

Bengal Renaissance and Abbasuddin Ahmed:Response of Muslims through his Folk Songs

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Abstract:This paper focuses primarily on the Bengal Renaissance, Abbasuddin Ahmed, and the reactions of Muslims through his folk songs. His folk songs significantly influenced the Muslim community by challenging the prevailing dogmas, leading to a strong response from them. He recognized the importance of addressing illiteracy as a fundamental barrier to their progress. In the first half of the 20th century in Cooch Behar, Abbasuddin Ahmed emerged as a pivotal figure in his folk music, attempting to dismantle the traditional orthodox mindset within Muslim society. The esteemed poet Kazi Nazrul Islam greatly impacted his journey toward success. His contributions to the renaissance through folk songs resonated with the masses and were passed down through generations. Through radio broadcasts, he reached the hearts of many. However, his journey was fraught with challenges, as orthodox Moulavis and Muslims were particularly restrictive towards musical instruments at that time. Ultimately, these folk songs gained immense popularity among the Bengali people, especially in northern Bengal and throughout colonial Bengal, including Cooch Behar. The researcher's primary aim is to explore how he fostered the north Bengal renaissance through his folk songs such as Bhawaiya, Islami Gazal, kaomi songs, and more.

Keywords:Abbasuddin, Bengal Renaissance , Muslims, Moulavi, North Bengal etc.

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Introduction

The Bengal Renaissance was not only confined to a few communities, but it had an impact on the Muslim community also. In those days, Abbasuddin Ahmed was one of the names we got from North Bengal, particularly the Princely State of Cooch Behar (under the British Presidency). He was born into an aristocratic family in Koch, Bihar. Although he was a Muslim by birth, we can see that he won the hearts of everyone through his beautiful folk songs. His indifferent mentality towards advancing Muslim society was formed at a very

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young age. And we see that Kazi Nazrul Islam, the famous Bengali poet of India, came into the company and showed the way to awakening the hands of the fundamentalists to the conservative Muslim society, and his contribution in this regard was noteworthy. He tried to express his infinite talent in him through folk songs and awaken his community to move forward during the period of Renaissance in Bengal. His move undoubtedly took the Muslim community forward. He played an important role in the Bengal Renaissance, and Muslim communities benefited from his efforts. Our great Bengali poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam, encouraged him, and even some songs of Nazrul Islam were sung to him. Through these folk songs, he wanted to awaken his community during the time of the renaissance in Bengal. He realised that the illiteracy of this community was the main cause of their backwardness.

Abbasuddin Ahmed was born into a respectable, conservative Muslim family on October 27th, 1901 at Balarampur under the Sub-division of Tufanganj in the Princely State of Cooch Behar (Bengal Presidency under British India) and he died on December 30th, 1959. His father, Zafar Ali Ahmed, was a lawyer at the Sub-division Court of Tufanganj. His early education was received in North Bengal's schools and colleges. Through cultural programmes, he became close to the music from his school and college days. He had an innate talent for melody. He went to great lengths during his lifetime to make the most of his natural abilities. After his debut disc record was released, his reputation quickly became well-known. He only managed to learn music via his efforts thanks to his incredibly reactive memory and keen hearing. He studied classical music in Calcutta under the tutelage of the then-reigning Thumri king, Ustad (teacher) Zamiruddin Khan. He interacted closely with Sarangi player Professor Chote Khan, Tabla player Professor Azim Khan, and Sitarist Ustad Enayet Khan.¹

The name Abbasuddin Ahmed has become synonymous with Bengali folk tunes. No one individual has done as much to revitalize the long-neglected folk songs that have been shared across generations through oral tradition. Abbasuddin took a deep plunge into this unexplored musical domain, keeping these cherished yet simple songs from being lost amid modernity. He was an innovator in raising the status of folk music from rural communities to a position of esteem. No other singer or musician has equaled his impact on reinstating folk songs as the root of all melody. He was a leader in this movement and saw the fruits of his exceptional contributions in his lifetime.²

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Abbasuddin claimed to have been instrumental in inspiring the great poet of Bengal, Kazi Nazrul Islam, to compose Islamic songs. Poet Nazrul's first Islamic song 'রমজানের ঐ শেসে এবং ইসলামের ঐ সউদানিয়ে' (Bengali version) were sung by Abbasuddin Ahmed. In the same vein, he popularised the regional folk songs of north Bengal, especially Bhawaiya, a song popular among cart men that is filled with melancholy and tragic cries. He played a key role in gathering classic folk songs in their original key and spreading their popularity throughout rural and urban life. Nobody has done as much before him to restore folk music to its proper position in the cultural landscape.³

Like his folk songs, he tried to reform Muslim society in Bengal. He promoted those reforms through his folk songs, although it was not an easy task at all because, in those days, it was very difficult to fight the *Moulavis* and their conservative mentality. Ultimately, we see that all obligations were removed by his efforts and he tried to awaken their community, not only in North Bengal but also throughout Bengal during the colonial period.

