

Urbanization and the Growth of Muslim Population in North Bengal, 1204 –1576: *A Historical Appraisal*

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[**Abstract:** North Bengal of modern connotation bounded on the west by the Ganges– Mahanand, on the east by the Karatoya, on the north by the Himalayan Tarai and Duar’s jungle and on the south by the Padma occupied a pivotal position in the socio-political upheavals of Bengal during the period of Turko-Afghan rule i.e. 1204– 1576 AD. Within these geographical boundaries North Bengal comprises the greater districts of Rajshahi, Pabna, Bogra, Rangpur and Dinajpur of Bangladesh and the districts of Malda, West Dinajpur, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling of West Bengal in the broader perspective. There is no denying the fact that this region had its own heritage in the ancient and medieval history of Bengal. Before the advent of the Turks the rulers of the Pala and Sena dynasties had their capital cities and other strategic urban settlements over this land. Moreover, this was a convenient zone for the horse-riding people of Turkish race of central Asia to make it a centre of their politico-administrative activities in the period of their rule. To materialize this objective effectively they needed to found new towns and cities in different strategic places of the land i.e. North Bengal. Therefore, the foundation of new towns and cities in the form of fort, riverports, mints and garrisons was considered an effective step for the urbanization of the area understudy.

From historical perspective the urbanization-policy of the Turko- Afghan rulers during the period of 1204– 1576 AD., proved to be a success in making Bengal a country of local and foreign attraction. With the growth of urban areas in the North Bengal during the period of Turko-Afghan rule the Muslim population also increased to a considerable number in this region either to ensure the security of their lives and properties or to get jobs in the governmental services. Pertinently a vertical study of the growth of Muslim population in the urban settlements along with their racial origin is to be made in historical perspective for giving a final shape to the paper.]

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Before the Muslim conquest at the early 13th century of the Christian era Bengal was divided into five main *Janapadas* or principalities of the name Varendra, Radha, Banga, Bagdhi and Mithila in consideration of the water-courses and geographical barriers.¹ Among these *Janapadas* Varendra equating with Pundravardhana of earlier times indicates more or less the same tract of land connotated as North Bengal in geographical dictionary. It is bounded on the west by the Ganges-Mahananda, on the east by the Karatoya, on the north by Himalayan Tarai and Duar's jungle and on the south by the Padma.² More precisely this tract of land comprises the greater districts of Rajshahi, Pabna, Bogra, Ranpur and Dinajpur of Bangladesh and the districts of Malda, West Dinajpur, Jalapaiguri and Darjeeling of West Bengal in the broader perspective. As being the laterite and high tract of land with old alluvial formation this region other than the rest of Bengal attracted the people of various races and climates to find it a convenient zone for their habitation. Thus the process of urbanization started over this land in a primitive level. To avail of the opportunities and facilities of livelihood the local and foreign influx of people accelerated the dimension of urbanizing this land. In their track the invaders rushed on this land from west and north western entry routes of Bengal and established dynastic rules. To combat them the militant people of indigenous origin gave them stubborn fight and ultimately the people of both these two camps established their strongholds in various parts of this land. In this way the process of urbanization continued over this land coming down to the Muslim conquest at the early 13th century of the Christian era.

The conquest of Lakhnawati Kingdom in Bengal by the Turks headed by Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji at the early 13th century ushered in a new vision of statecraft along with the urbanization in new dimension.³ So long in the dynastic rule of ancient Bengal the towns and cities were fewly founded clustering round the capitals and the seats of government while the Muslim's conquest opened the new avenues in the sphere of urbanization with pertinent paraphernalia. An investigation into the contemporary records and archaeological finds tends us to assume that urbanization in North Bengal during the period of our study had developed in the forms of the capital cities, the mint-towns, the religious sites, *maristan* and the emporium marts. In comparison with ancient period the urbanization expanded tremendously over this land during the long expanse of time referred to above. Hence it demands that the subject of urbanization be studied vertically and to a greater depth under the main heads as below.

Urbanization as capital city: For the better administration of the country a king or ruler needs to live in a fortified and well-protected place with his retinues and members of various administrative organs. A suitable site with congenial atmosphere and easy communication is mostly selected for the capital city. Besides the royal dignitaries and retinues the people of various shades flocked together for job and better livelihood in the capital. The people swelled in the number and had the habitation enlarged thereby expanding the extent of urbanization.

