

# Preaching of Islam and Dissemination of Learning in Medieval Bengal

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**Backdrop:** Bengal comprising modern Bangladesh and West Bengal of India was considered an important part of Eastern India in the medieval period. The time span of medieval period can be taken here tentatively from the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the third quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Before the advent of the Muslims in this land no ruler had connoted *Bangala* or Bengal in the sense of a country. It was then divided into so many *Janapadas* or principalities over which the rulers of various dynasties ruled. It was sultan Shams al Din Ilyas Shah (1339 1358 A.D.) who united all the administrative divisions of Lakhnawati, Satgaon and Sonargaon and various *Janapadas* into a compact country which became widely known as Bagala or Bengal in later times.<sup>1</sup> Bengal connoted as country in medieval period consisted of a vast expanse of land from the Teliagarhi pass in the west to Chittagong in the east and from the foot of the Himalayas in the north to the Bay of Bengal in the south.<sup>2</sup> It is discernable that from the time of yore Bengal had been an important region of Indian sub- continent, and her affluences arrested the attention of the foreigners and travelers to land in, and in many cases to make habitation in various parts of her soil. Enormous archaeological remnants of ancient and medieval times scattered over this land bear witness to this fact. Following the age long tradition of influx the Muslims availed the opportunity of entering into Bengal with the peace mission of Islam and rich cultural heritage.

**Advent of Islam:** On an analysis of the available sources we may surmise that Islam penetrated into this sub-continent by three groups of people- traders, the missionaries i.e *ulama- mashaikh* and the conquerors. The first two groups paved the ground for permanent footing of Islam in this soil. The sayings of the Prophet Muhammad (sm) “*Ballighu anni wa law aya*”<sup>3</sup> (communicate from me even though it may be a single message) and “*fal yuballighu al- shahid al -ghaib*”<sup>4</sup> (those present here should convey to those who are absent) imbibed the votaries of Islam to preach the teachings of Islam to the people of other lands than those of theirs. Moreover, the Prophet(sm) offered the good tiding of the conquest of India by his followers, and he

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assured them the reward for the endeavours they made in such enterprise.(5) Bengal could not be excluded from such tiding of the Prophet. In this connection it is to be mentioned here that three distinct phases could be noticed in the preaching of Islam along with the expansion of Muslim rule in the Indian sub-continent.

The first phase began from the time of the four pious caliphs (632-661 AD) especially of Hazrat Uthman(644-656)(6) and ended in the reign of the Ummayyad caliph al-Walid b. Abdul Malik (705-715) with the conquest of Sind and Multan by Muhammad b. Qasim al-Thaqafi in 712 A.D.(7) The Muslim emissaries put their foot in the various parts of this vast country especially of her north western regions. The seventeen times` military expeditions of sultan Mahmud of Ghazna to this sub-continent in between 1000-1030 AD can be considered the second phase regarding politico-cultural and Islam's contact with this land. The impact of these expeditions extended to Kanuj in the east and Gujrat in the south, thus introducing the ideals and egalitarian spirit of Islam to the people of this area. The third phase started with the second battle of Tarain in 1192 AD when sultan Muiz al- Din Muhammad b. Sam better known as Muhammad Ghuri defeated the combined forces of the Hindu rulers headed by Prithviraj and established permanently the Muslim rule in India with Delhi as capital.(8) In this third phase Ikhtiyar al- Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji led his military expedition to Lakhnawati kingdom of eastern India and defeating the Sena king Laksmana Sena established the Muslim rule in this part in 1204 AD.(9) Thenceforth the preaching of Islam made a great stride through its various organs over this land.