In 1932, he was still young when he received an invitation to participate in a youth conference in Sirajganj (now part of Bangladesh), alongside the esteemed poet Kazi Nazrul Islam. The residents of Sirajganj warmly welcomed him. The gathering was filled with continuous applause for every utterance, making the event vibrant and lively. He kept performing song after song. Although there were no microphones or sound systems permitted at that time, everyone present found fulfillment both indoors and outdoors. That day marked his first recognition as a singer in Bangladesh.⁴

The students at Jaipurhat School, located near Hilly Station, once invited him to be a guest.

Later in the evening, they set up a singing session, but one boy interjected, "Look, singing with a harmonium and other instruments could lead to significant issues." This is due to the fact that La-Mahajabi individuals make up the majority here, and they find music to be quite offensive. Initially, he was taken aback by the boy's comment. However, he then took to the stage and approached the audience with respect. A gentleman in the crowd asked him, "Are you going to sing here with musical instruments? There won't be any consequences." He responded, "No, I will only share a few words with the audience. Thirteen hundred years ago, dear Prophet, consider the message he delivered to us." He began to sing -- *তোরা দখে যা*

আমনি মায়েরে কৈলে

মধু পূর্ণিমার সিঁথো চাঁদ দৌলে।" (Bengali version)

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Then he sang, “*জাগে সে জোশ লয়ে আর মুসলমান*” (Bengali version). After stopping his song, he highlighted where Muslim society falters; the chains of illiteracy bind everyone closely, and the presence of fundamentalists weighs down this community like a stone. Young passers-by, free yourselves from them; push for a fresh beginning, a new wave of progress; eliminate this clutter, the illuminating fire of knowledge.⁵ He got a new turning point in his life from that day, because at the end of the song, everyone shakes hands with him.

On a certain day, Abbasuddin met Fazlul Haque, a prominent leader from Bengal, who was living in his home on Beniapukur Lane in Calcutta at the time. During one meeting, Haque asked him to listen to his song. When Milad was finished, he brought a harmonium into the house. Several *Mulavis* stood inside. Fazlul Haque told them that those who wanted to leave could do so. "This time, I'm going to listen to Abbasuddin's Milad accompanied by the harmonium," he said, prompting the *Moulavis* to exit. He proceeded to play the harmonium and sing. “*তোরা দেখে যা আমনি ময়েরে কোণে*” (Bengali version). Tears are flowing in the eyes of Hazulul Haque. *Maulvis* was standing outside the door. One by one, everyone came and took their seats. Then he started a song⁶-

জগনা সে যোশ লয়ে আর মুসলমান

করলি জয় যে তজে লয়ে দুনিয়া জাহান (Bengali version)

A smile of joy appeared on the faces of the *Mualavis*. Mr. Haque explained, "Is this song *haram*? You were leaving before. How do you feel now?"

Mr. Fazlul Haque came back from the roundtable discussion, following which a large conference for farmers and tenants took place in Mymensingh, featuring Hazlul Haque, Maulana Akram Khan, and K.G.M. Farooqi, along with Nalini Sarkar's Leaders' Rally. The event drew an immense crowd, approximately sixty thousand attendees. It marked the first occasion since Sirajganj that he had the chance to perform at such a significant gathering, filling him with an unstoppable courage that inspired him to sing. –

বাজছে দামামা বাধরে আমামা শরি উঁচু করি

মুসলমান

দাওয়াতে এসছে নয়া জমানার ভাঙা কল্‌লায়

ওড়ে নশান ॥

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The meeting attracted a large crowd. He needs to perform this type of song after one speaker concludes. Those who have listened to him on the radio are excited to see him in person. By the end of the meeting, everyone in the room rushed to get closer to him. Giyasauddin Pathan managed to rescue me from the throng and took him to his home.⁷

Fazlul Haque, the chief of Bengal, had a deep affection for Kazi Nazrul Islam. They were both once invited to the Eid-Re Union at Washel Mollah's shop. Mr. Haque was there and asked Kazi Nazrul to perform a song centered around the theme of Eid. Then Abbasuddin and Kazi Nazrul together started a song,

