

SPREAD OF ISLAM IN PRE-MUGHAL BENGAL

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Abstract: Today's Muslim-majority Bangladesh is surrounded by non-Muslim northern India in the west and Buddhist Mynamar in the east. Many non-Muslim scholars have argued that force was applied in converting indigenous Hindus, while a number of Muslim scholars have emphasised the migration of Muslims from other parts of India, as an explanation. Scholars have differences of opinion regarding the time when Bangladesh became a Muslim-majority area. This paper argues that the area constituting Bangladesh was a Buddhist majority area before conversion to Islam, and that this conversion was largely voluntary, through the preaching of sufis. Bengal had already become a Muslim-majority area when Mughals arrived there.

Bangladesh today is geographically a territory isolated from the rest of the Muslim world. It is isolated from Pakistan and the Middle East to the west by the non-Muslim areas of India and from the Malay world to the east by Burma and Thailand. When and how did Bengal become a Muslim-majority territory? Why did this area become Muslim-majority region while the rest of northern and southern India failed to do so? This paper intends to address these questions.

Modern historians disagree on the questions of when and how Islam spread in Bengal. For example, while a Hindu historian, R.C. Majumdar, emphasized the role of forced conversion, a Muslim one, M.A. Rahim, points to the migration of Muslims from other parts of the world, along with the conversion of low-caste Hindus, as the primary methods of Islamization in Bengal. This paper reviews the available literature on the subject.

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It is almost impossible to ascertain when Islam first appeared in Bengal and when Muslims came to constitute the majority of population in Bengal. A likely starting point for historical study is the records of the British East India Company, but some of these reports are far from reliable. The East India Company at the beginning of its rule in Bengal misunderstood the population configurations. An English magistrate in 1765 estimated that only one percent of the population was Muslim.¹ In 1824 a census of Dhaka, the capital of present Bangladesh, revealed a very different distribution: there were 32,463 Muslims and 28,154 Hindus in the city.² This was a shock to Company officials, for they had not realized that Muslims constituted the majority of population in the city. The 1872 census report surprised the Company officials even more: it revealed that Muslims in Eastern Bengal (present Bangladesh) constituted more than seventy percent of the total population. Since the publication of that report and others, officials and historians have put forward theories of when and how the majority of the people of Bengal became Muslim. Although like many other parts of the Muslim world it is difficult to ascertain exactly when Muslims became a majority in Bengal, it is much less difficult to ascertain how and why the people of the region accepted Islam.

It has already been noted that some historians have emphasized the migration of Muslims from other parts of the world as a major factor in the Islamization of the region. Although the role of migration cannot be neglected, it is possible to miss the central issue of early modern Bengal history if that role is overemphasized. For example, Rahim speculates that as much as twenty-nine percent of the total Muslim population of Bengal is the result of migration.³ Above and beyond the difficulty of specifying the exact proportion of immigrants behind the Muslim Bengali population of today, the question why people migrated to Bengal remains unanswered. A number of factors are responsible for this migration, and among them surely a Muslim base of population created by conversion is a major factor. The people of Bengal accepted Islam to an extent not paralleled elsewhere in the subcontinent outside the territory of modern Pakistan. Did these converts come from low-caste Hindu families, as has been suggested, or from some other social background? In order to address these questions it is necessary to understand the pre-Islamic society of Bengal.

Pre-Islamic Bengal

The use of the term pre-Islamic to describe Bengal before the advent of Muslim dynasties in the early thirteenth century reflects our desire not

to prejudice the question of its religious and cultural character. One alternative is to use the term Hindu Bengal. Thus the History of Bengal Publication Committee of Dhaka University (in British India), under the editorship of R.C. Majumdar, divides the history of Bengal into three phases: the Hindu period, the Muslim period and the British period. By the term Hindu Bengal, the Committee implies that pre-Islamic Bengal was populated and ruled by Hindus.⁴ The first volume of this history project which covers Bengal from pre-historic times to the establishment of Muslim rule, depicts pre-Islamic Bengali society as a happy one in which all religions flourished in a 'spirit of catholicity.' The author of the essay on "Religion" in this volume, Probodh Chandra Baghchi, claims:

