

The Image of the First Caliph and the Bengal Muslims Psyche through Unconventional Sources: The Colonial Milieu

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The 19th century social awakening in Bengal accommodated a historicist trend that tried to resolve contemporary social problems with a reference to the past. Though late-starters, a part of the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia began to tread on the same path. They invoked the ideals of *Sharia*, *Hadith* & *Sirat* tradition in vernacular. Most of the times, the aim was a mix of two complimentary objectives. First, they tried to unify the *Ummah* through a process of social reformation. Secondly, they wanted to present a glorious picture of the Islam to counter the contemporary Hindu & Christian propaganda. A number of the Muslim intelligentsia took the medium of *Sirat* and other form of Islamic literature to express the high tradition of Islam and its ideals which were represented through the biographical works on the Prophet and the “*Kholafaye Rasedin*”. This paper seeks to represent and analyze the different forms of Bengali Islamic literature centered on the life of Abu Bakr, the first Caliph.¹ Our main aim is to highlight a more comprehensive picture of Bengali Muslims’ psyche by analyzing the above stated unconventional sources in its proper historical setting.

In the thirteenth century, the Turkish invasion brought about an intense change in the socio-economic, political and cultural sphere of Bengal. The establishment of mosques, madrasahs and Sufikhanqa or darga by the Independent Sultans of Bengal (1350A.D.-1575A.D.), coupled with the influx of Muslim traders and Sufi preachers, encouraged local Hindus, Buddhists and others to embrace Islam.² Thus, in turn, led to the development of a new and vibrant Muslim culture in Bengal. With the effort of Muslim scholars and writers, there were a number of works on Islamic, historical, philosophical, cultural and mystical topics, as well as the aspects of comparative religion and mythology that emerged in the 15th and 16th century. The aims were to introduce the Arabic and Persian tradition to the Bengali Muslims.³ Thus the exogenous great tradition was transferred into indigenous tradition which was known as the Popular Islam in Bengal.⁴ In the latter half of nineteenth century onwards, *Sirat* and other kinds of biographical works beside classical texts were being emerged. These books were written with intent of stirring up Prophet-centered piety in the mind of the readers. Hence the learning of both the exogenous tradition and the indigenous tradition of Popular Islam were treated as ‘*shirk*’ and ‘*bidat*’⁵ in Islam. At this time, the question of purifying Islam came to the fore. The call to seek recourse in Quran or following *Tariqa-i-Muhammadiya* became the main issues for Wahabi movement. Thus, a clash of opinions erupted between the followers of Scriptural Islam and Reformists. However, the traditions of Popular Islam could not be purged. This was mainly due to the growing popularity of Islamic folk songs of varied forms that served as a medium by which Hazarat Muhammad and Hazarat Abu Bakr garnered veneration in minds of the masses. The Prophet-centric piety became inculcated in the Muslim society of Bengal. So the general theory of quasi-urban setting of Islam centering around the ‘*mosques*’, ‘*bazaars*’

and '*qasbahs*' directly contradicts⁶ with the rural setting of Bengal Islam where we see the growth of Prophet-centric piety. This study deals with the deep veneration towards Hazarat Muhammad and Hazarat Abu Bakr that was generated in the rural sections of Bengal by the Muslim intellectuals.

(I)

So far many historians, scholars and intellectuals have made momentous contribution about the study of Bengali Muslim Society. However, they have hardly acknowledged the significance of contextualizing unconventional sources i.e. *sirat*, *maulud*, *natiyya*, *maghazi* and *namaliterature* etc. Historians such as W.C.Smith, H.A.R.Gibb, Annemarie Schimmel, B.D.Metcalf have made useful efforts to analyze the historical reasons behind giving special emphasis to the Prophet in South Asian Islam from 19th century onward.⁷ Among Bengali historians who have written on Bengali Muslims in English, mention should be made about Muhammad Shah.⁸ Historian Asim Roy is the only scholar in this regard who analyzes some of the Bengali *sirats* but his focus area is pre-colonial Bengal.⁹ Abdul Hai, Ali Ahsan, Anisuzzaman and Md. Majiruddin Mian analyzed the nature of Bengali Muslim literature in the 19th and 20th century.¹⁰ But their field of specialization is Bengali literature not history. Historian Amit Dey used the massive Bengali *sirator* other type of unconventional sources and analyzed the various ways in which Bengali Muslims venerated their beloved Prophet.¹¹ My studies followed Prof. Amit Dey's footsteps and exploring sources beyond the archives. The subject matter of my study, Abu Bakr centered Bengali Muslim piety can claim novelty in many ways through its attempt to traverse an almost unexplored terrain.

