Project Summary: This paper examines the rise of collective Muslim identity in Bengal as it relates to the educational initiatives proposed by Muslim elites between the close of the First Partition of Bengal in 1911 to the mid-1930’s designed to target the “backwards” Muslim community. With the support of the colonial administration, Muslim elites were presented with a unique opportunity to institutionalize particular elements of a traditional Islamic education and direct the introduction of modern forms of knowledge at the maktab, madrassah, and University levels. In developing a curriculum fit for the Muslim community, Muslim upper classes put forth their own vision for a modern Islamic identity, and at the same time reasserted their own intellectual influence over Muslim society in Bengal.

The system of education instituted under the British is perhaps one of the most enduring, and widely researched, features of colonial rule in India. This paper explored the unique relationship that the British pursued with the Muslim community of Bengal, and, in particular, how Muslim leaders used education as a tool not only to secure greater influence for themselves in British policy-making, but also as a means of asserting a specific model of education that was at once modern and Islamic, and in the process helped to redefine Islamic identity for the Muslims of Bengal. The sources drawn upon in writing this paper are largely a collection of proposals produced in numerous commissions and conferences conducted by the British on the subject of Muslim education, as well as independent pamphlets and publications, and the opinions of contemporary periodicals.

The issue of how to define Muslim identity in colonial Bengal is perhaps one of the most substantial obstacles to scholarly research. From a modern historical perspective, the category ‘Muslim’ seems perfectly logical. Complications arise when the historically constructed nature of religion as a marker for identity, and, in particular, the role that Imperial attitudes played in shaping what exactly constituted a religious community, are taken into account. Historians have, in fact, challenged the idea that religious affiliation has always played as great a role in the identity of most Bengalis. While upper class, or ashraf, Bengali Muslims may have always defined themselves according to their religious practice, for the lower classes, or atrap Muslims, there was often little that distinguished them from their Hindu neighbors. In fact, it was not until after the failure of the First Partition of Bengal in 1911 that the Muslim elite of Bengal began to fully recognize the political potential of advocating for a distinctly Muslim collective interest.

The challenge for Muslim leaders was to devise a curriculum that straddled both the modern curriculum promoted by the British and at the same time remain faithful to at least some of the elements of a traditional Islamic education. For most rural Muslims, education would end after a few years spent in a maktab; the demands of an agriculture-based economy meant that a child’s labor could not be spared. While many in the Muslim community wished to see the installment of a distinctly Islamic curriculum, they were also concerned with the material status of Muslim graduates. A purely Islamic education was increasingly considered unable to prepare students for successful careers, and the curriculum for Islamic Studies at the University of Dacca founded by the British in 1912 contained distinctly modern features. Classes were to be conducted “on modern lines” and be combined with a “thorough grounding in the English language”.¹ Many of the recommendations proposed by Muslim leaders introduced greater numbers of rural Muslims into government-regulated schools, undermining the influence of the village mullah as they extended the institutional reach of the Muslim elite.

With the proliferation of education into the countryside and the near dominance of Hindus in both University studies and government positions, the turn of the 20th Century saw the relevance of the ashraf classes on the wane. Through collaboration with the colonial administration, however, Muslim elites used education as a means of advancing a particular vision of Islamic identity that was at once firmly-grounded in religious tradition and at the same time in touch with modern forms of knowledge.

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