

Racial Identity of Muslim Population of Medieval Bengal

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Bengal comprising modern Bangladesh and West Bengal of India was considered an important part of South Asia in the medieval period. Predominantly it was a Muslim populated area in this sub-continent. The Muslims of various racial origins came to Bengal, settled permanently and moulded the socio-cultural pattern of the area in the light of their rich cultural heritage. Before the advent of the Muslims, Bengal is said to have been divided into five principalities of Varendra (the Barind of the Muslim historian),¹ Radha, Banga, Bagdi and Mithila,² possibly in consideration of the natural barriers and river courses. On the exclusion of Mithila, which formed a part of Bihar, Bengal had four divisions well demarcated by the rivers and their tributaries. It was Sultan Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah (1342-1358 A.D.) who united all the prevalent administrative divisions of Lakhnawati, Satgaon and Sonargaon, and various *Janapadas* into a compact country which became widely known as Bangala (the Bengal referred to above).³ Here medieval Bengal is meant to spread over a long span of time starting with the Muslim conquest at the early 13th century and ending in her annexation with the Mughal empire by Jalal al-Din Muhammad Akbar in 1576 AD.

Topographically the north western part of Bengal is high and dry land whereas the southern and eastern parts of it are low and moist land. The name of ancient divisions of Bengal as referred to above continued for some periods after the Muslim conquest. By way of reference it may be cited here that Bang for more than two centuries was applied to eastern Bengal as is evidenced from the coins of Rukn al-Din Kayka'us⁴ (1291-1301 AD) and Shams al-Din Firuz Shah⁵ (1301-1322 AD) both of whom struck a few coins (possibly celebrating their victory in the eastern Bengal) from the Lakhnawati mint inscribing the formula of (من خراج بنك) i.e., from the land tax of Bang. But in course of time the *Janapada* names lost their importance and Bengal was connotated for a vast tract of land from Teliagarhi in the west to the Chittagong in the east and from the foot of Himalayas in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the South.⁶

The Muslims of Arabia and Persia as traders entered Bengal from the sea route even before the conquest and had their contact with the coastal regions of Bengal. It is presumed that with these traders came *ulama-mashaikh* whose main purpose was to propagate Islam among the people of this land. Many of them made their habitations in different parts of the coastal areas and hinter land of Bengal. But Ghazi Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji with his soldiers of Turkish race as conqueror entered Bengal from the land routes of Jharkhand and Teliagarhi pass of north west Bengal in the early 13th century AD. From this time onwards *Shari'ah* based state and society were founded in Bengal. *Masajid*, *madaris* and *khanqat* were built in various strategic places of Bengal to impart practical training to the people of faith.⁷ Keeping in view of these preliminaries we would like to study the racial identity of the Muslims of medieval Bengal which extended from its conquest in AH 600/204 AD to A.H. 984/1576 A.D.

Before the conquest of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji in A.H. 600/1204 A.D., the society of Bengal was represented by two major religious groups – the Hindus and Buddhists – as were evident from the accounts of *Sunya Purana*.⁸ But this does not preclude the existence of some other minor religious cults, the offshoots of Hinduism and Buddhism like the Nath cult, Tantric cult and Animistic cult. The Brahmins had predominance in the society and the Buddhists were on the verge of extinction from the society. This idea is well conveyed in the *Niranjaner Rushma*⁹ of Ramai Pandit. It gets corroboration in the accounts of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* where it is stated that the Brahmins and the soothsayers counselled king Laksmansena in matters of administration and policy-making.¹⁰ But the Muslims considered all the people other than the Muslims as *Mushrikun* (polytheists) and *Kuffar* (infidels). This notion is reflected in the early Muslim chronicle¹¹ as well as in the epigraph¹² of Bengal.

With Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji's occupation of Nudia,¹³ the temporary capital of Laksmansena and the establishment of his authority over the Lakhnawati kingdom of Radha and Barind, the Sena ruling power shifted to Sonargaon in Bang or eastern Bengal. A considerable number of Brahmins and merchants from Radha fled to Bang, Kamrud (Kamrupa) and Sankanat (Samatata) for fear of being destroyed at the hands of the Turks.¹⁴ But the conquering Muslims did not interfere in their ways of life. On the contrary, they were mostly concerned with the procurement of their own livelihood. It is stated that the job seeking people of Khalji extraction mainly flocked round Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji from different parts of Hindustan.¹⁵ He provided them with services, recruited many of them in the army and took all possible measures to get them settled in the various parts of his conquered territories. Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji and his successors' eastern frontier extended to the river Karatoya at the initial period. Lakhnawati was the capital of Muslim rule in this period. But Bakhtiyar Khalji's return to Dewkot¹⁶ instead of to Lakhnawati from unsuccessful expedition of Tibet, shows that he made it his second capital. Husam al-Din Iwad Khalji's transfer of the capital again from it to Lakhnawati¹⁷ supports the contention. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to support that like Lakhnawati, Dewkot was an important station of Muslim community in the high land of northern Bengal at the time of the Khalji *Amirs*. The narration in the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* makes one presume that the inhabitants of Dewkot were mainly Muslims of foreign extraction, because therein it is stated that the women and children of the Khalji soldiers who perished in the Tibet expedition lamented from the top of their houses, and Bakhtiyar Khalji could not go out in the street.¹⁸ The soldiers recruited for the Tibet expedition are stated to have been ten thousand in number,¹⁹ and most of them possibly belonged to the Khalji stock, because at such an early date of the Muslim conquest neither the Hindus would dare to seek employment in the army nor would the Muslims trust them in the position involving the security. There is no proof of any Hindu being employed in the army before the time of Sultan Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah. It is, thus, reasonable to assume that the soldiers who accompanied Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji in the Tibet expedition had their wives and children settled at Dewkot. On the circumstantial evidence it is presumed that Ghazi Ikhtiyar al-Din, the first ruler of Muslim Bengal was laid to rest at Dewkot.