Lakhnawati later on Gaur was the capital city as well as a mint-town of Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji and the successive Muslim rulers of Bengal Sultanate. The last Sena king of the Sena dynasty Lakshmana Sena appears to found this city in

between the Ganges and Mahananda and made it the seat of his government, and after his name this was named as Lakhnawati.⁴ Thenceforth Lakhnawati as the capital city of Lakhnawati kingdom had its flourishing and kept abaze even before the Muslim conquest. Minhaj Siraj's statement substantiates this contention when he says that Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji after the conquest of Nadiya, the temporary capital of Laksmansena desolated it and made Lakhnawati his capital.⁵ The numismatic evidence shows that the same city was called Gaur.⁶ Abul Fazl 'Allami, the court historian of emperor Akbar states that the Mughal emperor Humayun (1530-1556) after the conquest of Gaur in 1538 named it Jannatabad.⁷ But the discovery of the coins struck by Sultan Ghiyath al-Din A'zam Shah (1392-1410) from Jannatabad Mint shows that it was so named before long during the time of Ghiyath al-Din A'zam Shah.⁸ The Portuguese writer De Barros being charmed with the beauty of the city under Husayn Shahi rule (1493-1538) describes "The chief city of the Kingdom is called Gouro (Gaur). It is situated on the banks of the Ganges, and is said to be three of our leagues in length, and to contain 2000000 inhabitants. On the one side it has the river for its defence, and on the landward faces a wall of great height. The streets are so thronged with the concourse and the traffic of people... that they can not force their way past. A great part of the houses of the city are stately and well-wrought buildings."⁹ An inscription of Sultan Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah (1459-1474) found in the citadel of Gaur dated 871 A.H/ 1466 speaks about the transparent water course, the beautiful palace and the scenic beauty of the place which may reasonably be put for Gaur.¹⁰ The name Jannatabad has gone into oblivion and Lakhnawati replaced by Gaur as the capital city of Bengal Sultanate remains famous in history. Pertinently it may be mentioned here that at the early stage the mint was simply called Lakhnawati, but later on the term *Hazrat, Khittah* or *Hazrat Khittah* together was added to Lakhnawati.¹¹ The city Lakhnawati in the name of Gaur stands on the bank of the Ganges and it is still now situated in Malda district of west Bengal. But as an annexure its suburb extends to Mahdipur-Firozpur area of Shibganj Police Station of Chapinawabganj district of Bangladesh.

Pandua was the capital city as well as the mint town of Bengal Sultanate. Legend has it that the mythical Pandu Raja built this city as his capital of Bengal. But we have no such evidence which can substantiate this legendary tale. It is probable that this was an ancient city built by some Hindu kings of the locality. Sultan Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah (1342-1357) uniting Lakhnawati, Satgaon and Sonargaon regions into a compact country took the title of *Shahi- Bangala*, and at the same time he made Pandua the capital of Bengal.¹² As 'Ala al-Din Ali Shah's coin struck from Firuzabad mint in 743 A.H./ 1342 AD equating with Pandua so it is reasonable to assume that Pandua emerged as a mint as well a capital town during Ali Shah's time.¹³ Later on as a capital city Pandua got much care and flourishing under Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah and his successors. Till the time of Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah (1459-1474) it retained its status as a mint town.¹⁴ But it had been the capital city of Bengal till the time of Shams al-Din Ahmad Shah (1432-1435) of Raja Ganesh house. It is Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (1437-1459) who transferred his capital from Pandua to Gaur due to the receding of the course of the Ganges a bit away from Pandua.¹⁵ Pertinently it is to be mentioned here that 'Ala al-Din Ali Shah's construction of *Astana* in memory of Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi later on named *Bara Dargah* and Nur Qutbul Alam's family graveyard complex known as *Chhota Dargah* within the surroundings of Pandua bear witness to the urbanization-legacy of this area.¹⁶ Moreover, the great Adina mosque of Pandua built by Sultan Sikandar Shah (1357-1392)

on the Damascus mosque plan of al-Walid (705-715), the Umayyad caliph, the first and last in Bengal mosque architecture,¹⁷ testifies to its being a great urbanized city of medieval Bengal. This capital city appears first in the coins of 'Ala al-Din Ali Shah as Firuzabad, and it is claimed that after the name of Sultan Shams al-Din Firuz Shah (1301-1322) of Bengal it was called so.¹⁸ But Shams Siraj Afif writes that after the capture of Pandua and Ikdala Sultan Shams al-Din Firuz Shah (1351-1388) of Delhi named these two places as Firuzabad and Azadpur respectively.¹⁹ Leave aside the naming controversy of this place it is historically true that Pandua approximately twenty miles north of English Bazar i.e. Malda town had its fame as a great urbanized habitation of the rulers, their retinues and people of diverse races and professions in North Bengal. Numismatic source reveals the fact that this city was called *al-baldah al-mahrusah* or the fortified city.²⁰

