims felt threatened by the revivalist Hindu rhetoric and reacted by defending their practice to sacrifice cow for their religious festival. Eating beef was not common in the villages, which is why local leaders were able to utilize its miniscule nature to emphasize the Hindu attack on Islamic traditions. In doing so, they created Muslim solidarity in the countryside that rarely existed in Bengal. It politicized the issue of cow killing by framing it in terms of a clash of religious ideology.

A third case was the Talla riot, which transpired in Calcutta on 29 June, 1897 over a minor personal dispute. While the jute mill factories did not discriminate among its laborers, the politicization of the Hindu and Muslim rural communities during this decade had spilled over into the industrial Calcutta. The anger also spread deeper into the villages, sparking violence. The riot started with a land dispute between the Maharaja Jatindramohan Tagore and a tenant, Himmat Khan.<sup>81</sup> The court gave Himmat Khan a notice of eviction because his hut was declared to be a mosque. The so called mosque was demolished by the police, which started the riot. As the riot spread through the surrounding lands of Talla, on the northern outskirts of Calcutta, the communal infighting did not abate until July 6<sup>th</sup>. Eighty-seven people were arrested on rioting charges and 81

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<sup>80</sup> Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, 192.

<sup>81</sup> Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 178.

of them were ultimately convicted.<sup>82</sup> Reports depicted the event as one in which “hundreds of masons and coolies” fought with the police for two days.<sup>83</sup>

Most of the people protesting were Muslims since they were fighting against the state on the issue of the demolition of a mosque. The protest politicized more Muslims. These riots were manifestations of a politically charged communal atmosphere. The three riots encapsulate how the workers from several mills were reacting to the increased religious awareness and communal tension. Their response demonstrated the workers’ conception of belonging to a larger community. The question whether or not the hut was actually a mosque or Himmat Khan’s house in the Talla riot was thus completely ignored in the process. Furthermore, it also illustrates the role of religious spaces and leaders for political mobilization. Muslims congregated at their local mosque for the Titaghur riot and an imam was heavily involved in connecting and collecting people from neighboring towns to rise against Hindu domination. The *anjumans* and the *gauraksha Sabhas* were crucial to precipitating the violence. Moreover, the British tried to maintain the status quo by desperately trying to avoid regulating cow slaughter. And their court decisions on each cow protection case only inflamed communal feeling since the defeated party rioted to protest the result of the trial.

Despite their profession or place in the social structure of the colonial milieu, the Muslim mill hands shared a sense of identity that cross cuts into what Chakrabarty defines as “class,” the working class in the factories. Their communal connection generated hundreds and thousands workers from different places like Chitpur, Kashipur,

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<sup>82</sup> Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, 189.

<sup>83</sup> Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, 188-9.

Branager, and Nikaripara to face a police force that was predominantly Hindu.<sup>84</sup> The episode demonstrated the arousal of religious and communal consciousness.

During Bakr-id, the issue of cow protection was explosive and it inflamed religious passions of both the Hindus and Muslims; and its ramifications of antagonistic communal relations also manifested in other areas. Muslims no longer attended open-air operas by Hindu performers because the enactments demonized the Muslims in the stories. They also stopped celebrating Durga Puja with the Hindus.<sup>85</sup> In turn, the Hindus discontinued coming to the Muharram and collaborating with the Muslims in public events. Muslim tenants also refused to pay festival fees to the *zamindar*.<sup>86</sup>

Other manifestations of peasant consciousness were increased observance of religious holidays. In Titaghur, Baranagar, Kamarhatty, Garden Reach, and Hooghly workers aggressively began to take holidays for religious celebrations, even threatening to go on strike if the authorities refused. In 1894-95, mills workers became extremely assertive about observing their religious festivals, including those of Id, Muharram, and Rath Jatra".<sup>87</sup> It was a display of the burgeoning religious identity among the lower classes. Sometimes the Indian Jute Manufacturing Association had to request additional police support in the jute-mill municipalities to maintain order among the raucous jute mill workers. There were other cases of tense confrontations stemming from boisterous

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<sup>84</sup> Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History, 189-90*.

<sup>85</sup> Mushirul Hasan, *Natioanlism and Communal Politics in India, 1885-1930*. (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2000), 48.