Of the *iqta's* allotted to the Khalji *Amirs* at the initial stage, the *iqta's* or fiefs of 'Ali' Mardan Khalji and Husam al-Din Iwad Khalji were situated within the tract of land extended to the Karatoya river in the East. It can be presumed that the people of Khalji origin settled in a considerable number in this region. The place-names like Masidah,²⁰

Santush²¹ and Narkuti²² of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Barsul or Barsuli of *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*²³ and Barsala of *Ain-i-Akbari*²⁴ fall within the territorial jurisdiction of high land of North Bengal. Now we may reasonably infer that at the initial period of the conquest, Muslim settlement mostly of Khalji extraction grew up in these areas. Malik ‘Izz al-Din Muhammad Shiran Khalji’s flight towards Santush and his tomb therein²⁵ support the contention. In the first quarter of the 13th century A.D. the Khalji rule was mainly confined to the high land of Bengal and it was not extended beyond the Karatoya river in the East. So it is reasonable to presume that the settlement of the Khalji Turks did not grow in the eastern and lower Bengal at this early period. The mention of the name of Baba Kutwal Safahani²⁶ (i.e. Ispahan in Persian) as a chief police officer in the *iqta*’ of Narkuti indicates that the early Muslim settlement also had some people of Persian origin. The appeal of a distressed merchant of Ispahan for help at the court of ‘Ali Mardan Khalji²⁷ and the lectures of Jalal al-Din, son of Jamal al-Din, the Imam Zadah of Firuz-Kuh, a place in Persia, in the court of Husam al-Din Iwad Khalji²⁸ prove it beyond doubt that the Persians had also contact with this area at the initial period. Shaykh Makhdum Jalal al-Din Tabrizi who was laid to rest at Deotala and after whom it was named as Tabrizabad²⁹ is stated to have preached in this region. He was a Persian and had some Persian disciples who did not leave it for the country of their origination. We may, therefore, presume that the Persian people as saint-preachers, merchants, teachers and government officers settled in this area at the early period.³⁰

With the appointment of Nasir al-Din Mahmud, the eldest son of Delhi sultan Iltutmish at Lakhnawati after the overthrow of the Khalji Malik Ghiyath al-Din Iwad Khalji in 624 A.H. 30/1227 A.D. opened the way for the Ilbari Turks to get appointment in the government services. Undoubtedly some of them settled in this region. However, there is no evidence to show that the Khaljis settled earlier were extirpated. The suppression of the rebellion of Balka Khalji by sultan Iltutmish taught the Khalji populace of Bengal to merge with the common people and to pursue various professions for livelihood. In his campaign against the rebellious governor Tughral of Lakhnawati kingdom, sultan Ghiyath al-Din Balban of Delhi was accompanied by huge force, consisting of soldiers, camp followers and traders numbering two lakhs.³¹ Though the forces went back with the sultan to Delhi, some persons must have been left to help the newly appointed governor Nasir al-Din Mahmud Bughra Khan. Moreover when Balban’s dynasty was overthrown by the Khaljis in Delhi, more Ilbari Turks left for Bengal seeking employment and habitation under Nasir al-Din Mahmud Bughra Khan who had established his sway over Bengal. The period of the rule of Balban’s house (1286-1328 A.D.) was one of active expansion of Muslim dominion in Bengal and the adjacent countries.³² The coins struck at Hadrat Lakhnawati out of the Kharaj of Bang³³ or eastern Bengal in 690 A.H./1291 A.D. testifies to its reduction to the Lakhnawati kingdom. The Lakhnawati principality seems to have expanded over the whole of Bengal with the well-defined divisions of Lakhnawati, Satgaon, Sonargaon and Chatgaon (Chittagong).³⁴ The Ilbari Turks coming to Bengal, in all fairness, settled and had jobs in all these divisions. The Qarawana Turks came to serve under the Tughlaq vassals in Bengal after the invasion of Ghiyath al-Din Tughlaq of Delhi in 724 A.H./1324 A.D. The transfer of capital from Delhi to Dawlatabad by sultan Muhammad b. Tughlaq pushed many people with their families and followers to Bengal where food-stuffs were in plenty.³⁵ Yaqut al-Ghiyathi, a servant of sultan Ghiyath al-Din A‘zam Shah of Bengal (1392-1410 A.D.) was an Abyssinian. He was entrusted with carrying out the construction of Madrasah at Makkah.³⁶ It is stated that sultan Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah

of Bengal (1459-1474 A.D.) had one time in his service eight thousand Negro slaves, well mounted and armed, and finding them faithful and attached to him, he promoted several of them to the high rank and responsible posts of the government.³⁷ The usurpation of the power from the later Ilyas Shahis by the Habshis indicate their dominance, at a time, in Bengal politics. Sultan 'Ala' al-Din Husayn Shah (1493-1519 A.D.) because of their high handed manners expelled them from this land.³⁸ But that does not rule out the possibility of a few of them being settled in Bengal. In course of time they merged with the local people.