Ekdala also being a temporary resort of Ilyas Shah's royal house, retinues and armed forces can be considered an urban settlement in the time of our discussion. It is stated that at the advance of Firuz Shah Tughlaq towards the capital Pandua Sultan Ilyas Shah took shelter with all his retinues and people in Ekdala a mud fort built by him during the course of his encounter with Delhi Sultan Firuz Shah Tughlaq.²¹ As identified by Westmacott it indicates the village of the same name in the Dhanjar Pargana of Dinajpur district about twenty five square miles, surrounded by a board moat formed by linking up the Chiramati river on the west and Balia river on the east.²² Ruins of a fort with three big tanks, one called Garh-Dighi, or the Tank of the fort, were noticed by Dr. Buchanan early in the nineteenth century.²³ This is the fort which Sultan Firuz Shah Tughlaq of Delhi called Azadpur.

Dewkot, the second capital of Bakhtiyar Khalji emerged as an early urban settlement of the Muslim population in North Bengal.²⁴ It is equated with Gangarampur in Dinajpur district of West Bengal. While traversing this land from Lakhnawati to his so-called Tibet expedition he built this city as his capital, and his soldiers and retinues built habitations over there.²⁵ Bakhtiyar Khalji's return to Dewkot instead of Lakhnawati from unsuccessful expedition of Tibet shows that he made it his capital. Ghiyath al-Din Iwaz Khalji's transfer of capital from it to Lakhnawati supports the contention.²⁶ It is, therefore, reasonable to say that urbanization had its start here as the capital city. Moreover Mawlana and Shaykh Ata's tomb (died before 1365 AD) lying in this place added its importance in urbanization.

Urbanization as Mint-Town: In the process of urbanization besides the capital cities the administrative headquarters of the *iqtas* and the mint-towns necessitated the skilled hands, the security forces and the people in general to dwell in the marked places so that their scheduled activities might run well. Like the administrative units decentralization policy was adopted in case of minting the coinage, because of providing the well circulation of money among the people of the respective surroundings of the particular mints due to the bad communication system of the time. There is no denying the fact that all mint towns had their own artists and calligraphers to size up and to embellish the coins with decorative motifs and calligraphic styles.²⁷ To get more security and to avail of better means of livelihood all shades of people clustered round the mint towns. These factors

brought positive progress to the forms of urbanization in the important and the strategic places of North Bengal during the period of our study. Most of the mint towns falling within the territorial expanse of North Bengal were either the capital cities or the suburbs of the capital in new name. But there were a few mint towns which were neither the capital cities nor the suburbs. The mint Barbakabad identified with Mahisantosh²⁸ in Dhamurhat Police Station of Naogaon district in Bangladesh could be categorized under this nomenclature. It was founded by Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah. Masidah Santush of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Santush of *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* and Mahisun of *Maktubat* Literature possibly indicate Marisantosh. But there is no contrary evidence to show that these names were coined for different places.²⁹ This place urbanized earlier and had been a Muslim settlement and administrative unit since the time of Izz al-Din Muhammad Shiran Khalji of the Lakhnawati Kingdom.³⁰ It is also stated that there had been an educational seminary where Yahya Maneri, the father of celebrated saint and eminent scholar Shaykh Sharf al-Din Yahya Mareri received learning under Mawlana Taqi al-Din al-Arabi.³¹ Even this place was considered as the north eastern frontier outpost against the Raja of Kamrupa.³² Therefore, the place could very well be used a mint town and promising station of urbanization. However, that the city was officially used as Barbakabad is supported by an epigraph dated A.H. 876/1471 AD.³³ Besides Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah, Sultan Shams al-Din Muzaffar Shah (1490-1493 AD.) and Nasir al-Din Nusrat Shah (1519-1532 AD.) struck coins from this mint.³⁴