“ঈদ মোবারক ঈদ মোবারক ঈদ মোবারক হে।

রাহলেল্লাহ কে আপনাকে বলিয়ে দলি কে হল শহীদ ?”(Bengali version)

Mr. Fazlul Haque also there and wrote a poem instantly and recited it,

“দখেনি সদেশি রাত্রে অদ্ভুত স্বপ্ন

স্বশানরে মাঝারে, এক মহান মানব বিভূতিভিষি

জজিঞাসনে তারে: কহ তুমি কবো

কহলি—আমি য়ে কবাপ্রথিবী

শ্বশানে আমি গাহি সদা জীবনের গান।”(Bengali version)

Everyone was taken aback. He stated, "Look, if I (Hazlul) head to Bengal alongside Kazi Nazrul and Abbasuddin, I could dominate the entire region in just a few days."⁸

Promoting the message of the Muslim League, Syed Badroddoja commenced advocating for the charm of Islam, education, and religion in Bengal through his passionate speeches, using such rational language that he swiftly garnered the affection of Muslim youth across Bengal. Abbasuddin Ahmed had attended various meetings and committees in Bengal during that era with Mr. Badroddoja. Syed Badroddoja was at that time the leader of Bangladesh and was once escorted to Sylhet by the students there. Captivated by Sylhet's natural beauty, he stood mesmerized by the stunning Surma River. Then Abbasuddin Ahmed Sang the first song— “এই

সুন্দর ফল সুন্দর ফুল মর্তি নদীর পানী

খোদা তোমার মহেরবানী”।(Bengali version)

On that day, the speeches delivered by Syed Badroddoja inspired the people of Sylhet with remarkable zeal. Meanwhile, Fazlul Haque's name was circulating among the everyday

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citizens of Bengal. The highly regarded leader in Bengal, Abbasuddin, performed on the day when the eleventh minister received his first congratulations at the Calcutta Town Hall.⁹—

ভারতের দুই নয়ন-তারা হিন্দু মুসলমান

দেশ-জনীর সমান প্রিয় যুগল সন্তান।

হিন্দু মুসলমান। (Bengali version)

A live broadcast will be presented by Radio about the Fateha Dohaj Doham. The Radio Station's Director, Mr. Nripen Majumdar, remarked that this is the first show centered on this topic; they are quite traditional, and they might disrupt my radio station. However, if you can obtain his signature on this script, with no objections from Maulana Akram Khan, I will proceed with the broadcast. Afterward, he approached Maulana Sabeel and shared the entire script. Maulana embraced him joyfully and expressed, "We must invigorate our stagnant society with this vibrancy. Outstanding, outstanding." Maulana noted, "The more this type of biography is spread, the greater the impact." The Director of the Radio Broadcast felt very pleased to find that there were no objections. Maulana inquired about the number of programs planned for the entire year. Abbasuddin then listed Shabebarat, Fateha Doaj Doham, Fateha Yaz Doham, Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Adha, and others. Special programs were created for each of these Muslim events. All forms of ceremonies began to come alive with songs, lyrics, and recitations. During Ramadan, Azan was scheduled on the radio, the Shabebarat program was organized, and numerous food arrangements were made at the radio station.¹⁰

Abbasuddin Ahmed reached out to Nazrul Islam, the renowned Bengali poet, to compose and arrange Islamic songs for the HMV studios. By introducing music into Indian Muslim households, he helped awaken them from a state of stagnation. His name was the first Muslim name to be featured on record labels in what was once India. Prior to Abbasuddin's influence, Muslim artists often adopted pseudonyms to conceal their Muslim identity. In the undivided Goalpara District, Cooch Behar, and Rangpore, Abbasuddin recorded various genres including Bhawaiya, Khirol, and Chatka.¹¹

As we observed in the 1940s, particularly on the eve of India's partition, Abbasuddin's songs played a very significant role in raising Muslim public opinion in favour of Pakistan. A few months after the partition in 1947, he became an additional song organizer for the Department of Information and Broadcasting. In 1955, he participated in the South East Asia Conference in Manila as a representative of Pakistan. And in 1956, he participated in the

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International Folk Music Conference in Germany and 1957 the Bengali Cultural Conference in Rangoon.¹² He was the recipient of the Pride of Performance award in 1960 by the Government of Pakistan and the *Shilpakala* Academy Award and Independence Day Award in 1979 and 1981 by the Government of Bangladesh.¹³