As a matter of fact the religious life in India is marked ... by a spirit of catholicity and mutual respect and understanding which is hardly compatible with deliberate persecution on sectarian grounds. The barriers between the different religious sects were fast coming down, and Buddhism as represented in the documents of Pala period (750-1095), exhibits the new tendency of eclecticism ... The Pala rulers, although great devotees of Buddha, and promoters of the cause of Buddhism both in Bengal and Bihar, were also patrons of Brahmanism.⁵

This observation does not seem to be objective. In a society where religion was the primary tool for social organization, it seems unlikely that two major and rival religions coexisted quite peacefully. This phenomenon needs further investigation.

The plain facts of political history make it clear that it is a mistake to depict pre-Islamic Bengal as a Hindu region. During the period prior to Muslim rule, Bengal was ruled by two dynasties namely, the Buddhist Pāl dynasty (750-1095) and the Brahmanic Sen dynasty (1095-1204). The priority of the Pāl kings suggests, and we shall argue on other grounds, that most people in Bengal prior to Muslim rule were followers of Buddha and thus were not 'Hindu' or Brahmanic.

Buddhist historical works recognize an important Buddhist presence in Bengal in the centuries before the Pāl dynasty. For example, we may consider the ancient story of the coming of Buddhism to Sri Lanka. A number of Buddhist works, including the reputable *Mahavamsa*, record that a Buddhist prince named Vijoy Singha, who was the son of King Singha Bahu of Bengal, migrated to Sri Lanka in 543 B.C.E. (sic.) with seven hundred followers and established his kingdom there. Under the patronage of the Singha kings, Buddhism flourished in Sri Langka and

the island was named 'Singhal' after the dynasty.⁶ Without an organized army of followers it would not have been possible for Vijoy Singha to lead an invasion on an island so remote from Bengal. The narration of the story in Buddhist works also suggests that the earliest Buddhist culture in Bengal was a literate one. However if this and related stories dating to the age of the Buddha himself are evaluated historically, they suggest that Buddhism came early to Bengal. Historians generally admit that the entire population of Bengal was either Buddhist or Jain at one time. Dinesh Chandra Sen suggests that, "Brahmanism could not thrive for many centuries amidst a people who were the pioneers of Buddhism."⁷

On the other hand, historians are not sure when Brahmanism appeared in Bengal. Brahmanic orthodoxy was apparently worried about the Buddhist presence in Bengal. In the late first millennium B.C.E. the Brahmanic religious book *Manū* (ca. 100 B.C.) prohibited all followers from developing any contact with Bengal for fear of 'contamination'.⁸ In the middle of the first millennium C.E. Brahmanism appears to have made its way to Bengal under the Gupta rulers (320 - 650 C.E.), but there is no evidence to suggest the extent of Brahmanic influence in Bengal under the Guptas. Indeed the opposite may have happened: Buddhist from the west may have fled to Bengal to escape harsher Gupta persecution. It appears that the common people of Bengal continued to subscribe to Buddhism throughout the Gupta rule. We first hear the persecution of Buddhist commoners under the Brahmanic ruler Shashanka (d. 637) in the writings of the Chinese traveler Hsuan-Tsang (596 - 664) who traveled to Bengal shortly after the death of Shashanka.⁹ It was this persecution perhaps which ultimately led to the end of Brahmanic rule in Bengal. The Buddhist Pāl dynasty came into power in 750 C.E.

The Pāl dynasty was succeeded by the Sen dynasty in 1095; political conquest of Bengal by Muslims ended Sen rule in 1204. The five-hundred year period of the Pal and Sen dynasties is one of Brahmanic-Buddhist rivalry. The first three and a half centuries, under the Pal kings, was a period of relative religious toleration. Probodh Chandra Baghchi's statement on religious toleration in pre-Islamic Bengal, quoted earlier is relevant to this period. This tolerance perhaps reflects the strong Buddhist concept of forgiveness. As soon as the Brahmanic Sen dynasty came to power, it appears that it sought to eradicate Buddhism from the soil of Bengal. Among texts suggesting this is a Bengali couplet, apparently written by a Buddhist commoner, which describes the situation:

Krittivas (the Bengali translation of the *Ramayana*), *Kasidas* (the

Bengali translation of the *Mahabharata*), and those who follow their followers and mix with them are the greatest of evil-doers.