Further more can be said for its being one of the early urbanized habitations of North Bengal. An extant dilapidated mosque of Mahisantosh points to its emerging as an old flourishing city. The mosque plan which can still be clearly noticeable may date it back to the Sultanate period of Bengal. The mosque is a rectangular one divided into three longitudinal aisles and five bays. An eye observation, though renovated much, may lead us to presume that either the walls of the mosque were built wholly of stone or the brick walls were faced with stone-slabs.³⁵ Five bayed mosques either of two or three longitudinal aisles may be seen in the later part of the 15th century and the earliest part of the 16th century AD. This mosque of Mahisantosh falls within this period.

In addition to these facts, the topography of Mahisantosh testifies to its being an early urbanized settlement and a place of historical interest. Several mounds, the tomb-sights of Mawlana Taqi al-Din al-Arabi and other *mashaikh*, traces of fortification walls though in diminishing form and a ruined mosque referred to above tend us to believe that it was possibly an urban settlement of the Muslims in the early period of their history in this region. A spot visit leads to express that even now potsherds and brickbats are strewn over an area of 5 to 6 miles in circumference. Piecing together all these scattered and scanty informations we may hold that the place was an important military and administrative unit for several centuries beginning from the 13th and ending in the 16th century AD. Hence the mint town fits well to this long urbanized habitation.

Urbanization as old site of civilization and Emporium mart: Urbanization takes place in the old site of human habitation and also in the emporium mart. In this category the name that appears first is Pundranagara identified with Mahasthan twelve kilometers north of Bogra town.³⁶ The excavation of the mounds in the area of Mahasthan for several

times unearthed the proposed roots of various human civilization starting from pre-historic era. It is therefore, reasonable to assume that Mahasthan is the earliest known centre of urban settlements in Bengal. The antiquarian relics, potsherds and brickbats strewn over a large area to the west and south of Mahasthan testify to its being a populous city in the time of yore. The site of its citadel, oblong in shape, covers a large expanse of 500ft long from north to south and 400ft wide from east to west. The area involved is about 185 hectares. The area is surrounded by a good number of early historic and early medieval sites within a radius of approximately 20 km.³⁷ Of the earlier archaeological units traced in the region are: an early Brahmi stone inscription of third century B.C., punch-marked and cast coins of silver and copper, a large number of semi-precious stone beads, glass beads, Sunga terracotta plaques, Rouietted ware and impressive structural remains of the ancient and medieval periods.³⁸

With the advent of the Muslims to this land at the beginning of the 13th century positive steps were taken for the new urbanization and the betterment of the conditions of the people. To give vent to this programme they adopted the policy of decentralization and divided their conquered territories into several *iqtas* or administrative zones. Agriculture, trade and commerce were encouraged providing all sorts of facilities to the people. New habitations, cities and mint-towns were established in various parts of North Bengal. In this regard Mahasthan arrested the attention of the rulers for its upkeep and flourishing. The Muslim populace made their habitations in and around Mahasthan. Steps were taken by the ruling authority for the protection of their lives and properties. The Mahasthan inscription of the time of Rukn al-Din Kaikaus dated A.H. 700/ 1300 AD. brings to light the name of Khan Muazzam Mukraam Mir Namwar Khan presumed to be *Mir Bahr* or the Admiral of Navy who was posted at the naval headquarters of Mahasthan to keep a vigilant eye on the enemy's war flotilla in the river Karatoya.³⁹ The traditions ascribed to Sultan Mahmud Mahisawar of Mahasthan, a large number of tombs in the area, the discovery of the layout of an early mosque in the *Mankalir Bhita* and the Arabic stone inscription referred to above all point out to its having been a settlement of the Muslims early than 1300 AD. Moreover, the disciples of the famous saint Mahisawar made their habitations in Mahasthan and increased their numbers in later times. The mausoleum of Mahisawar along with the tombs of his disciples on the top of the Garh area attracted the devotees to pay a visit to his shrine. Gradually during the long span of Muslim rule in this region Mahasthan had been a place of importance not only from political point of view but also from religious and cultural points. Quite an appreciable number of coins belonging to the reigns of Sultan Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah and Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah procured from the ruins of Mahasthan⁴⁰ bear witness to the important position it held during the succeeding period of the independent Sultanate in this area.