The famous *sufi* saint Shaykh 'Ala' al-Haqq of Pandua in upper Bengal is stated to have been a descendant of the great Qurayshite general Khalid b. Walid.³⁹ The illustrious family of the Shaykh maintained a great centre of learning at Pandua. The members of this family made positive contribution to the political and cultural life of the people of time when Shaykh Nur Qutb al-'Alam, the son of Shaykh 'Ala' al-Haqq invited Ibrahim Sharqi of Jawnpur to put an end to the oppression of Raja Ganesh.⁴⁰ At the time of sultan Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah, Shah Isma'il Ghazi who is stated to have belonged to the Qurayshite family⁴¹ landed in Lakhnawati. He got killed due to the intrigue of a Hindu noble, Bhandusi Rai of Ghoraghat⁴² and was buried at Kantaduar in Rangpur district of upper Bengal. If we are to believe the *Risalah al-Shuhada*, we may ascribe the Arab descent to some of his retinues who are believed to follow him in the hazardous journey from Arabia to Bengal. The construction of *madaris* by Ghiyath al-Din A'zam Shah (1390-1411 AD) and Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah (1415-1432 AD) at Mlakkah and Madinah⁴³ reminds us of the relation of Bengal with Hijaz. This might have induced some Arabs to come to live in Bengal. Sultan 'Ala' al-Din Husayn Shah, the son of Sayyid Ashraf al-Husayni claimed his Arab lineage. His father Sayyid Ashraf al-Husayni is stated to have been the *Sharif* or Chief of Makkah.⁴⁴ The very connotation *Sayyid* prefixed with his father's name followed by suffix *al-Husayni* in the epigraph⁴⁵ establishes a sort of link with the family of Imam Husayn, the son of 'Ali. In some coins 'Ala' al-Din Husayn Shah has been described as a descendant of the leader of apostles⁴⁶ i.e. Prophet Muhammad (sm.). Migrated to Bengal in quest of better livelihood 'Ala' al-Din Husayn Shah by dint of his merit and ability rose to the throne and founded a dynasty for his family. From the factors cited above, we cannot, therefore, preclude the possibility of the settlement of people of Arab descent in various important places of upper Bengal.

It is possible that the Afghans came to Bengal as mercenary soldiers in the army of Turkoman generals and rulers. The Habshi sultan Muzaffar Shah had a few thousand Afghans in his army. There were a good number of Afghan soldiers in the army of Husayn Shah.⁴⁷ It is said that the last Karrani Afghan ruler Da'ud Khan had a force of 40,000 cavalry, 14,000 infantry, 3,300 elephants and 20,000 pieces of fire-arms.⁴⁸ We can reasonably hold that a considerable number of these people settled in Bengal. Ghoraghat, Mahasthan and some other places of Northern Bengal were rendezvous of the Afghans at the concluding phase of the Mughal annexation.⁴⁹

This study shows that the racial identity of the immigrant Muslims of Bengal may be traced to the Turks of various tribes such as the Khalji, the Ilbari and the Qarawana, to the Persians, the Arabs and the Afghans. It is fair to say that they spread over all the places of Bengal from 1204 A.D. to 1576 A.D. But the number in which they settled in the different regions can hardly be determined. As shown above, the Khalji people at the

early period made their home and habitation in all important places of upper Bengal. Gradually with the territorial expansion, the immigrant Muslims of other races mentioned above established their settlement in the regions of eastern and southern Bengal. Sonargaon was considered the administrative headquarters of eastern Bengal and Satgaon that of the south and south-west Bengal. It is reasonable to believe that the Muslim population under the administration of Muslim rulers in the period under study spread to the various places of these divisions in search of better livelihood. But the capital of the country, in the period under review, being transferable between Gaud (i.e. the site of Lakhnawati), Pandua and Ikdalah of upper Bengal, it is not unreasonable to presume that the immigrant Muslims naturally preferred to have their settlements in this area than to other areas where facilities for employment in the state service were limited. Thus, the numerical strength of the Muslims was higher in this region than in other regions of Bengal. Did this position remain unchanged in the succeeding period? It is found that with the passing of time, the number of the Muslims increased to a great extent in the eastern Bengal.

Now let us explain the factors which paved the ground for this increase in number. Sultan Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah in order to unite all the people of Bengal against the invasion of Firuz Shah Tughlaq of Delhi recruited the indigenous people in the army⁵⁰ as well as in other sectors of administration. This reconciliatory policy was similarly followed by his successors Abul Majahid Sikandar Shah b. Ilyas Shah (1358-1392 A.D) and Ghiyath al-Din A'zam Shah b. Sikandar Shah. The letters of the saint Mawlana Muzaffar Shams Balkhi addressed to sultan Ghiyath al-Din A'zam Shah pointing to the danger of providing the Hindus with responsible posts of administration⁵¹ bear testimony of this policy. This warning of the saint proved rather prophetic,⁵² and the Hindu Raja Ganesh of Bhaturia (in upper Bengal) got *istila* or supremacy in administration.⁵³ Ultimately he grew so strong as to found a dynasty in his own line overthrowing the Ilyas Shahis. We can reasonably infer that the appointment of the Hindus in the administration encouraged the Hindu population of other areas of Bengal to come to settle in the area where the administrative headquarters of the sultans were situated. This indirectly gave impetus to the Hindus to increase their number in the adjoining areas of the capital in the upper Bengal. In the same way the total elimination of the Habshi soldiers from the administrative machinery must have left a vacuum which 'Ala' al-Din Husayn Shah had to fill with local elements.⁵⁴