The interest in Prophet and his followers have a long tradition in Bengal and it would be convenient to categorize the Islamic literature relating to their life into six groups; i) *Sirati* ii) *Maulud*, iii) *Natiyya* iv) *Mirajnama*, v) *Maghazi* vi) *Wafatnama or Wafat-i-Rasul*.

Sirat: The word *Sirat* derives from the word '*Seera*' or '*Sirah*' - meaning life or journey. Generally it means the printed biography of Hazarat Muhammad. The *siratis* often supplemented by the *hadith* collection, which contains numerous accounts of things the Prophet is reported to have and done.¹² The *sirat* literature includes a variety of heterogeneous materials containing mainly the stories of military expedition undertaken by Muhammad and his companions like Hazarat Abu Bakr and other Caliphs. These stories are intended as historical accounts and used for veneration and were also utilized by many nineteenth and twentieth century *sirat* writers.

Maulud: It comes from the word *miladormaulud*. The literary meaning is Prophet's birth anniversary. Those poetry or literature written on that occasion is known as *maulud*. *Maulud* literature in Bengali as a separate genre began to appear from the late nineteenth century.¹³ This genre of literature was written with purpose of being recited before the audience at the time milad celebration. According to available knowledge *maulud* literature in Bengali were being published from the 1870s. Abdul Ali Chowdhuri's *Maulud-i-Sarifh*, published in 1874 is an early example.

Natiyya: The word *natiyya* has derived from the Arabic word *nat*, meaning encomium or eulogium. Poetry in praise of the Prophet is known as *nat-i-Rasul* or simply *nat*. It is not surprising that most of the medieval Bengal poets who wrote *natiyya* were Sufi poets. Medieval Bengal poets focused the supernatural and mystical character of the Prophet in their *nats*. But modern Bengali writers

emphasized a sense of community solidarity with the Prophet than the supernatural and mystical character of the Prophet. The *nats* of Munshi Meherullah, Golam Mostafa and Muhammad Wajed Ali bear some example of this new trend.¹⁴

*Mirajnama, Maghazi and Wafatnama*¹⁵ are other examples of unconventional sources in this regard. It has been observed that the Sufi poets of medieval Bengal interpreted *miraj* in terms of Prophet's physical journey to heaven. Whereas their modern counterparts focused a greater eagerness as compared to them, towards interpreting *miraj* as a spiritual journey.¹⁶ *Maghazi* literature provided important information about the life of the Prophet and his Companions. It dealt with the description of military expedition of the Prophet after *Hijrah* (622). *Maghazi* was one of the common features or integral part of modern *sirat* and on the basis of this literature all the *sirat* writers tried to argue that Islam was not spread by the power of sword but by its spiritual power.¹⁷ The word *wafat* is an Arabic word meaning demise. *Wafat-i-Rasul* means demise of the Prophet and the genre of literature dealing with this event are commonly known as *wafatnama*. This genre of literature created a model before the *Ummah* as how they should venerate and love the Prophet. Akram Khan's *Mostafa Charit* (1921) and Muhammad Wajed Ali's *Maru Bhaskar* (1941) were the best example of such type of literature where the human aspect of Prophet and his followers Hazrat Abu Bakr's character is focused.¹⁸

(II)

Based on the available information, the writings of sixteen biographers of the Prophet and Hazrat Abu Bakr's will be focused with special attention in our discussion within the span of 1860-1964. Twenty are not studied either because too little is known about these writers or time limit factors. We can divide the *sirat* writers into two broad categories: the major group of writers and the minor ones. While dividing these two groups of writers, the parameter has not been ascertained upon the quality of their literary works, but on the available information regarding Abu Bakr's life and the depth of their depiction. Therefore, limiting our discussion in the traditional method of distinction among liberal conservative and unified group of writers, we shall try to distinguish under two broad divisions: Muslim and non-Muslim *sirat* writers. This is because, there is no one way identification like liberal, conservative and unified group of writers.¹⁹ While analyzing the biographical accounts and the writings of the above mentioned group of biographers, we can realize the multi-dimensional situation.