Stories of persecution of the Buddhists are also found in contemporary Sanskrit literature. A poem written in Sanskrit, apparently by a Brahman, depicts the situation this way:

Many of the chief princes, professing the wicked doctrines of the Buddhist and the Jain religions, were vanquished in various scholarly controversies. Their heads were then cut off with axes, thrown into mortars, and broken to pieces [reduced to powder] by means of pestles. So these wicked doctrines were thoroughly annihilated, and the country made free from danger.¹⁰

It is quite clear that the Brahmanic ruling classes were originally foreigners in Bengal. They did not adopt the language of Bengal until the advent of Muslims. They not only used Sanskrit as their cultural and religious language, but also strictly prohibited the use of Bengali, particularly for religious purposes. A Sanskrit couplet describes the Brahmanic ruling on this issue:

If a person hears the stories of the *Eighteen Puranas* or the *Ramayana* recited in Bengali, he will be thrown into hell called *Rourvana*.

Under the circumstances many Buddhist monks and scholars migrated to Nepal and further to the East.¹¹ Such was the situation in Bengal when Muslims arrived there.

Establishment of Muslim Political Rule

Bengal was known to Muslims long before it became a Muslim territory. A number of Arab geographers and traders, notably Masudī, mention Bengal in their works.¹² Archeological excavations at Bangladeshi sites as far separated as Paharpur in Rajshahi and Mainamati in Comilla have yielded Abbasid coins, ranging in date from the eighth to the thirteenth century C.E.¹³ Thus both literary and archeological evidence suggest that Muslims had contacts with pre-Islamic Bengal.

There is a body of evidence which suggest that in fact many Muslims lived in pre-Islamic Bengal. Although the coastal areas of Bengal were not politically liberated by Muslims before the fifteenth century, two European travelers, Varthema and Barbossa, report that people of Arab, Persian and Abyssinian stocks lived in the area before that time.¹⁴ Two

other European travelers also provide evidence: Caesar Frederick mentioned in 1565 that inhabitant of Sandwip island were Moors; and Samuel Purchas (d. 1626) mentions that at the end of the sixteenth century the inhabitants near the shores were for the most part Muslims.¹⁵

The best collection of evidence for the existence of Muslims in pre-Islamic Bengal has been assembled by Enamul Haq. In reviewing the contribution of sufi teachers he mentions that the shrine of Bāyazīd Bustamī (d. 874) in Chittagong suggests that this great sufi teacher might have visited Bengal and certainly that he had followers in the area. Haq also suggests that stories of Sultān Mahmud Mahisawar (d. 1047) at Mahasthan in Bogra, Muhammad Sultān Rūmī (d. 1053) at Madanpur in Mymensingh, and Baba Adam at Bikrampur in Dhaka bear witness to Muslim saints visting and settling down in pre-Islamic Bengal.¹⁶

Strong evidence for Muslim presence can be found in the stories of Muslim advent to Bengal. The whole of Bengal was brought under Muslim rule in 1204 by a Turcoman general named Ikhtiyār Uddīn Muḥammad Bakhtiyār Khiljī. According to one story only eighteen horse-riders were required for the purpose, though some historians have disputed this account. Whatever may be the case, it is clear that Bakhtiyār Khiljī entered Bengal without much resistance. This situation leads us to believe that the local people of Bengal welcomed the appearance of Muslims. During the struggles of Brahmanic-Buddhist rivalry in pre-Islamic Bengal, Muslims may have been helped by local Muslims and Buddhists in fighting against the Brahmanic rule of the Sen dynasty. At any rate, many Buddhists viewed the Muslim invasion as a miraculous delivery from Brahmanic oppression. The story of coming of Muslims to Maldah and Jajpur as narrated by a Buddhist scholar evidences this view. The last chapter of the famous Bengali historical-theological work *Shunya Puran* by Ramai Pandit¹⁷ narrates the story. In this astonishing story, *Dharma* (God) himself becomes a Muslim savior, and Brahmanic figures repulsed by their followers, translate themselves into Muslim figures:

In Jajpur and Maldah [northwestern Bengal] sixteen hundred families of Vedic Brahmans became strong. Being assembled in groups of ten or twelve, they killed the Sat Dharmis [Buddhists] who would not pay them religious fees, by uttering incantations and curses. They recited mantras from the Vedas, and fire came out of them as they did so. The followers of Sat-Dharma trembled with fear at the sight thereof, and prayed to Dharma; for who else could give them succor in the crisis? The Brahmans began to destroy creation in the above manner, and acts of great violence were perpetrated on the earth. Dharma who resided in Baikuntha [Heaven] was grieved to see all this. He came to the

world as a Muslim. On his head he wore a black cap, and in his hand he held a cross-bow. He mounted a horse reciting the name of one Khoda. Niranjan [god] incarnated himself in Behest [Heaven]. All the gods, being of one mind, wore trousers. Brahman incarnated himself as Muhammad, Vishnu as Paigambar [prophet], and Shiv became Adam. Ganesh came as a Ghazi [conqueror], Kartik as Kazi, Narad became a Sheikh [leader] and Indra a Maulana [teacher]. The rishis of heaven became fakirs. The sun, the moon, and the other gods and all other gods came in the capacity of foot-soldiers, and began to beat drums. The goddess Chandi incarnated herself as Haya Bibi [Honored Lady] and Padmavati became Bibi Nur [Lady Light]. The gods, being all of one mind, entered Jajpur. They broke the temples and Math's, and shouted "seize," "seize." By submitting to Dharma, Ramai Pandit sings, O what a confusion!

Some historical features of this story are noteworthy. The citation of a number of families who followed the Vedic religion suggest that such families did not constitute the majority of the population. The story also hints at the nature Brahmanic persecution of Buddhist commoners. It was, therefore, quite natural that Buddhists in Bengal welcomed the Muslim rule. In the last couplet of the story the author mentions his name and states that he submitted to the feet of Dharma to whom he had prayed earlier in order to get rid of Brahmanic persecution.

Methods of Islamization

There are a number of theories about the ways in which Islam was spread in Bengal.¹⁸ As we have seen, the theory of forced conversion of Hindus is a favorite one of many historians. It is not, however, well grounded; as Milot points out, there is no evidence of mass-scale persecution of non-Muslims by the Muslim rulers of Bengal.¹⁹ The only evidence for pre-Mughal persecution of 'Hindus' by Muslims, involves limited persecution under the rule of Jalāluddīn (1413-1430). Let us closely examine the events of that reign.

Jalāluddīn was the first indigenous Bengali Muslim to assume political power in Bengal. According to the author of the Persian book *Riyāz as-Salātīn* (The Garden of Rulers), Raja Kans,²⁰ a Brahmanic chieftain in Maldah, became very strong and captured from Muslims the throne of Bengal in 1407. Once he was in power, he began to persecute Muslims under his rule. A Muslim saint, Shaikh Kutb al-'Alam, invited the Muslim king of Jaunpur to invade Bengal and save the persecuted Muslims. The king of Jaunpur reached Bengal in response to the

invitation and was about to invade the capital of Raja Kans, when Kans rushed to Shaikh Kutb al-'Alam and asked forgiveness for his activities. The Raja directed his son Jadu to embrace Islam and then handed over all power to his son and he himself retired from the throne. The Raja's son Jadu changed his name to Jalāluddīn when he converted. After Jalāluddīn became the king of Bengal, the saint requested the king of Jaunpur to return home because the problem of persecution was solved and there was no reason for him to invade the country. The king of Jaunpur returned.