It is, therefore, plausible to maintain that after the first wave of conquest and consolidation, the Hindu population from the middle of the 14th century A.D. grew larger in this northern part of Bengal. The expulsion of the Habshis from this area by sultan 'Ala' al-Din Husayn Shah naturally invited the indigenous people to fill the gap created by the departure of the Abyssinians. That the Hindus held important key-posts of administration in his reign confirms it.⁵⁵ In the chaotic period of the Afghan and Karrani rule many people apprehending the invasion of the Mughals from this direction possibly sought safety in the river-girt areas of eastern Bengal. The shifting of the capital of the imperial Mughal rule to Dhaka caused the settlement of a considerable number of the Muslims in the eastern Bengal. Moreover, the merchants of Arabia and Persia in course of their merchandise enterprise landed in the sea ports of eastern Bengal, and many of them made their home and hearth permanently in this part of Bengal. Gradually the number went on increasing in such a way that in the succeeding period of the British

rule the Muslims of Eastern Bengal attained numerical superiority over the Muslim population of Northern Bengal.

Being acquainted with Islamic way of life, the local people accepted Islam on their own accords and thereby swelled the number of Muslim population of Bengal. In the absence of any positive evidence, it is not possible to state categorically the proportion of the immigrants and converts. The immigrant Muslims mostly and generally served in the army and other offices of the government. The names and titles of the officers holding various administrative ranks as preserved in the epigraphs⁵⁶ bear this out. They hardly pursued any profession which the converted Muslims did by inheritance. The converted Muslims by inheritance took to agriculture and local trades while the immigrant Muslims got the privilege of employment in the different branches of administration. It is difficult to determine with any accuracy the number of converted Muslims as against the immigrant Muslims. In reality an overwhelming majority of the Muslims of Bengal were converts from both the lower and upper classes of the Hindus.

It is not easy to throw light accurately on the process of conversion after the conquest of the land by Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji. The *Kulinism* as reorganized by Vallala Sena made the cast-system more rigid and turned the Brahmins into a privileged and tyrannical people. The low-caste Hindus and the *Sadharmis* or the Buddhists fell victims to their oppression.⁵⁷ This possibly made them welcome the conquering Muslims. Islam seemed to them a better alternative. We may, therefore, assume that a considerable number of these people accepted Islam to avail of the equal privileges granted by the *Shari'ah* and to remain free from the apprehension of future Brahmanical domination. It is evident from the account of Minhaj Siraj that a Mech leader belonging to the aboriginal Mech tribe of northern part of Bengal⁵⁸ accepted Islam at the hands of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji and received the name of 'Ali, the Mech.⁵⁹ 'Ali, the Mech even after his acceptance of Islam commanded respects from both from Mech and Koch tribes. If we are to believe in the accounts of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, we cannot but come to the conclusion that a weighty number of Koch and Mech people accepted Islam under the influence of 'Ali, the Mech. If it was not so they would not have escorted Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji to Dewkot⁶⁰ after the latter's defeat in the Tibet expedition. As aboriginal people they were expected to hold the animistic form of religion.⁶¹ It is not, therefore, unreasonable to assume that at the initial period of conquest of Bengal, the lower section of the Hindus, the Buddhists and the Animists accepted Islam. There is no evidence to show that coercion was applied for such conversion. The story of *Seka Subodaya*, a book the credibility of which is questioned, is at least indicative of the influence of the *Shaykhs* and *Sufis* among the masses of this land at the early period of conquest.⁶² The foundation of *Khanqat* by Muhammad Bakhtiyar and his Khalji *Amirs*⁶³ at such an early stage indirectly supported the prevailing missionary works of *ulama-mashaikh* and the *Sufis* in Bengal.

This does not suggest that the converted Muslims of Bengal came only from the lower section of the indigenous people. Even in the early period there was the instance of the conversion of a Brahmin to Islam. It is stated that Bhojar Brahmin, a *Yogi* of Kamrupa came in the time of 'Ala' al-Din 'Ali Mardan Khalji (1206 -A.D.) at the court of Lakhnawati in the upper Bengal and had religious discourse with Qadi Rukn al-Din Samarqandi.⁶⁴ The *Yogi* was defeated in the discourse, and he accepted Islam at the hands of the Qadi. Later on he presented a book *Amritkund* to the Qadi who translated it

both in Arabic and Persian under the title of *Hawd al-Hayat*.⁶⁵ The Brahmins and the Kayasthas being the most enlightened people of the society sought employment at the court of the Muslim sultans. The Muslim rulers employed them in the various services of the government. This contact with the Muslims gave them better opportunity to understand and appreciate the Muslim society and their faith. The higher ideals of Islam might have induced some of them to profess Islam. The Bhavanipur legend,⁶⁶ though apocryphal, depicts the conversion of Vijaya Vahum the son of high class Hindu noble to Islam in the early 14th century A.D. at the time of Ghiyath al-Din Bhadr Shah (1322-1328 A.D.), the son of Shams al-Din Firuz Shah (1301-1322 AD). After his acceptance of Islam he received the name of Kamal Khan and became, as the story relates, one of the courtiers of Ghiyath al-Din Bahadur Shah. Jadu, the son of Raja Ganesh belonged to the influential and aristocratic Brahmin family. He accepted Islam at the hands of Shaykh Nur Qutb al-'Alam, and under the name of Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah ascended the throne of Bengal.⁶⁷ He left behind him descendants professing the faith of Islam. Kalapahar, the famous general of Sulayman Karrani and Da'ud Karrani was a convert from the Kayasthas.⁶⁸