Major group of Muslim Writers:

Meer Mosharraf Hossain (1847-1912): Mosharraf Hossain was born into a notable Muslim family in the village of Lahinipara in Kusthia District, formerly Nadia subdivision in Kusthia (present-day in Bangladesh). In his autobiography entitled *Amar Jibani* (My Life), Mosharraf stated that at the early stage he became well known for his love of Bengali literature and poetry.²⁰ As a writer, his interest in Bengali and Islamic literature became a lifelong hobby. However, he was unable to complete his education at Calcutta as he was forced to return home to look after his family's properties.²¹ Mosharraf was born, brought up and educated during a socio-political volatile period in the history of Bengal, and it is not surprising that his life, thought and writings also reflected these concerns. He spent most of his life working as a manager in the Faridpur Nawab's estate and later

on in the Dilduar estate of Maymensingh, but he was still able to flourish as a profile writer. We can divide two phases of his life, the first phase (1869-1899) was eager to promote Hindu-Muslim unity. And the final stage (1899-1910) of his life concentrated anti-Hindu feelings.²²

In the first phase Mosharraf started his career by writing *Sangbad Prabhakar* and *GrambartaPrakashika*(1863-1874), which, under his stewardship, became an unrelenting voice for the poor and downtrodden people. The last one was an influential weekly journal, edited by KangalHarinathMajumder which published various articles, essays and poems on a wide range of subjects such as politics, philosophy, science, religion and literature. This journal also campaigned in favour of mass education, unfair government policies and impudence practices of the European indigo planters.²³ He wrote his first novel *Ratnabali*(1869) and a play *Basantakumari*(1873) that were brought to light to promote Hindu-Muslim unity. In this phase his liberal religious consciousness reflected in his *Go-Jiban* (1888), where he appealed to the Bengali Muslims to stop eating beef. At the same decade DayanandaSaraswati started his movement against cow-slaughter (1882) and reached its climax. Mosharraf remains concentrated in his feeling of communal harmony which was reflected in his *Go-Jiban*.²⁴His social consciousness flourished in his play *ZamidarDarpan* (1873), where he tried to disclose the zamindari oppression of the riots. His plays *UdasinPathikerMonerKotha* and *GajiMiarBastani* were also the best examples of communal harmony. In his acclaimed novel, *GajiMiarBastani*, his attitude about women was very conservative.²⁵Though, a wise, liberal and an enlightenment writer, his views about the role and position of women in the 19th century Bengal was surprisingly negative and illiberal.

At the final stage as a devout Muslim, Mosharraf wrote many books on Islamic historical and cultural themes. At this stage his famous works were “*HazaratUmarerDharmajibanLabh*”, “*HazaratBilalerJibani*”, “*Maulud Sharif*” (1905), “*BibiKhadisarBibaha*”(1905) and “*MadinarGourab*”(1906) etc. ²⁶ In his sirat ‘*MadinarGourab*’, he dealt with Muhammad and his follower Abu Bakr’s migration to Medina, his marriage with Ayesha and also how Islam became a powerful religion in Medina under leadership of Muhammad and Abu Bakr. Though rationalist, Mosharraf focuses on the mythical image of Muhammad and Abu Bakr, because the *sirat* was apparently written for the common people who were not interested in the rational image of these heroic leaders. In his *Moslem Birattva*(1907), Mosharraf wrote about Muhammadan heroism during Prophetic wars. After one year Mosharraf wrote his famous book *Islamer Joy* (1908) where he focused some aspects of Hazarat Muhammad and his follower Hazarat Abu Bakr’s life, their heroic episodes during the conquest of Medina and Islam became powerful religion in this region.²⁷ Being inspired by Bankim Chandra’s *Anandamath*, Mosharraf was writing these books, when nationalist movement reached at its peak for protesting the partition of Bengal (1905). Mosharraf was not involved in any political or nationalist movement directly or indirectly. But he could not override the spirit of his time and presented the glorious past of Islam as well as the patriotic image of Prophet and his followers before a nation under colonial rule.