Immediately after the danger of invasion was averted, Raja Kans returned, took over power from his son, and forced his son to return to Brahmanism. The Raja is reported to have prepared several massive gold statues of cows; this gold was distributed among the Brahmans. According to one account, the Raja even jailed his son. Raja Kans also started to persecute Muslims again. After his father's death, Jadu ascended to the throne of Bengal and returned to Islam. He started taking revenge from those Brahmans who were among his father's main advisors. He compelled those Brahmans who had taken gold from the golden statues to eat beef.²¹ The persecution was however limited to Brahmans. This single event, however, cannot be accepted as an adequate explanation of turning Bengal into a Muslim-majority country.

Gopal Halder has quoted a Bengali poem by Kirtilata (ca. 1400-1450), a contemporary of Jalāluddīn, depicting the condition of Brahmans under Muslim rule. According to Kirtilata:

The Turks persecute the Brahmans on the roads,
They force the Brahmans to carry beef.
They tear out the physical witness of Brahmanism, and
Even lower caste Turks abuse the higher class Brahmans.²²

This poem is not a reliable document. It is clear that at that time Bengal was ruled by indigenous Muslims and not by Turks. Moreover, there are no caste distinctions among Turks or other Muslims. It is possible that Kirtilata referred to revenge activities by Jalāluddīn against those Brahmans who were among advisors to his father. The same historian credits Jalāluddīn with patronizing the translation of the Ramayana into Bengali.²³ How could a ruler who patronized the translation of a Brahmanic sacred book have engaged in the large-scale persecution of Hindus? A major role for forced conversion of 'Hindus', therefore, must be rejected as an explanation of the Islamization of Bengal.

A more significant role was played by the activities of sufi teachers.

Sufis arrived in Bengal for propagation of Islam much earlier than the political conquest of the area by Muslims, almost surely by the mid-eleventh century, if not by the ninth century.²⁴ Sufis belonging to four major orders; *Chishtīyah*, *Suhrāwardīyah*, *Qādirīyah*, and *Naqshbandīyah*, exerted a great deal of influence in Bengal. Individual sufis are reported to have possessed the ability to perform miracles, and many people are reported to have accepted Islam as a result of contact with them.

Shah Abdullah Kirmani introduced *Chishtīyah* order in Bengal at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Another *Chishtī* sufi, Akhi Sirajuddin (d. 1357), contributed to the spread of the order in Bengal. A number of people are said to have embraced Islam at their hands. The activities of *Chishtī* teachers have continued to the present century. Even today many people in Bangladesh consider it an act of worship to visit to the shrine of Mu'īnuddīn Chishtī, the founder of this order in Ajmer, India.

Shaikh Jalāluddīn Tabrezī (d. 1225) introduced the *Suhrāwardīyah* order in Bengal before the establishment of Muslim rule. His piety, ideal character, and humanitarian services are reported to have had a great impact on the common people of Bengal. A contemporary work, *Shek Subhodaya*, written in Sanskrit by a Brahman poet, credits him with performing miracles. According to Rahim, down-trodden Buddhists and 'Hindus' belonging to various castes accepted Islam at his hands.²⁵ His work laid a strong foundation of Islam in northern Bengal.

Another saint of the *Suhrāwardīyah* order, Shaikh Jalāl, popularly known as Shah Jalāl, has been credited with spreading Islam in Sylhet district and adjacent areas. According to Ibn Batutā, Shaikh Jalāl was in Baghdad when Mongols invaded the city in 1258. From there he traveled to Bengal with 313 followers. Ibn Batutā also claims that it was due to the saint's efforts that people of the whole area became Muslims. Both Muslims and non-Muslims held him in high regard. His shrine is still considered a sacred place by many in Bangladesh.