Abbasuddin Ahmed was one of those who contributed to the renaissance of Bengal from the minority community in the modern era, especially from Northern part of Bengal. Although he was born into a Muslim aristocratic family in the Cooch Behar State, he tried to reform the thinking of Muslim fundamentalists at that time. However, it was not an easy task at all. The reason was that it was very difficult to break the dogma in Muslim society and bring them into the mainstream of reform through music. We have noticed that the great Bengali poet Kazi Nazrul Islam helped him in this work. All the activities related to the Renaissance in Bengal were really difficult. In that sense, the conservativeness of Muslims and *Moulavis* were the main obstacles, and the introduction of musical instruments was a particularly challenging one. However, he made the work easier with the magic of his melody, particularly folk songs; he easily won the hearts of the people through his songs. He also popularised through his radio programmes songs like Bengali songs, *Islami Gazl*, *Kaoyami* songs etc. Even through these activities, he touched the hearts of the common people of Bengal very easily. He had a pioneering role in bringing music to the homes of Indian Muslims and arousing them from a state of backwardness. So, through these folk songs, he easily breaks the dogma of the conservative mentality of their community and forwards them from backwardness. He was a forerunner in the fields of the Bengal renaissance from the minority community. And it was a great achievement in those days and his songs. Those songs are still reverberating not only in Bangladesh but also in the whole of north Bengal, from generation to generation. Abbasuddin's unwavering excitement and abiding love for the music he performed, which had its roots firmly in the village traditions he learned from infancy and never betrayed, is surely a significant part of why people in East and West Bengal have grown to adore the folk music of their nation.

The Bengal Renaissance of the nineteenth century and the music of Abbasuddin Ahmed are intricately linked through the social and cultural evolution of Bengal. While Abbasuddin primarily belonged to the twentieth century, his musical works encapsulated numerous concepts that originated during the Bengal Renaissance. Below are the key connections between the two:

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Revival of Bengali Culture

The Bengal Renaissance fostered a renewed interest in and appreciation for the Bengali language, literature, and folk traditions. Abbasuddin advanced this ethos by popularizing Bengali folk songs such as Bhawaiya, Bhatiali, and Jari songs. His contributions played a crucial role in preserving rural Bengali culture, akin to the efforts of Renaissance thinkers who sought to safeguard and modernize Bengali identity.

Awakening of Common People

The leaders of the Renaissance aimed to make education and culture accessible to the general populace, not just the elite. Abbasuddin's songs, sung in straightforward Bengali, mirrored the lives, emotions, and challenges faced by rural communities. Through his music, he bridged the gap between cultural expression and the masses.

Religious Harmony and Humanism

The Bengal Renaissance championed liberalism, humanism, and interfaith understanding. Abbasuddin performed both Islamic devotional songs and secular Bengali folk music, exemplifying the harmony among various religious and cultural traditions within Bengal.

Development of National and Regional Identity: The thinkers of the Renaissance played a pivotal role in shaping contemporary Bengali identity. Abbasuddin's music reinforced this identity by celebrating the rivers, villages, and folk traditions of Bengal. His songs became integral to the emotional and cultural consciousness of the Bengali people.

Use of Modern Media for Cultural Spread

The Renaissance spurred advancements in printing, education, and modern communication. Abbasuddin leveraged gramophone records and radio to disseminate folk music extensively. This modernization of folk culture represented a continuation of the Renaissance spirit, merging tradition with contemporary methods.

Influence of Literary and Cultural Reformers

Abbasuddin was influenced by writers and composers who were themselves products of the Bengal Renaissance tradition, especially Kazi Nazrul Islam. Nazrul's progressive and humanistic ideals were connected to the intellectual environment created during the Renaissance.

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So, the relationship lies in the fact that Abbasuddin's songs became a continuation of the cultural awakening begun during the Bengal Renaissance, especially in preserving folk heritage, promoting Bengali identity, and connecting culture with ordinary people.

Towards Modernization

During the late colonial era, Abbasuddin Ahmed had a significant cultural impact on the social transformation of Bengali Muslims. His songs had a significant impact on the era in which Muslim intellectuals, reformers, and leaders started reconsidering their society's relationship with Bengali language, music, education, and contemporary public culture, even though they did not actively initiate political modernization initiatives. Many traditional Muslim families in Bengal in the early 20th century believed that music was either too strongly linked to Hindu culture or un-Islamic. By performing Islamic devotional songs in Bengali, particularly those composed by Kazi Nazrul Islam, Abbasuddin altered this. Together, they produced a cultural manifestation that was uniquely Bengali Muslim.

This cultural confidence helped Muslim reformers argue that Bengali Muslims should participate in modern literature, education, journalism, recording industries, and public life instead of remaining socially isolated.