Md. Dad Ali(1852-1936): Md. Dad Ali was born in a landed aristocratic Muslim family of Khustia. Dad was pro-British in his attitude. Though he did not receive ample institutional education, Dad had acquired sufficient knowledge in Sanskrit, Bengali, mathematics, Hindu scriptures and mysticism

for his mother's initiative.²⁸ He acquired some knowledge of Arabic and Persian through his own initiative and had learnt Islamic theology from his spiritual guide who was Shah Abdul Haq, a Sufi saint of Murshidabad. According to Dad's biographers, Shaykh Muhammad Burhanullah al Qurayshi, one of his forefathers, came to India from Makkah in order to preach Islam in the subcontinent.²⁹ He served as an honorary magistrate in the bench of Khustia and his father was a police inspector of Murshidabad. He was also engaged in socio-religious activities like digging ponds, outset of school and Mosques for commoners.

Dad started his career after pre-mature death of his wife. He elicited his sore in a book of verses entitled "*Bhangapran*" (Broken-heart) in 1905.³⁰ In one of his poem in this book he exposed his feeling about Hindu-Muslim unity, when the partition of Bengal had sieved between the two communities. Muhammad Dad Ali's birth place was also the flourishing centers of the folk song *baul*. Probably under this influence, in his book "*Ashique-Rashul*" (1907), Dad presented here Muhammad and Abu Bakr as boat men who were supposed to take soul peacefully and safely from one shore (this world) to another (world beyond).³¹ In one place of the poem the poet appealed to the bird not to hate the Bengali language and speak or song of the sweet language. The poet had also concerned about the upliftment of peasantry which was portrayed in his *Samajsikshab* because the majority of peasantry of the Bengal belongs to the Muslims in that period. In recognition of his literary contribution, his local village school was renamed as Dad Ali Primary School. As a tribute to his memory, Muhammad TajulHaq a prominent leader of Kusthia had established a socio-cultural organization Kabi Dad Ali Trust in 1977.³²

Abdur Rahim(1859-1931): Abdur Rahim was born into an educated Muslim family of the village Muhammadpur in Basirhat.³³ He was brought up in the house of Radhamadhab Bose, a liberal Brahmo landlord and government official of Taki. As a talented student, he pursued his early education with considerable devotion and dedication, and this enabled him to complete his early education with success. However, he could not appear for his entrance examination due to illness, and although later made a full recovery, but he was not able to resume his formal education. So Abdur Rahim became disappointed but his undeterred spirit helped him to continue his studies privately. He not only acquired fluency in Arabic, Persian, Urdu and Bengali, but also became thoroughly familiar with scriptural Islam, history and literature. In the second half of the 19th century, some *sirat* writers tried to point out the superiority of Islam and its Prophet or Caliph the first over their religions by focusing on the ritualistic aspects of Islam. Those writers were popularly known as "Sudhakar Group". Prominent among them was Abdur Rahim who wrote "*Islam*" (1896), "*Namaj-Tattva*" (1903), "*Hajbidhi*" (1903) and "*Islam Itibritta*" (1910) with the purpose of bringing Bengali Muslim's back to the way of Islam as shown by their holy Prophet and his followers. At the age of 28, Abdur Rahim wrote his magnum opus entitled "*Hazarat Muhammad Jiban Charit ODharmaniti*" (Cal.-1887), which provided a detailed survey of the life and teaching of the Prophet and his follower Hazarat Abu Bakr.³⁴

Abdur Rahim's *Sirat* became very influential, and it inspired other famous writers to compose their own biography of the Prophet. These *sirats* are Akram Khan's *Mustafa Charit*; Yakub Ali Chowdhury's *Noor Nabi*; Golam Mostafa's *Viswa-Nabi* etc. His important work *Islam Itibritta* covered

the period of Islamic expansion in the East and the West. He intended to write a comprehensive history of the Muslim world, beginning with the Prophet and ending in his own time. In this two volume works he focused the detail description of the first Caliph Abu Bakr and other Caliphs of *Kholafaye Rasedin*.³⁵ Abdur Rahim's work on Islam and Muhammad can be properly treated in the context of emerging Bengali nationalism, when Bankim Chandra played a significant role for creating the theoretical platform of Bengali nationalism by using Hindu sentiment. Thus, the approach and target of the two intellectuals became different in the question of nationalism.