The Hindu officials were much influenced by the Muslim culture. In order to get appointment in the government services they learnt Persian, because it was the official language⁶⁹ in the period under-review. To maintain decorum the Hindu officials and nobles attired themselves with white turban and a long shirt in the same way as the Muslim officials and nobles did. The accounts of the Chinese embassies of the early 15th century A.D. visiting the court of Pandua confirm this point.⁷⁰ Even the Hindu scholars received very honourable titles for their literary works from the Muslim sultans. Vrihaspati Misra received the *Raymukuta* and five other titles from the Muslim sultan.⁷¹ However, they had to mix up with the Muslims, and this mixing sometimes made them out-caste. In that case they either embraced Islam or developed new society of people who lost caste for the same fault. The recasting of *Kulinism* by Uday Chandra Bhaduri among the Varendri Brahmins and the creation of *Kaps* or cadres of the Varendra Brahmins⁷² substantiate the view. We may, therefore, come to this proposition that the converted Muslims in medieval Bengal came from higher as well as lower classes of the Hindu people.

Regarding the process of conversion some scholars hold prejudiced opinion which cannot be historically substantiated. According to them force was applied for conversion. H. Beverly, representing this class, says, "The Muhammads were ever ready to make conquest with the Koran as with the sword. Under Jalauddin (Jadu) for instance, it is said that the Hindus were persecuted almost to extermination. The exclusive caste-system of the Hindus again naturally encouraged the conversion of the lower orders from a religion, under which they were no better than despised out-castes to one which recognized all men as equals."⁷³ Beverly and the scholars like him do not seem justified in deducing such a conclusion from the instance of Jalal-al-Din Muhammad Shah. It is not historically true that Jalal al-Muhammad Shah persecuted the Hindus to extermination. It is possible that he adopted severe attitude to those selfish Brahmins who counselled Raja Ganesh for his conversion to Hinduism by applying *suddhi* (purification) ceremony and received the gifts.⁷⁴ His conferring of *Raymukuta* and other titles on Vrihaspati would reasonably contradict their view. As converted Muslim he might have taken some repressive measures upon a class of selfish Brahmins. But that cannot represent the whole class. If Muslim rulers applied force, no non-Muslim would

have been left in Bengal during the period of their continuous rule for several centuries. Explanation for conversion should be sought elsewhere. The poet Vrindabana Das says, “In the Hindu community even the Brahmins came and voluntarily accepted Islam.”⁷⁵ The Portuguese merchant Barbosa who visited Bengal in 1518 A.D relates, “The king who is Moor (Musalman) is a great lord and very rich; he possesses much country inhabited by the Gentiles (Hindus), of whom everyday many turn Moors (Muslims) to obtain the favour of the king and governors.”⁷⁶ There is no dearth of evidences to show the voluntary conversion of Hindus to Islam. Some of those who were converted succeeded in convincing his relation to follow him.⁷⁷ The evidences indirectly tend to infer that the defeat of the Hindu Brahmins in religious debates with Muslim *‘ulama* and *sufis* many a times caused their conversion to Islam with their followers. We can, therefore, presume that instead of coercion, constant contact with the Muslim population, aspiration for employment in the government services, the egalitarianism of Islam and the humanistic attitude of the Muslim sages and *sufi* saints were the factors contributing to the conversion of Hindus to Islam.

To sum up the racial origin of the Muslims of Bengal let us consider the view of modern scholars on this point. European scholars like H. Beverly, H.H. Risely and E.A. Gait are of the opinions that the Muslims of Bengal originated from the lower class Hindus who were converted to Islam.⁷⁸ On the basis of facial and physical similarities between the lower class Hindus and the common Muslims they possibly came to this conclusion. Moreover, they argued that the low-born Hindu population of the soil accepted Islam in large number to get relief from the tyrannical caste-system of the Brahmins. The present Muslims are, in their opinion, the descendants of those converted Hindus and aborigines. This kind of generalisation is neither logical nor historical. The conclusion they arrived at was the result of a very limited survey carried out on the criminals in a number of Jails. Upper class and respectable Muslims were not studied at all. The findings, therefore, are highly unscientific and hence unacceptable.

This view of the aforesaid scholars is opposed by the unbiased critics and especially by Khundker Fazli Rubbee. He seems to have traced the origins of Bengali Muslims to the Muslims of foreign extraction.⁷⁹ He cited some examples from historical facts to show that the Muslims coming from outside of India, mostly Arabs, Turks and Afghans. In support of this contention it is said, “The kingdom of Gaur in Bengal had long continued very powerful and prosperous, so much that it had no rival in wealth and affluence. The city of Gaur was extensive and populous. It teemed with noble and high families noted for learning, erudition and genius. A large standing army was also located there. All these various classes of people were the Muslims of foreign origin. In short, where there was a Musalman government, there were all the necessary appenages thereto, as also men in adequate numbers and of sufficient ability to conduct the machinery of the government. It would be simply preposterous to think that the kings were the only Musalmans in the country and that they had no Musalman countries or officers, or even they had that they were only the new Musalman converts of this country.”⁸⁰ As regards the large Muslim population of foreign origin the remark of C. Stewart is worth-mentioning. He says, “Raja Kanis was greeted by the Hindu as the restorer of their religion and sovereignty of Bengal, but after being seated on the throne of Pandua he found that the Muhammadans in his dominions were so numerous, and so much superior in bravery to natural subjects that he judged it requisite to treat them with

mildness and affability he, therefore, allowed many of the Afghan chiefs to retain their estates and granted pensions to the learned and devout of religion.”⁸¹