<sup>86</sup> Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest, 71*.

<sup>87</sup> Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History, 194*.

Hindu festival processions passing near Mosques during prayer time.<sup>88</sup> It became another recurring point of contention between the two communities.

### REMNANT COMMUNALISM AND ITS AFTERMATH

Cow protection and cow sacrifice is an issue, Hindus and Muslims have laid down differences that are sharp in contrast. In Bengal, the violence over cow protection did not reach the same ferocity as it did in Punjab and the United Provinces. In India, the movement was at its height from 1888 to 1893, but the most intense riots in Bengal did not erupt until after 1894. From Punjab, the movement spread to the east, energized by the “Allahabad High Court’s decision that cow killing could not be prohibited merely on the grounds that the cow is an object of religious worship”.<sup>89</sup> Hindus established *gauraksha sabhas* in Bengal largely because of the news of clashes coming from western India. As in other areas, the cow protection support came from the *zamindars*. It was not a pan-Hindu phenomenon as it is proclaimed, and was skillfully utilized by certain caste elites to improve their social position. From the previous examples, we see that the most serious clashes over cow protection took place in the *mofussil*, with the *zamindars*, *jotedars*, and local religious associations who were frequently involved in the incidence. Furthermore, British attempts to codify the authentic place for cow killings and protection only exacerbated the problem, since each side claimed the custom to be on their side. It resulted in a private and local issue to spill over into the public arena, which became one of first steps to painting the issue in terms of a conflict between *zamindars* and *raiyyats* by the *anjuman*.

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<sup>88</sup> Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 175.

<sup>89</sup> Gossman, *Riots and Victims*, 33.

These incidents and clashes created deep suspicion between the two communities. Succeeding disputes developed a communal narrative of distinct communities that would become dominant in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but was not prevalent yet. The *anjumans* and the *gauraksha sabhas* proactively made the situation worse by using religious differences to explain socio-economic grievances. The politicization of the cow-protection debate would never have reached such fiery heights without the activities of the *sabhas* and *anjumans*. The eruption of cow-controversy related violence effectively divided the people of Kushtia, along communal lines in 1897. Hindu milkmen stopped delivering milk to the Muslims, and Hindu washermen and barbers refused to service Muslims. Ibn Maazuddin discusses how tenant Muslims resisted their *zamindars*' orders not to sacrifice cows with the help of the *anjumans*.<sup>90</sup> As expected, the tension surrounding the issue reached a culminating point, during Bakr-id time, where police had to be called in to prevent violent outbreaks. That is, riots and clashes demonstrated and fomented hostile communal relations.

Frequently, the peasants and factory workers have become involved in these conflicts, even if they were not directly affected. The government tried to rectify the situation by citing customs and innovative laws but implementing them stirred more trouble. Local officials mismanaged conflict instead of mediating it, which turned a bad situation worse. After the 1893 riots, Dr. Lethbridge, an official in the British Government, commented that these conflicts “make all combinations of Hindus and

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<sup>90</sup> Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 179.

Mahomedans impossible".<sup>91</sup> The government officials were also swept away by the communal hostilities. The magistrate of the 24 Parganas, E. W. Collin was critical of the Hindu police inspector for inadequately dealing with the Muslim unrest. The policemen in the Talla riots openly sided with the Hindu landlords because they were Hindu, enraging the Muslim rioters.

In the earlier Talla riot, Bengal witnessed some fierce conflicts among jute-mill workers over religious affiliations. As a result, they encouraged communal solidarity. One of the first workers' organizations was formed in 1895; it was called the Mahomedan Association, whose main purpose was to recruit more Muslims to jute mills and renovate mosques.<sup>92</sup> Peasants were mobilizing along religious lines to counter mistreatment of labor in factories. Dipesh Chakrabarty demonstrates that during the cow protection movement elements of traditional religious relations were utilized to combat the new challenges of the industrial period.