Mozammel Hoque (1860-1933): The poetry and prose writer Mozammel Hoque was born at Shantipur in Nadia. He maintained a deep respect towards Sufism and Vaishnavism. ³⁶He wrote several biographies of Sufis such as "*Maharshi Mausur*" (1896), "*Tapas Kahini*" (1906) and "*Hazarat Muhammad*" (1903) etc.. The Sufi influence was reflected in his *sirat* entitled "*Hazarat Muhammad*" (1903), written in verse. Here he focused the moral and truthful aspect of Abu Bakr's character. I quote from this *sirat*:

"Arab bhumirmajheatisaysadasoy
Chhila Abu bakrmahan.
Bidaibhusitamatisagunasaurava tar
Nabanirchhilobhaktiman,
Chilonasanmansimasatataisadatusto
Maharusthohaitaasatyadarsane.
Devtulladeha tar shovitomadhuroti
Nainisthasadhutiaujjal kirane."³⁷

[There Lived Abu Bakr, noble and magnanimous / In Arab Land/ His was mind, enlightened with learning./ And embellished with virtues/ He was devoted to the creator and he was /Universally revered/ Truths always gave him satisfaction and he was/ Very indignant at the sight of untruth/ His psyche and divine grace/ He was a man, illuminated by his adherence to /Fairness and justice.]

Here Haque described Abu Bakr as "sadhu or saint". Probably the poet was subconsciously influenced by the Vaishnava tradition when he was writing this *sirat* in verse. It is interesting that Vaishnava influence was great in Haque's birth place Shantipur. This Vaishnava tradition was also responsible for Hoque's liberal attitude towards other religions.

(III)

Minor Group of Muslim Writers:

Doctor Syed Abul Hossain (1862-?): Syed Abul Hossain was a homeopath medical doctor by profession and spent a long time in Europe and in America. His literary activities received the praise of Meherulla and Zamiruddin. His important *sirat* was "*Moslem Patakaba Hazarat Muhammader Jibani*" (1908) which received praise from Hindu intellectuals as shows the advertisement of the book. ³⁸This book was written with the purpose of reawakening the Bengali Muslims by informing them about their glorious past.

Munshi Sheikh Muhammad Zamiruddin (1870-1930): Zamiruddin has mentioned in his autobiography that he was born in the village of Garandoba in the district of Nadia. He wrote an article "*Asal Quran Kothai?*" by the inspiration of "Sudhakar Group". His famous *sirat*

were “*SresthaNabiHazaratMuhammad*”, “*MeherCharit*” and “*Islam Grahan*” etc. In his “*SresthaNabiHazaratMuhammad*”, Zamiruddin emphasized the human character of Muhammad who told his follower Abu Bakr that the real power to show *mujiza*(inimitable miracle of the Prophet) was the monopoly of the God.³⁹

AbdurRahaman Khan (1890-1964): AbdurRahaman was born at the village Bhanderkandi in Faridpur district. By profession he was a principal of Jagannath College in Dacca. He belonged to the ashraf society and was pro-British in his attitude. He wrote his *sirat* “*Char Iar*” in the year 1933. In this book he focused the mystic image of Abu Bakr. His other famous *sirats* were “*Moslem Nari*”, “*ShesNabi*”, “*Islam Parichiti*” and “*Quran Sharif*” and *Hadith Sharif*” etc.⁴⁰

GolamMostafa(1897-1964):Poet GolamMostafa was born in a highly educated and highly religious Muslim family. His birth place was the village of Monoharpurin Jessore. His “*Viswa-Nabi*” is arguably the most popular *sirat* even written in Bengali. In this *sirat*, he tried to defend *mujiza* in the light of science. After twenty two years of this *sirat*, he wrote his famous book “*Hazarat Abu Bakr*(1964).⁴¹

(IV)

Non-Muslim Sirat writers:

It is interesting that some non-Muslim *sirat* writers wrote biography of Muhammad and his followers, like Hazarat Abu Bakr Siddiki. Those writers were Bhai Girish Chandra Sen, Atul Krishna Mitra, Rampran Gupta, Charu Chandra Mitra, Nagendranath Bondapadhaya and Brajasundar Roy etc. Bhai Girish Chandra Sen (1894-1910) wrote a biography of Muhammad and his follower Abu Bakr under the influence of Keshab Candra Sen.⁴² It is regarded as the first biography of Muhammad in Bengali. His deep respect for Sufism was reflected in his work entitled “*Tapasmala*”. It had more than five editions which testify its popularity. Rampran Gupta wrote many articles in the journal ‘*Prabasi*’ on Islam and Indian Muslim dynasties for promoting a better understanding between the two communities. In his book “*Islam Kahini*”, in the first chapter he dealt with the biographical accounts of Hazarat Muhammad and in the second chapter with the biographical accounts of *Kholafaya Rasedin*.⁴³ Atul Krishna Mitra wrote a drama on the life of Muhammad and his follower, Abu Bakr, entitled “*Dharambir Muhammad*” (1885).⁴⁴ The second part of this book was published by Sri Gurudash Chatterjee. The subject matter of this drama contains after *Hijrat* to Muhammad’s death. In the fourth act of this drama, we get the depiction of Abu Bakr as warrior. Here he makes Abu Bakr utter:

“Chalahaomar! nahibhoy
Chalmatiranarangabhume.”⁴⁵

It is interesting to note that Nagendranath Bandapadhaya and Md. Jaharul Hoque wrote their *sirat*—“*Hazarat Abu Bakr*”. The publisher made unbounded praise about this *sirat*:

“One crowded of glorious life
Is worth an age without name.”⁴⁶

Obviously this glorious past of Muslims was an indirect influence to the ‘*Ummah*’. Similarly lawyer, Charu Chandra Mishra also, in his article entitled “*Khelafat Bibaran*” tried to portray Abu Bakr as fearless, ideal, and an honest Caliph.⁴⁷ Another non-Muslim writer Brajasunder Roy, a Principal of

a college of Assam, wrote “*Islam Gourab*”(1943), published by “*SadharanBrahmoSamaj*,” is a simple book, simply and elegantly written, and an attempt to show where the strength and beauty of Islam actually lay. Here he portrayed the historical pictures of the holy prophet and his follower Abu Bakr’s life. ⁴⁸

The most interesting fact that the above stated major portion of writers belongs outside the Ulama society. They were also educated in the western education and by profession they were Govt. patron classes who tried to promote a better understanding between different communities through their writings. And most of the non-Muslim *sirat* writers were influenced by the ideas of Brahmo. They tried to represent the Islam and the biographies of Muhammad and the *KhulafayeRasedin* in the monotheist tradition believed by the followers of Rammohan Roy. In order to create and enrich Islamic literature in Bengali, these writers translated Arabic and Persian Books into Bengali, wrote biographies of the Prophet Muhammad, the Caliphs and other Personalities. Thus, they played an important role in making Bengali an acceptable medium for carrying the message of Islam. In this connection, my query is whether the religious factor was the main cause or the market and its reader.

(V)

Projection of Abu Bakr in the Bengali Countryside

The Bengali *sirat* literature on Abu Bakr presented him in various roles. In our analysis they are divided in five broad groups. The *sirat* literature on Abu Bakr stresses his role as the foremost theologian of Islam, a righteous judge, a warrior of Islam and tireless preacher of Islam. In some works the roles of Abu Bakr overlapped each other. The following table will highlight the points.

Table-1: Projection of Abu Bakr by Sirat Writers

Image	No. of Ideas
1. Abu Bakr as Theologian	16
2. Abu Bakr as Judge	04
3. Abu Bakr as Preacher	01
4. Abu Bakr as Warrior	04
5. Miscellaneous Character	03
Total :	28

In Bengali *Sirat* literature the image of Abu Bakr as the foremost theologian of Islam in the Post-Muhammad period became prominent. The projection of Abu Bakr was in the line of the well-established tradition of Islam through the life of Abu Bakr. The *sirat* writers tried to highlight the ideals of Islamic theology. This image was also most acceptable to the target readers of Bengali Muslims in the town and in the countryside. Abu Bakr as the righteous judge and a warrior of Islam also commanded the attention of Bengali *sirat* writers, though they are few in number in comparison with his presentation as a theologian. In only one case Abu Bakr appeared as a preacher of Islam. As we have mentioned earlier Abu Bakr appeared as a mixture of different characteristics.

We have seen what features of Abu Bakr's character was more acceptable to the authors and hence, the readers of vernacular *sirat* literature. The periodical distribution of such images of Abu Bakr during our period is also interesting to note.