**Nature and Stages of Preaching and Dissemination:** There is a moot question whether the Muslims had contact with Bengal in any form either for preaching Islam or for carrying business transaction before the military conquest of Muhammad Bkhtiyar khalji in the first quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD. The scholars are not unanimous on this point. Now let us consider various factors in this regard and come to an agreeable opinion. It is presumed that the Arab Muslims had their trade relation with the people of the East especially of China, possibly from the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD.(10) It is known from the accounts of the early Arab geographers (11) that Arab merchants, in their eastward voyages, some times broke their journey at ports of Samondar, Orashin, the corruption of Roshang or Rokhang, the old name of Arakan and Abina indentified with Burma.(12) In some accounts Kamrun or Kamru identified with Kamrupa is mentioned in the countries of the east.(13) The accounts of the Arab geographers are not clear to locate the distance of some places with accuracy. Hence the schorars differ one another in the identification of the term Samondar mentioned in their accounts. A.H. Dani locates Samondar on the confluence of the Meghna river identifies the island described by al-Idrisi as being at a distance of one day's journey from Samondar with Sandipa.(14) A.Rahim holds the view substantiated with further arguments and describes Sandipa as a flourishing commercial port in the early period.(15)A. Karim differs with them and takes Chittagong to be the Samondar port of the early geographers. He strengthens his view with convincing arguments.(16) The mention of Sudkawan(17)by Ibn Batutah as the coastal city and its identification with Chittagong by the scholars(18) reveal the fact that Chittagong occupied a pivotal position for the landing of the Arab merchants in their eastward voyages. Though opinions differ among the scholars as to the identification of the Samundar, it is clear

that Arab merchants had their commercial contact with the ports and coastal regions of Bengal from the mouth of Meghna to Coxes Bazar in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. It is possible that ulama-mashaikh and preachers came with them in their voyages and settled in the regions of their landing. Chittagong was named as port grande or the great port by the Portuguese for its flourishing sea port. Likewise Satgaon named as porto piqueno or the small port in the south-west of Bengal and later on Hugli as porto piqueno in the same direction attracted the attention of the merchants for their merchandise enterprises. With them invariably came the ulama-mashaikh and saint-preachers to spread the Islami Da`wah among the people of this land. From all these citations it may be presumed that Islam started penetrating in the cities and ports of the coastal areas of Bengal and other adjoining countries from the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries of the Christian era. It is, therefore reasonable to hold that before the conquest of the land in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century AD the traders and missionaries were credited for preaching and expansion of Islam, and also for the evolving of Islamic society in the sea-girt areas of eastern India.

What about the contact of Islam with main and hinter land of Bengal? In order to clarify this point we are to into consideration the numismatic and circumstantial factors. First, the discovery of a silver coin (dirham) of the Abbasid caliph Harun. al-Rashid ( 786 -809 AD ) dated A.H. 172 / 788 AD at Paharpur (greater Rajshahi district) and some other Arab coins of the same period unearthed at Mainamati (Comilla ) have led us to presume that the merchants or the saint-preachers had come to the hinter land of Bengal in the 8<sup>th</sup> or the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD. To add to it if 'mulk Ruhmi` or 'Darhami` of the merchant Sulayman meant the kingdom of Dharmapala it would seem that the coming of the Muslim merchants or preachers to this land fell in the time Dharmapala (770-810 AD ) was not improbable. Because the Muslims as horse-dealers were not possible unknown to the people of this region. The accounts of Minhaj Siraj bear indirect testimony to this fact. It is known that Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji with eighteen horsemen seemed to the city guards of Laksmana Sena to be the merchants displaying their horses for sale. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to presume that the merchants of Turkish or Persian origin had traversed the important towns and commercial places of the hinter land of Bengal even before the military occupation. The foundation of khanqat by Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji and his nobles just after conquest of this land indicates the existence of the Sufis and preachers even before the conquest. The story of Makhdum Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi as narrated in Sek Subhodaya reminds us of the preaching of Islam at the time of Laksmana Sena before the conquest of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji. Though we may not subscribe fully to the narration of Sek Sbhodaya regarding Jalal al- Din Tabrizi, his tomb at Deotala named Tabrizabad is indicative of his work over north-western portion of this land. Mahisun identified with Mahisantosh, Deotala and Narkuti identified with Natore are stated to have been the important centers of the different sufi orders at the initial period Muslim conquest. These indirect evidences show that the connection of Islam with land even before the military occupation of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji. This may be termed as the initial stage regarding the contact of Islam with the hinter land of Bengal.

The second stage for the preaching of Islam and the nourishment of Islamic culture started with the foundation of Muslim rule in Bengal at beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup>

century AD. The Muslim rule over this area began with the conquest of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1204 AD and ended in the catastrophic fall of Nawab Siraj ud-Dawla at battle of Plassey in 1757 AD. This long period is divided into Sultanate period and Mughal period. The former begins with the conquest of Lakhnawati kingdom in 1204 AD and ended with the fall of Daud Khan Karrani in 1576 AD. The latter begins from that year and ends with the battle plassey in 1757AD. Under the direct patronization of the Muslim rulers sultans the masajid ( mosques ), madaris ( educational seminaries ) and khanqat ( seat of religious divines ) considered to be the luminaries for the spread of Islamic beliefs and practices, were founded in the capital cities, strategic places and other stations of the country.() In the chronicles and the epigraphs of Bengal sultans from the time of conquest in 1204 to her annexation with the Mughal empire 1757 AD we can trace a good number of mosques which provided arrangement for imparting religious learning and other essentials of Islam besides retaining the places of accommodation for salat ()or daily congregational and weekly prayers.