The cow protection movement and communal clashes, however sporadic, left a permanent mark on the rural identities of Bengal. The Bengali journal *Navajug* described the situation in 1901 as the Hindus "come across cases of cow-killing by particular Mussalmans, or by a particular Mussalman community, [they] hold the entire Mussalman population of the country responsible for the act... the Mussalmans, on their part, come to entertain a similar feeling against the Hindus".<sup>93</sup> It foretells of the new kind of communal politics that was emerging not only in Bengal, but in all over India. It was

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<sup>91</sup> Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 178; Landowne Papers, Letters, Secretary of State, vol. V, January 1893 to January 1894, Letter No. 53, from the Earl of Kimberley to Marquess of Lansdowne 25, August, 1893.

<sup>92</sup> Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, 191.

<sup>93</sup> Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims*, 178.

undoubtedly a stepping stone to the more virulent uprisings and riots of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ultimately, it shaped the historical discourse of the subcontinent.

In the preceding argument, it has been “shown that cow-protection movement did not yet indicate a complete communal polarization of Bengali society... [but it] drew the lines between the two religious communities; these lines were further re-enforced by skillful manipulation of other available cultural symbols, such as language”.<sup>94</sup> The Hindi-Urdu controversy, which concluded in 1900 in favor of Hindi, was another explosive issue. However, it primarily affected the landed magnates and the professional classes, since they were competing for government positions in the United Provinces but not in Bengal. To the illiterate Bengali peasants, it was uncontroversial until the Muslim elites used the Urdu language, as a symbol of Islamic purity to arouse communal consciousness. However, their efforts had a meager effect.

The politicization of both Hindu and Muslim identities during this period raised tensions and animosities, but it did not indicate communal inevitability. There were still plenty of voices calling for communal harmony. Despite explosive incidents, the cow protection movement in Bengal was confined to only certain parts of Bengal. With the majority of the riots occurring in the latter part of the decade in Bengal, it remained an episodic demonstration of communal tensions. In fact, between the years 1889 to 1894, there was only one recorded communal incident in all of Bengal, which happened in the Calcutta suburbs.<sup>95</sup> Even though the cow protection movement portrayed the fragile nature of Hindu-Muslim relations, it did not irreparably impair the social fabric of the Bengali countryside. Communal clashes still remained a sporadic source of civil

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<sup>94</sup> Bandyopadhyay, *From Plassey to Partition*, 242.

<sup>95</sup> Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal*, 48.

disturbance, and an individual's personal reputation still trumped over religious affiliation in elections. In the first Bengal Legislative Council election in 1893, a Muslim lawyer named Maulvi Serajul Islam was elected in the Chittagong district "largely on Hindu votes", and Surendranath Banerjea could not have won the seat for Calcutta Corporation without Muslim support.<sup>96</sup> One senior police officer notes the general harmony among caste and racial groups, "Nothing strikes the intelligent traveler in India more forcibly than the friendly and peaceable attitude of all castes and classes towards each other".<sup>97</sup> However, the mutual distrust would resurface again in the wake of the *swadeshi* movement during the first partition of Bengal.

Lord Curzon, who became the Viceroy of British India in 1899, decided to vivisect the Bengal presidency in 1905, which sparked the potency of communalism in Bengal anew. The population of the presidency had surpassed 78 million and it was becoming increasingly cumbersome to govern.<sup>98</sup> Curzon combined Assam in the east with East Bengal to make one province and fused Orissa, Bihar and a few districts of Central Provinces with Bengal to create another province. The reasoning was that the Bengal province had become much too big for efficient administration. The new provinces after the partition caused a major demographic shift changing the political balance of the region. East Bengal and Assam, with a population of 31 million became a muslim operated province, with Dhaka as its capital; Bengal comprised of some 50

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<sup>96</sup> Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal*, 50; Ray, *Social Conflict and Political Unrest*, 133.

<sup>97</sup> Hasan, *Nationalism and Communal*, 47.