Table-1.1 : Projection of Abu Bakr by Sirat Writers

Time Scale	Theologian	Judge	Preacher	Warrior	Misc.	Total
1880-1910	10	02	01	02	01	16
1910-1940	06	--	--	02	01	09
1940-1964	--	02	--	01	--	03

Most of the *sirat* literature on Abu Bakr appeared between 1880-1940.⁴⁹ During the first thirty years (1880-1910) Abu Bakr as a theologian drew the attention of the *sirat* writers. During the same period the aspects of Abu Bakr's character such the judge, the warrior of Islam were taken up by the *sirat* writers. In the next 30 years (1910-1940) the appeal of Abu Bakr as the central figure of *sirat* literature decreased. In that period the basic presentation of Abu Bakr as a theologian continued. His image as warrior invoked but his roles as the judge and the preacher made no impact on the *sirat* writers. It is to be noted that actually Abu Bakr appeared as a warrior character in the *sirat* literature three times between the years 1905-1940. It reminds us the rise of militant Islam in Bengal.⁵⁰ During the next 24 years *sirat* literature on Abu Bakr drastically decreased. In majority of those literatures Abu Bakr appeared as righteous judge. We conclude that the first 60 years of our period (1880-1940), the projection of Abu Bakr in the *sirat* literature was made to signify the importance of Islamic codes in unifying the *Ummah*. At the same period though much sparsely, his image as a militant hero was invoked. While the growth of communal tension in Bengal (1910-40),⁵¹ *sirat* literatures on Abu Bakr decreased. But his image as theologian and warrior overshadowed other features of his characters. In the last period of our analysis Abu Bakr's appeal as a theologian and warrior ceased to attract the attention of the *sirat* writers. His role as a righteous judge holding the laws of *Ummah* became dominant.

Conclusion:

During the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, these biographers' respect towards Abu Bakr began to flourish in their prose and poetic creation. Gradually, the rationalistic thinking got the major concern; though it pivoted within the traditional periphery. At this stage the biographical writings of Abu Bakr were gradually transformed from poetry to prose.⁵² The fact becomes clear from the analysis of these *sirat* writer's lives and professions.

The second category writers dealt with the several other matters beside the scriptural Islam. These writers have emphasized the importance of education, freedom of women, modern medical science and last but not the least, active political participation.⁵³

Finally, Some Brahma and Hindu intellectuals tried to promote studies in comparative religion for better understanding between Hindus and Muslims. This group of writers tried to salvage the real and historical image of Muhammad and his follower Abu Bakr. On the other hand, the Muslim

writers only concentrated on their own religion and hence failed to share studies in comparative religion. Moreover, unlike the non-Muslim writers, the Muslim writers were critical about the leader of other religions. So, their *sirat* literature failed to promote a better understanding between different communities in the multi-religious subcontinent.⁵⁴

The *sirat* writers, though mostly non-Ulama in origin, operated within the restricted code of the Ulama in their literary works. The writers would face trouble or their literary works would not reach to the readers without the Ulama's approval. In this context, we can remember the burning of Atul Krishna's dramatic work "*Dharmabir Muhammad*".⁵⁵ So it is difficult to analyze whether popular ideals influenced the vernacular *sirat* literature in Bengal or the elitist ideals of Islam filtered down through the vernacular *sirats*. From 1940, *sirat* literature based on Abu Bakr decreased because of two reasons. From 1940-1947 the calm and quiet image of Abu Bakr lost its appeal because of the increasing communal tension in Bengal.⁵⁶ From 1947, the partition of Bengal caused a temporary halt in the process of unification of the Bengali Muslim society through a religious line.

Notes and References :

1. Hazrat Abu Bakr, the believer, was close associate of Prophet Muhammad. Both of them hailed from the Banu Koraish family. He was the first Caliph of Islamic world. Matar N.L. *Islam for Beginners*, Delhi, 2002, pp. 25-26
2. Sen Sukumar, *Islami Bangla Sahitya*, Calcutta, 1951; Musa Mansur (ed.); *Enamul Haq Rachanabali*, Vol.-1, Dacca, 1991; Sarkar Jagadish Narayan, *Hindu Musalman Samparka (Madyayug)*, Calcutta, 1388 B.S.
3. *ibid.*; Sharif Ahmed, *Syed Sultan – Tar Granthabali O Tar Yug*, Dacca, 1972, pp. 86-98; Eaton Richard M., *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, New Delhi, 1994.
4. Roy Asim, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, Princeton, 1983.
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