Many other sufi teachers came to Bengal with the intention of spreading Islam in that territory. Thousands of stone inscriptions about them are still scattered all over Bengal.²⁶ An idea of sufi activities can be obtained from a letter written in Persian by Mīr Sayyid Ashraf Jahangīr Simnānī (d. 1380) to Sultān Ibrahīm Sharqī of Jounpur. The letter reads as follows:

God be praised, what a good land is that of Bengal, where numerous saints and ascetics came from many directions and made it their habitation and home. For example, at Devgaon seventy leading disciples of the Shaikh of Shaikhs, Hadhrat Shaikh Shihabuddin

Suhrwardi are taking their eternal rest. Several saints of the Suhrāwardīyah order are buried in Mahisun and this is the case with the saints of the Jalālīa order in Deotala. In Narkoti some of the best companions of Shaikh Ahmad Damishqi are found. Hadhrat Shaikh Sharfuddin Tawwamah, one of the twelve of the Qadir Khani order, whose chief pupil was Hadhrat Shaikh Sharafuddin Maneri, is lying buried at Sonargoan. And then there was Hadhrat Bad Alam and Badr Alam Zahidi. In short in the country of Bengal, what to speak of the cities, there is no town and no village where holy saints did not come and settle down. Many of the saints of the Suhrāwardīyah order are dead and gone, but those still alive are also in fairly large numbers.²⁷

The letter clearly demonstrates the nature and intensity of Islamic *da'wah* (missionary) activities in early Islamic Bengal. We shall return to the question of why Bengal witnessed such intensified *da'wah* activities, in the concluding part of this article.

Literary activities must also be considered in our reconstruction of the Islamization of Bengal, and the question of the languages to be used is antecedent to a review of literature. It will be recalled that the Brahmanic Sen kings suppressed the Bengali language and attempted to impose Sanskrit on the Bengali-speaking population. After the establishment of Muslim rule the use of Bengali language received a remarkable boost from two directions. First, Persian speaking rulers appointed Bengali poets at their courts in order to promote the language as well as to communicate with the common people in the region. Second, the sufi teachers learned the language and adopted it as the medium of their *da'wah* activities in Bengal. Their contribution to the development of *puthi* literature and of ascetic *ma'rifatī* and *murshidī* songs is remarkable. Most of these works deal with the life of the Prophet of Islam and stories of his disciples, or with the miraculous activities performed by the Muslim saints. This method of *da'wah* activities continues even today in the present Bangladesh. Some examples of these activities are noteworthy.

As we saw earlier, the author of *Shunya Puran* states with remarkable emotion that he submits to the *Dharma* or godhead who had worn a black cap, fought against Brahmanic tyranny, and consequently saved the Bengali people. It is not clear whether the author became a Muslim. It can certainly be said, however, that his work contributed to the propagation of Islam at a later date in the region. Similarly, *Shek Subhodaya*, which contained stories of the miraculous activities of Shaikh Jalāluddīn Tabrezī, although written in Sanskrit, contributed to the spread of Islam, particularly among high-caste Brahmans.²⁸ According

to Annemarie Schimmel, the impact of Shaikh's activities flourished in the area for several centuries and produced a number of mystics and political figures among Bengali Muslims.

The distinguished poet Zainuddin wrote his *Rasul Bijoy* (The Victory of the Prophet) during the reign of Sultan Ghyāsuddīn Azam Shah (1389-1409). His text was based on the *Maghāzī* books, (narratives of early Islamic wars). The uniqueness of the *Rasul Bijoy* lies in the translation of emotion into a Bengali environment. The author, for example, describes the bravery of the Muslim army by saying:

[It] made them afraid and they [the enemy] fled away;
Just as the waves in the Padma break on each other due to the wind.²⁹

The literary activities of Muslim mystics also suggest that they were rivals and competitors of the Brahman pandits. The *Satya Pir* (The True Saint) of Faizullah written around 1575, seems to have been a response to *Satya Narayan* (The True Godhead) written by a Brahman.³⁰ These examples suggest that both political and religious leaders of the Muslim community were involved in missionary activities in Bengal. Muslim rulers patronized the language of the people in their courts. The religious leaders came one step forward; they learned, spoke and wrote in the language of the local population in order to convey the message of Islam in a more popular manner.