Neither of these views seems to represent the whole truth. It is historically correct that the Muslims of foreign extraction, as pointed out above, settled in different parts of Bengal being patronized by the rulers of same racial origin. It is also unhistorical to think that their descendants became altogether extinct and did not leave their children in the soil. In the same way, the members of the aborigines like Koches and Meches⁸² and the high born Hindu like Jadu,⁸³ the son of Raja Ganesh of this tract of land were converted to Islam. Their descendants also lived in this land as Muslims. It can, therefore, be assumed that while some of the Muslims of Bengal owed their origin to foreign Muslims and some others belonged to the high and low-caste people of this land. Even today marks of distinction regarding the various racial origins of the Muslims of Bengal could be seen apparent in their facial appearance, physical structure and complexional variation. Islam is the only force which can bring them together and inspire them to work for the interest of the Muslim *Ummah* against all wrongs.

Notes and References

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- ² H. Blochmann, *Contribution to the Geography and History of Bengal* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1968), p. 31; S.N. Majumder, “Some Notes on Ancient Geography,” *Sir Asutosh Mookherjee Silver Jubilee Volumes*, Calcutta University, 1925, p. 423.
- ³ A.H. Dani, “Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah Shah-i-Bangalah,” *Sir Jadunath Sarker Commemoration Volumes*, Punjab University, 1958, p. 56.
- ⁴ H.E. Stapleton, “Contributions to the History and Ethnology of North Eastern India,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (JASB)*, New Series, Calcutta, 1922, P. 420.
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- ⁶ A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, Vol. I (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1963), p. 2; B.C. Law, “The Vangas,” *Indian Culture*, Vol. I, Calcutta, 1934, p. 55.
- ⁷ *TN*, Vol. I (Kabul edition), p. 427.
- ⁸ Ramai Pandit, *Sunya Purana* ed. N.N. Vasu (Calcutta: Vangiya Sahitaya Parisad, 1314 B.S.), pp. 140-42.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ *TN*, Vol. I (Kabul edition), p. 427; Nizam al-Din Bakhshi, *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*, Vol. I, Tr. H. Beveridge (Calcutta: Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1927), pp. 50-51.
- ¹¹ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 423.
- ¹² Arabic Inscription of Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah of Bengal; It was a valuable procurement from an antiquarian site of Bangladesh for the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi and was deciphered by the writer. The text of the epigraph is as follows:
Ist line : اما بعد حمد الله على نعمائه والصلاة على النبي واحبابه ولم اظهر شعاعي
الشرع و احركه امنه سلطان العصر و الزمان ناصر الدين و الدين ابوالمظفر
محمود شاه السلطان خلد الله ملكه و سلطانة فى خطة ربيعة موسومة بسمل اباد و
لم اهدى جناب الاعظم
2nd line : م المصرو و الاسلام الذى خوطب بخطاب مجلس منصوص مازال كاسمه صار الكثر
منصورا و لم اعزم لعرف مسجدا ليجعله ذخيرة فى دار الجزاء الى يوم الساعة خان

المعظم عضد الاسلام و المسلمین خان الاعظم و خاقان المعظم الغ رحيم خان يبقی
 الله شره و جعل الجنة مشواه و وفقه
 3rd line : اله قلع اعداء الله من الكفار و المشركين و ادارا لانعام على العلماء و الل : الل
 المتعلمين مورخا فى الثانى و العشريين من ذى القعدة فى يوم الجمعة سنة ثمان
 و خمسين و ثمنماية.

Translation:

Ist line: *Ammabad* (after this), praise be to Allah for His endless bounties and peace be upon the Prophet and his friends. When the insignia (canons) of the *Shari'ah* was shaken (turmoil and unrest prevailed in the country) then the sultan of time and age, Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah had given it asylum. May Allah perpetuate his kingdom and sultanate (he established the rule of law) in such high *Khittah* which might be named Simlabad. When the great personality was guided rightly.

2nd line: He was regarded as the honoured person of the city and of Islam. He was dignified with the title of *Majlis Mansus*. Like his name he would remain always victorious in all campaigns. When he intended (to perform) any good work, he started (constructing) the mosque so that he might make it saving for the abode of retribution till the day of resurrection (this man was known as) *Khan al-Mu'azzam*, the helper of Islam and the Muslims, and also *Khan al-A'zam* and *Khqan al-Mu'azzam* Ulugh Rahim Khan. May Allah illuminate his grave, make his abode in the paradise and give him opportunity.

3rd line: To uproot the enemies of Allah from among the unbelievers and polytheists. May Allah also give him heart to bestow his rewards repeatedly upon the learned (teachers) and the learners (students). (This mosque was built) on Friday, the 22nd Dhul Q'adah of the year 858 A.H./October, 1454, A.D.

¹³ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 426; *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*, Vol. I, p. 51.

¹⁴ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 426; *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* Vol. I, p. 51; A. Karim, "Early Muslim rulers in Bengal and their non-Muslim subjects," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan (JASP)*, Vol. IV, Dhaka, 1959, p. 74.

¹⁵ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 425.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 431; *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* Vol. I, p. 54.

¹⁷ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 426.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 431; A. Karim, "Expansion of the Muslim Society in the 14th century A.D." (in Bengali), *Bangla Academy Patrika*, No. 2, 1372 B.S. Dhaka, p. 23.