These mosques played a vital role for the spread and expansion of Islam in Bengal in the period under study. The Imams in the mosques besides leading five times' prayer a day and the weekly Jum'ah prayer delivered religious sermons to the audience who communicated them to the absentees. In this way the teachings of Islam reached to the multitudes of people of the area of our study. In the same way the madaris or theological seminaries were considered to be the rendezvous where the learners met together, and getting proper theological training worked for the spread of Islam among the masses. Contemporary epigraphical sources relate to a great number of such madrasahs where the primary and advanced learning of Islam were imparted to the students. They, on getting proper religious education, spread far and wide of the country and motivated to the teachings of Islam. On inscriptional evidences it is held that a madrasah built at Triveni in the Hoogly district in the reign of Rukn al Din Kaykaus (1291-1301 AD) by Qadi Nasir in 1298 AD and another madrasah under the name of Darul khairat or the house of benevolence built in the same locality in the time of Shams al Din Firuz Shah (1301-1322 AD) by Khan Jafar Khan in 1313() provided religious education to the learners and worked for the expansion of Islam among the people of the Satgaon region i.e. south-western Bengal. Likewise in the Lakhnawati region i.e. north-west Bengal along with the territories of Bihar the Darasbari madrasah()of the time of sultan Sham al-Din Yusuf Shah (1474-1481 AD), Belbari madrasah()of the time of `Ala al-Din Husayan Shah(1493-1593 AD) and Bagha madrasah() of time of Nasir al-Din Nusrat Shah( 1519-1531 AD) played a pivotal role in the spread and expansion of Islam among the masses.

In the same way the madrasah at Mahison identified with Mahisantosh ( greater Rajshahi district) built by Mawlana Taqi al-Din al-Arabi in the hinter land of Bengal attracted the students from the various parts of the country and thereby helped greatly to acquaint the people with the fundamental beliefs and practices of Islam. In this list is added the name of Mawlana Sharaf al-Din Abu Tawwama, an inhabitant of Bukhara who came to eastern India in about 1281 AD, settled down at Sonargaon in east-Bengal and built a khanqah and an Academy for learning in the city.()Religious as well as secular sciences were taught and studied in the great educational seminaries of Mahisantosh and Snargaon. These Academies for learning produced illustrious

sages and scholars in various branches of human knowledge. These institutions earned great fame as seats of learning in eastern India, and to these academies the students from all over the sub-continent flocked together to receive training in all subjects Islamic learning. Thus they rendered valuable services in producing scholarly people by whom expansion of Islam was possible in every nook and corner of the country. During the reign of sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah( 1442-1459AD ) Ulugh Khan Jahan() an area administrator shared to build mosques and academic resorts in the Khalifatabad region i.e. southern Bengal, and they played significant role for the spread of Islam and dissemination of learning in the area of southern Bengal.

In the third stage for the spread and expansion of Islam in eastern India may be noted the endeavours of the individual persons and eminent preachers who, either founding the Islamic seminaries or giving religious sermons to the people, persuaded them to enter the fold of Islam. For instance the name of Taqi al –Din al-Arabi and Abu Tammam as founders of religious academies in Mahisantosh and Sonargaon, and the name Qadi Rukn al-Din Samarqandi() and Imamzada Jalal al-Din son of Jamal al-Din, an inhabitant of Firuzkuh ()as Islamic scholars and debaters may be mentioned for the expansion of Islam and dissemination of learning at the initial period of Muslim rule in this part of the sub-continent. In the very inaccessible places of the country among the masses steps in different forms were taken by the competent individuals for the spread of education and learning which proved beneficial at large. In view of above discussion we may come to this proposition that the merchants, the missionaries i.e. ulama-mashaikh , the rulers their deputies eminent scholar-speakers did their best for the spread and expansion of Islam and the dissemination of learning as well in the period of our study in Bengal.

**SOURCE: Obtained directly from the author**

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