Conclusions

Why and how did the Bengali people accept Islam? When did Bengal become a Muslim-majority territory? Answers to these questions depend, to a great extent, on our understanding of the character of pre-Islamic Bengal. We have argued here that pre-Islamic Bengal was populated mostly by Buddhists, Historians generally agree that the population of Bengal became Buddhist at one time, and there is no clear sign that the population subsequently converted to Brahmanism. In fact, we do not think that Bengal ever became a Brahmanic-majority area, as Majumdar and other historians have claimed. It is true that Brahmanism in Bengal was imperially sponsored under the rule of the Guptas. There is no evidence, however, to suggest that Brahmanism was accepted by Bengali people, or that Brahmanic rule in Bengal was strong enough to eradicate Buddhism from Bengal as it succeeded in doing elsewhere in the sub-continent. There is evidence for persecution of Buddhists in Bengal by the Brahmanic king Shashanka; perhaps reaction to this persecution led in part to the rise of the Buddhist Pāl kings to power in Bengal.

Under the Pāl kings the Bengali language developed as a cultural medium. The Brahmanic predecessors of the Pāl dynasty suppressed the vernacular languages, which were variously known, and imposed Sanskrit on the people of Bengal. During the several centuries of Brahmanic rule, perhaps, the Pālī of the Bengal area underwent a transformation. It was only after Bengali became the language of the land with the support of Muslim rulers that the followers of Brahmanic religion, i.e. Hindus started adapting it; pre-Islamic Bengali literature is chiefly Buddhistic.³¹

The Brahmanic Sen rulers persecuted the people of Bengal after they succeeded in overthrowing the Buddhist Pal dynasty; Many Bengali intellectuals left Bengal with their scholarly works, and thus many early Bengali manuscripts have been found in Nepal. The Bengali language again flourished under Muslim rule. At the same time Muslim saints adopted the Bengali language as the medium for the propagation of Islam. This gesture must have appealed positively to the people of Bengal. The patronization of the Bengali language is, therefore, partially responsible for the Islamization of Bengal.

A crucial element in the spread of Islam in Bengal was the sufi presence. Because of the continued Buddhist cultural base in Bengal, this land was perhaps more fertile for the propagation of Islam than any other part of India, and perhaps it attracted more sufi teachers than other parts of India. The beliefs of the Buddhists of pre-Islamic Bengal appear to have been close to the Islamic concept of *tawhīd*, the oneness of God. Such notions may be found, for example, in the description of the origin of the universe illustrated in the opening of *Shunya Puran*:

There was no line, no form, no colour, and no sign.
 The sun and the moon were not, nor day, nor night
 The earth was not, nor water, nor sky
 The mounts Meru, Mandara and Kailas were not
 The creation was not, nor were there gods, nor men
 Brahma was not, nor was Vishnu, nor the ethereal regions
 Heaven and earth were not - all was emptiness
 The presiding gods of the ten directions were not,
 Nor were there the clouds nor the stars
 Life was not, nor death, nor pangs of death
 The Lord moved in the void, supporting Himself on the void.

This idea of the unity of the Creator must have played a significant role in the propagation of Islam in Bengal. Thus one can very well argue that the main reason that Bengal became a Muslim-majority territory while northern and southern India failed to become so is because of the

presence of the Buddhist community in Bengal. Because of the same reason it may also be suggested that it became Muslim-majority territory at a very early stage of the establishment of the Muslim rule. Bengal became Muslim-majority territory, perhaps, before the advent of the Mughals. Recent findings in Afghanistan and Kashmir also suggest the same.

The question of caste composition of the converts; whether Muslims of Bengal constitute high or low class Bengalis, is difficult to ascertain. One point is clear on this issue; a significant proportion of them migrated from various other parts of the Muslim world. The theory of low caste Hindus converting to Islam in Bengal is difficult to accept on historical grounds. For, if that were the case, then all low caste Hindus would have accepted Islam and now modern India would not have been a low-caste Hindu majority area. Moreover, lower caste people generally lack the initiative to accept another religion. Therefore, the idea of a mass conversion of lower caste people must be rejected. Evidence of high caste Hindus accepting Islam have been mentioned earlier. However, since bulk of the Muslims of Bengal belonged to the former Buddhist community, therefore we believe that they constituted people from all social classes.