¹⁹ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 427; the number of the soldiers is stated to have been twelve thousand in *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* Vol. I, p. 52; possibly the account of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* is nearer the truth as it is contemporaneous to the event.

²⁰ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 433, Masida (Moseeda), Maksidah in Kabul edition is identified with a large *Pargana* south of Mahiganj and north of Jangipur on both the banks of the Atrai river. Cf. J.N. Sarker ed., *History of Bengal*, Vol. II (Dhaka: Dhaka University, Second Impression, 1972), p. 37.

²¹ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 433; *Risalah-i-Shuhada'* (Persian text), *JASB*, Vol. XLIII, 1874, p. 230. Santush in identified with Mahigang on the eastern bank of the river Atrai. Cf. *HB*, Vol. II, p. 37.

²² *TN*, Vol. I, p. 432. In some old manuscript it is Narangoe. This place-name can not be definitely identified. Narkuti may have some phonetic resemblance with Natore of Rajshahi district. For some other factors Nurkuti may presumably be identified with Natore, Cf *Indian Culture*, 1944, p. 44, f.n. 2.

²³ *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* Vol. I, p. 55.

²⁴ Barsala is a *mahal* in the Ghoraghat Sarkar.

Cf. Abul Fadl 'Allami, *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol. II, Tr. Colonel H.S. Jarret (Calcutta; Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1891) p. 135.

²⁵ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 433.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 433; *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*, Vol. I, p. 56.

²⁷ *TN*, p. 424; *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* Vol. I, p. 56

²⁸ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 436.

²⁹ *JASB*, Vol. XLIII, 1874, pp. 296-97; *Archaeological Survey Report (ASR)*, Vol. XV, pp. 94-95.

³⁰ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 436.

³¹ Diya al-Din Barani, *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi*, text ed. Sayyid Ahmad Khan (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1862), pp. 85-86; *HB*, Vol. II, p. 56.

- ³² H.E. Stapleton, "Contributions to the History and Ethnology of North Eastern India," *JASB*, Vol. XVIII, 1922, p. 411.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 410; A. Karim, *Corpus of the Muslim Coins of Bengal*, (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1960), p. 25.)
- ³⁴ *HB*, Vol. II, p. 68.
- ³⁵ *Tabaat-i-Akbari* Vol. I, pp. 224-25.
- ³⁶ Zia Uddin Desai, "Some new data regarding the pre-Muhat Muslim rulers of Bengal," *Islamic Culture*, Vol. XXXII, 1958, Hyderabad, pp. 199-200.
- ³⁷ C. Stewart, *History of Bengal* (London, 1813), p. 51.
- ³⁸ *HB*, Vol. II, p. 144; A. Karim, *op.cit.*, p. 51.
- ³⁹ Quoted in Ghulam Sarwar, *Khazinat al-Asfiya* (Lucknow: Nawal Kishore Press, n.d.), p. 368; S.H. Askari, "New light ... of two Muslim Saints," *Bengal Past and Present (BPP)*, 1948, no. 130, p. 35.
- ⁴⁰ Ghulam Husain Selim, *Riyad al-Salatin*, Tr. Abdus Salam (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1904), p. 113; M. Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, Vol. III (Delhi: Cosmo Publication, Reprint, 1976), p. 618.
- ⁴¹ *Risalah al-Shuhada*, Persian Text in *JASB*, Vol. XLIII 1874, P. 223.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 235.
- ⁴³ *Islamic Culture*, Vol. XXXII, 1958, p. 200 & 204.
- ⁴⁴ *Riyad al-Salatin*, p. 131; C. Stewart, *History of Bengal*, p. 71.
- ⁴⁵ A.H. Dani, *Bibliography of the Muslim Inscriptions of Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1957), pp. 49-50; S. Ahmad, *Inscriptions of Bengal*, Vol. IV (Rajshahi: Varendra Research Museum, 1960), P. 163.)
- ⁴⁶ Michael Mitchiner, *Oriental Coins and their Values* (London: Hawkins Publications, 1977), p. 71, Coin No. 2758.
- ⁴⁷ *Riyad al-Salatin*, p. 132.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-55; C. Stewart, *History of Bengal*, p. 97; N.B. Roy, "Da'ud Khan," *The Visva Bharati Quarterly*, Nov. 1948 – January 1949, p. 192.
- ⁴⁹ N.K. Bhattasali, "Bengal Chiefs' Struggle for Independence in the Reign of Akbar and Jahangir," *BPP* Vol. XXXV, 1926, Calcutta, pp. 32 & 38; *The Visva Bharati Quarterly*, pp. 197 & 273; S. Ahmad, *IB*, Vol. IV, pp. 261-63.
- ⁵⁰ Barani, *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi*, p. 593; Sirhindi, *Tarikh-i-Mubarak Shahi*, Text ed. M. Hidayat (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1931), p. 1253
- ⁵¹ S.H. Askari, "The Correspondence ... Bengal," *Journal of the Bihar Research Society (JBRS)*, Vol. XLII, Part 2, 1956, pp. 186-87.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*
- ⁵³ *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* Vol. III, p. 430.
- ⁵⁴ M.R. Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1965), p. 37.
- ⁵⁵ A. Karim, "Early Muslim rulers", *JASP*, 1959, p. 83.
- ⁵⁶ The title like *Khan al-A'zam*, *Khaqan al-Mu'azzam Ulugh*, *Majlis al-Majalis*, etc. Cf. 'Abid 'Ali, *Memoirs of Gaur and Pandua*, ed. H.E. Stapleton (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1930); A.H. Dani, *Bibliography*; S. Ahmad, *IB*, Vol. IV.
- ⁵⁷ *Sunya Purana*, p.140; A. Rahim, *op.cit.*, p. 70.
- ⁵⁸ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 436. It is stated therein – در اطراف ان كوهه كه ميان تبت و بلاد لكهنوتى است، چ و س يوم را تهاروا. دوم را مي چ و سه چنس خلق است : يكي را كو
Tr. In between Tibet and Lakhnawati in the hilly and high land three types of people lived - Kuch, Mich and Tharu.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 431. The escort offered by the Koch and Mech people to Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji has been very nicely narrated in these few sentences - ختيار از اب بيرون آمد جماعت چون محمد ب - نر داشت، پيش ر قرا بتان (خود را) بر ره گ غلى مي چ را هب كوچان و مي چان را خبر شد ون بدى كوت رسيد. چ آمدند و استقبال كردند و خدمنى بس يار آوردند
Tr. The news of Muhammad Bakhtiyar's rescue of drowning reached the Koch and Mech people. They along with the relations of 'Ali, the Mech came hurriedly to his help and escorted him to Dewkot.