The success of Abbasuddin challenged conventional beliefs regarding music and modern cultural engagement. Before his time, a number of Muslim entertainers masked their Muslim heritage or used alternative names within the music industry. In contrast, Abbasuddin proudly used his Muslim name on his gramophone recordings. This transition was important as modernization in Bengal involved more than just technology and political matters; it also signified a shift in societal views on education, artistic expression, and community involvement. While various Muslim political leaders and reformers aimed for social betterment, they often found it challenging to emotionally connect with rural peasants. Through his folk songs—especially Bhawaiya and Bhatiali—Abbasuddin utilized local dialects and mirrored the lives of cart drivers, farmers, laborers, and boatmen.

By incorporating rural folk culture into gramophone records and urban environments, he honored marginalized Muslim rural culture, indirectly increased literacy and cultural engagement, and assisted in linking elite reform movements with the general populace. This was crucial for leaders aiming to help Muslim society transcend feudal traditions and embrace modern education and politics. His efforts were part of a broader Bengali Muslim renaissance connected to writers and reformers such as Kazi Nazrul Islam, A. K. Fazlul Huq,

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Muhammad Shahidullah, and Begum Rokeya. These individuals advocated for the Bengali language among Muslims, modern educational practices, social reform, women's involvement, and a critical view of superstition and strict conservatism. The songs of Abbasuddin laid the emotional and cultural groundwork for these reformist concepts to reach a wider audience among ordinary Muslims.

His incorporation of gramophone recordings, radio broadcasts, and popular music symbolized a shift towards modernization. The print culture, recording industry, public performances, literary communities, and mass communication networks increasingly integrated Muslim society in Bengal. Abbasuddin played a crucial role in making Muslims active participants in the evolving cultural landscape of Bengal, rather than remaining isolated or solely reliant on Urdu-Persian traditions. Thus, while Abbasuddin's impact on Muslim leaders was largely indirect, it was significantly influential. His music facilitated the emergence of a modern Bengali Muslim identity, fostering cultural participation, pride in the Bengali language, and a willingness to engage with reforms and public life. Consequently, his songs became integral to the larger process of modernization within Bengali Muslim society during the late colonial era.

Abbasuddin Ahmed aimed to modernize aspects of the Bengali Muslim community primarily through culture, education, and public identity instead of focusing on religious reform movements. He gained recognition for bringing Bengali folk music—particularly bhawaiya, bhatiali, and Islamic devotional songs—to the attention of Muslim audiences in Bengal. During an era when many elite Muslims in Bengal favored Urdu or Persianized culture, Abbasuddin played a crucial role in validating the Bengali language and folk traditions as integral to Muslim identity.

His role in "modernizing" can be interpreted in several ways: He utilized gramophone recordings and radio, the contemporary mass media, to disseminate folk and Islamic music to a larger audience. He urged Bengali Muslims to engage in literary and cultural activities rather than stay socially conservative or withdrawn. He promoted education and a greater cultural revival among rural Muslims. He aimed to connect Islamic identity with Bengali regional culture, demonstrating that it was possible to be both Muslim and profoundly Bengali.

Concerning the political issue of Pakistan: yes, Abbasuddin did, to some extent, support the Pakistan movement during the 1940s. Like many Muslim artists and intellectuals in Bengal,

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he was involved in the atmosphere shaped by the All-India Muslim League and performed songs that bolstered Muslim political consciousness. However, he wasn't a key political ideologue or strategist for Pakistan, unlike Muhammad Ali Jinnah. His involvement was predominantly cultural rather than political.

Significantly, his backing for Pakistan was fueled by the aspiration that the Muslims of Bengal would achieve increased dignity, opportunity, and representation. However, following Partition, numerous Bengali Muslim cultural icons—among them those inspired by Abbasuddin's legacy—grew disenchanted with West Pakistan's hegemony over Bengali language and culture. His daughter, Ferdousi Rahman, eventually emerged as a key figure in the cultural landscape of what became Bangladesh.

The previous discussion shows that Abbasuddin has produced numerous songs, each carrying its own significance. These songs had a modest influence on individuals, particularly regarding Muslim religious music. One consensus we reached from the discussion is that these genuine songs aim to elevate the Muslim community. He sought to bring some reform to the early Muslim society, although achieving this was a formidable challenge. Undoubtedly, society at that time made some progress in its efforts. Then, in the early 1900s, Muslim society began to glimpse the path of revival. He stood out as one of the prominent figures in the twentieth-century renaissance in north Bengal, especially within the Muslim community.

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