Notes

1. See Jean Rene Milot, "The Spread of Islam in Bengal in pre-Mughal Period 1204-1538" (Unpublished M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1970), 1.
2. James Tylor, *Sketch of Topography and Statistics of Dacca* (Calcutta, 1840), 222.
3. M.A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Benga*, Vol. 1: 1201- 1576 (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1963), 64.
4. It should be noted that most pre-Islamic Bengali literature refers to what we call Hinduism today as Brahmanism. The term Hindu was coined by Persian-speaking Muslims to describe inhabitants of the Indus Valley or India more broadly.
5. See Probodh Chandra Baghchi, "Religion," in R.C. Majumdar, ed., *The History of Bengal* Vol. 1: Hindu Period, (Dhaka: University of Dhaka, 1943), 416.
6. See Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1954), 4. Majumdar also admits that much of Bengal was populated by Buddhists at one time. See Romesh Chandra Majumdar, *Bangla Desher Itihash* Vol. 1, (Calcutta: General Printers and

Publishers, 1373 Bengali Era), 149-152.

7. Sen, 5.

8. Ibid.

9. See Romesh Chandra Majumdar, "Sasanka," *The History of Bengal* Vol. 1, ed. Romesh Chandra Majumdar, 66-68.

10. For the original Sanskrit, see Sen, 7. Translation has been taken from Sen.

11. Ibid., 6-7.

12. See Sulaiman Nadvi, *Indo-Arab Relations* trans. Salahuddin (Hyderabad: Institute of Middle East Cultural Studies, 1962), 24ff. Also see A.H. Dani, "Early Muslim Contact with Bengal," *Proceedings of All Pakistan History Conference* (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1951), 148.

13. Enamul Haq, *Muslim Bengali Literature* (Karachi: Pakistan Publication, 1957), 5. For a discussion on the subject, see M. Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal* Vol. IA (Riyadh: Imam M.S. Islamic University, 1985), 29-43.

14. See Rahim, 43.

15. See Tylor, 244.

16. *Encyclopedia of Islam* New Edition, s.v. "Muslim Bengali Literature."

17. Ramai Pandit is said to have lived around 1000 C.E. It has been suggested that this story has been included into the *Shunya Puran* by another Buddhist scholar three centuries after Pandit's death. See Sen, 34-43.

18. See Milot, 40ff.

19. Ibid, 48.

20. Raja Kans has been identified as Raja Ganesh by some historians.

21. For the complete version of the story, see Ghulam Haider Salim, *Riyāzu-s-Salātīn* trans. Abdus Salam (Delhi: Idarah-i-Adabiyat-i-Delli, 1963), 113-117

22. See Gopal Haldar, *Bangla Shahityer Ruprekha* (Calcutta, 1954), 42.

23. See Haldar, 57 and Sen, 164.

24. On the contribution of Sufis in the spread of Islam in Bengal, see Enamul Haq, "Sufi Movement in Bengal," *Indo-Iranica* Vol. III No. 1 and 2 (July and October 1948), 9-32. Also see, Muhammad Enamul Haq, *A History of Sufism in Bengal* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975).

25. Rahim, 98- 99.

26. See Enamul Haq, *Muslim Bengali Literature* (Karachi: Pakistan Publications, 1957), 40-51.

27. The letter has been translated and published by Prof. H. Askari in *B.P.P.* Vol. 67, No. 130, 1948, 35-36, and quoted in Rahim, 77.

28. For a discussion on the subject, see Enamul Haq, *Muslim Bengali Literature*

- 27-28. See also Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chappel-Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 352.
29. See Enamul Haq, *Muslim Bengali Literature*, 58.
30. Ibid, 73.
31. See Dinesh C. Sen, preface VI.