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- ⁶¹ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Rajshahi* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1916), p. 54.
- ⁶² Halaydhu Misra, *Seka Subhodaya*, ed. Sukumar Sen (Calcutta, 1927), Chaps. I & XVIII.
- ⁶³ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 427; *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*, p. 51.
- ⁶⁴ Qazi Ahmad Mian Akhtar, "Amrit kund," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society, (JPHS)*, Vol. I, 1953, Karachi, p. 47.
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 53.
- ⁶⁶ Bhavanipur is situated on the western bank of the Karatoya river about twenty four miles south of Bogra town and it comprises some northern portions of Pabna district and southern portions of Bogra district at the junction of Bogra, Pabna and Rajshahi districts of Bangladesh.
Cf. P.C. Sen, *Bagurar Itihasa*, Vol. I (Rangpur: Sahitaya Parisad, 1912), pp. 101 ff.
Legend has it that Vallala Sena built in this place a fort-city called Kamalapur and made his kinsman the ruler of that place and bestowed upon him a small principality extending from the Karatoya in the east to the Atrai river in the west. Achchuta Sena is said to have been a ruler of this lineage at the end of the 13th century and the first quarter of the 14th century A.D. He was a tributary ruler of Shams al-Din Firuz Shah, the Muslim ruler of Gauda. Vijaya Vahu, one of his kinsman accepted Islam, took shelter in the court of Gauda and persuaded the prince Ghiyath al-Din Bahadur Shah to invade the tributary principality of Achchuta Sena.
cf. Sri Tarini Charan Thakur, *Ghavanipur Kahini* (Calcutta: Published by Sri Kali Charan Vasu, 1308 B.S.), pp. 65 ff; P.C. Sen, *Bagurar Itihasa*, Vol. II, pp. 85-87.
- ⁶⁷ *Riyad al-Salatin*, p. 116; 'Abid 'Ali, *Memoirs*, p. 28; *BPP*, No. 130, p. 33.
- ⁶⁸ A. Rahim, *op.cit.*, p. 66.
- ⁶⁹ Kalikinkar Dutta, *Survey of India's Social life and Economic Condition in the Eighteenth Century* (Calcutta: Firaana K. L. Mukhpadhya, 1961), p. 17.
- ⁷⁰ P.C. Bagchi, "Political relations", *Visva Bharati Annals*, Vol. I, 1945, p. 113.
- ⁷¹ *JAS*, Letters, Vol. XVIII, 1952, pp. 160 ff; A.H. Dani, "Was Jalaluddin, the Patron of Rayamukuta?" *Indian Historical Quarterly (IHQ)*, Vol. XXX, 1959, pp. 264 ff.
- ⁷² Sri Jadava Chandra Chakravarti, *Kula Sastra Dipika* (Calcutta: New Britannica Press, 1314 B.S), p. 9; Mahim Chandra Majumdar, *Gaude Brahmana*, p. 138.
- ⁷³ H. Beverly, *Census Report of Bengal, 1872* (Calcutta: Government Printing Press, 1872), p. 30.
- ⁷⁴ *Riyad al-Salatin*, p. 116; 'Abid 'Ali, *Memoirs*, p. 30.
- ⁷⁵ Brindavanadasa, *Chaitana Mangala*, Part I, V. 16; A. Rahim, *op.cit.*, p. 67, f.n. 2.
- ⁷⁶ M.L. Dames, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, Vol. II (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1921), p. 148.
- ⁷⁷ *Rasul Vejaya* by Shaikh Chand, *Sahitaya Parisad Patrika*, 1343 B.S., Calcutta, Part III, pp. 100-101.
- ⁷⁸ H. Beverly, *Census Report, op.cit.*, p. 132.
- ⁷⁹ Khundkar Fazli Rubbee, *Haqiqat-i-Musalman-i-Bangalah* (Calcutta: Thaker Spink & Co., 1895), Photostat Copy, p. 63.
- ⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 47
- ⁸¹ C. Stewart, *op.cit.*, p. 60.
- ⁸² *TN*, Vol. I, p. 427; *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*, Vol. I, p. 52.
- ⁸³ *A'in-i-Akbari*, Vol. II, pp. 148-49; *Riyad al-Salatin*, p. 116.

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