<sup>98</sup> Anislie Embree and Mark Carnes. *Defining a Nation: India on the Eve of Independence, 1945.* (New York: Pearson Education Inc, 2006), 121; for a detailed study on this topic, see Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*.

million people was still a Hindu majority region, but was no longer a region dominated by Bengalis.<sup>99</sup>

Hindu nationalists claimed it was a deliberate attempt by the British to divide and rule Bengal, and this notion would not be tolerated by Hindu's. Therefore, they launched a protest movement called *swadeshi*, where people boycotted foreign manufactured products from shoes to cigarettes. The song *Bande Mataram* written by Bankimchandra was set to tune by Rabindranath Tagore, and it became a rallying cry for nationalist fervor.<sup>100</sup> The political leadership of the *swadeshi* movement was led by Hindu *Bhadraloks*. The strong emphasis on Hindu symbols in the *swadeshi* movement was another point of division between the Hindus and Muslims. The Hindu domination in the leadership with the glorification of the Hindu goddess *Kali* and the infusion of *Bande Mataram*, an overtly Hindu song, to the movement estranged the Muslims once again. In the beginning, the Muslim leaders were not supportive of the partition idea but they increasingly saw the advantages of having a separate province. After partition, East Bengal and Assam became a Muslim majority province.<sup>101</sup>

Partition gave the Muslim leaders aspirations of better educational and employment opportunities and greater voice in economic and political decisions favorable towards Muslims. There was always a looming suspicion that the *swadeshi* movement and the protest efforts were a culmination of the landed interests from west Bengal. For Bengali Muslims, the partition was a blessing because it presented the

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<sup>99</sup> Barbara and Thomas Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 156.

<sup>100</sup> Metcalf, *A Concise History*, 156.

<sup>101</sup> Metcalf, *A Concise History*, 159.

opportunity for empowering the Muslim community. The partition brought elite interests into the countryside yet again and created tensions between the Hindus and Muslims, exacerbating communal hostilities once more.

## CONCLUSION

The discourse in modern South Asian history is dominated by the dichotomy of Hindu-Muslim relations. Through a detailed examination of the cow protection movement, I show in this paper that the notion of Hindu-Muslim communalism was a discursive formation. It was a combination of religious revivalism, the effects of British legal system and census operations, and interests of local and urban elites in the political sector of the countryside that insured the widespread communal impact of the cow protection movement. It brought a new kind of politics in rural Bengal, one infused with religious dogmatism and nationalism.

However, the cow protection movement did not exhibit the ferocity of communal violence that was displayed in Punjab and the United Provinces. In Bengal, it demonstrated sporadic surges of communal politics. The 1890's were merely a time when glimpses of the communal violence could be observed and the formation of the Hindus and Muslims were becoming politicized as social categories. Throughout the colonial period, rural identities were still based on "primal and traditional sources such as religion, language, and ethnicity".<sup>102</sup> The communal question transformed into an adversarial relationship between the Hindus and Muslims because of the politicization of religious identities. The *anjumans* and the *sabhas* became the new social centers of the countryside

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<sup>102</sup> Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working-Class History*, 195.

where once fluid religious categories of Hindu and Muslim were codified. The British Census operations were vital to codifying Hindu and Muslim social categories that dominated politics in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The communal hostilities between Hindus and Muslims, when contextualized in the larger history of South Asia, depict a very different image. During the latter part of the Mughal era, there were fierce animosities between Sannyasi orders and the Vairagis. Literate and highly organized, these religious sects were traders. They competed for Mughal “state patronage or for control over commercial rights”.<sup>103</sup> Their hostilities were grounded in not only religion, but also in economic concerns. By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Muslims appealed to the British for preferential treatment within education and administration. Their efforts resulted in the formation of a pan-Muslim social category in South Asia. Similarly, Hindus attempted to mobilize various caste groups in order to demonstrate their demographic power. In doing so, they hoped to convince the British administration to allow them to participate in political decision-making. Corresponding with historical patterns, the elite pressure groups implemented a facile plan to draw distinctions among religious groups for economic concessions.

Mughal rulers, Babar and Akbar, impressed protection of the sacred animal, the cow, by banning its slaughter. During the Sepoy Mutiny, the king of Delhi outlawed cow slaughter for Hindu-Muslim amity and unity.<sup>104</sup> As demonstrated here, the history of Hindu-Muslim relations does in fact reflect instances of communal solidarity through the cow. The political conditions and power relations of that time demanded and shaped the

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<sup>103</sup> Romila Thapar, "Communalism and the Historical Legacy: Some Facets." (*Social Scientist*, 1990: 4-20), 11.

<sup>104</sup> Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, 90.

relationships among communities. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the politics of Bengal and India, in general, were evolving in a way that was re-formulating the identities of people along religious and communal lines.

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