Mahasthan, a metropolitan city and a historic place of North Bengal in ancient and medieval times, is likely to vitalize the environment as an emporium of trade and commerce. The tradable objects of this area seem to have been agricultural products and industrial items.⁴¹ In comparison with other areas the soil of North Bengal was previously very fertile as it is now, and produced rice, vegetables and other food-grains in large quantity. As to the raw materials and finished industrial goods, jute and silk seem to have been available in this area. In the sarkar Ghoraghat covering a greater portions of Dinajpur, Rangpur, Rajshahi and Bogra districts silk was produced.⁴² It is stated that the

women put on varieties of jute *sari* (*patta bastra*). Many of the Bengali works of the 15th and 16th centuries AD. refer to the wearing of jute *saris* by women.⁴³ Bengali literature also refers to the export of jute cloths to the neighboring countries.⁴⁴ The account of Mahaun, the Chinese envoy to the court of Sultan Ghiyath al-Din A`zam Shah (1392-1410) refers to the existence of silk worms and sericulture in this land.⁴⁵ The strip of land in between the river Karatoya in the east and the Ganges in the west grew mulberry trees and reared silk worms. It gets corroboration in the statement of *Ain-i-Akbari* that silk was produced in the sarkar Ghoraghat.⁴⁶ The river Karatoya three times than the Ganges in the 13th century as stated by Minhaj Siraj in his *Tabaqat-i-Nasir*⁴⁷ flew very closely by the east of Mahasthan. All the agricultural and industrial products of North Bengal for the purpose of inland and outland trades were clustered at Mahasthan through the rivers and rivulets flowing through the land. From this emporium of Mahasthan all these goods were despatched to the various parts of the country through the river Karatoya and its branched off rivulets, and also to the *Porte Grandee* or the great port of Chittagong. It is, therefore, evident that as the ancient site of civilization along with its emporium mart Mahasthan had the superior legacy of urbanization in North Bengal, nay to the whole of eastern India.

Urbanization as Religious Sites and other Minor Organization: Sufi-saints and *ulama-mashaikh* played a vital role in preaching and expanding Islam in the whole of Bengal. North Bengal is not an exception. Centering round the *ulama-mashaikh's* abodes and halting places religious complex consisting of the mosques, *maktabs*, *khanqas* and other serviceable institutions grew up. People of various stations, and the disciples of the particular *sufi* and *'alim* gathered around his *astana* or abode, and subsequently the place was fully urbanized with all sorts of amenities required for man's life. It is not possible in limited pages to throw light on all these urbanized places grew up in North Bengal during the period of our study i.e. 1204-1576 AD. A few of these urbanized places are delineated here to see their nature and the mode of habitation.

In this list Pandua and Deotola come to the picture. As regards Pandua discussion has been made before under the caption of urbanization as capital cities. Deotola is situated about twenty two miles north of Malda town near Pandua on the Malda-Dinajpur road. Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi coming to North Bengal at the beginning of the 13th century had his *sufi*-abode at both Pandua and Deolota. The lands of Deotola are included in the *waqf* estate of *Bais Hazari* dedicated to him. Epigraphic evidence shows that Deotola was named Tabrizabad after the name of the saint Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi.⁴⁸ It is also recorded in the *maktubat* of the saint that the followers of Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi known as *Jalilia* order lived in Deotola. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that Deotola as a religious complex of the *sufi*-saints had earned its fame, and as mark of honour Sultan Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah named it Tabrizabad. Even this place became a part of the administrative unit and upgraded to *Qasbah*. A Jami masjid was also built here in 868 A.H./1464 AD.⁴⁹

Shahzadpur in the district of present Sirajganj was possibly urbanized place centering round the *Sufi's* abode Makhdum Shah Dawlah Shahid in the 13th century AD. after the conquest of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji. Tradition relates that Makhdum Shah

Dawlah, a descendant of Mu'az b. Jabal with a large number of followers came from Yamen to preach Islam in this place of North Bengal and got martyrdom while he was engaged in a battle with a Hindu King of the locality.⁵⁰ He was buried in that place and his tomb therein bears witness to his activity in the early 13th century as the tradition goes. The construction of a superb mosque though renovated in the Mughal period might be placed in the 15th century AD. It is, therefore, reasonable to suggest that the urbanization of this place started in a new vision at the early 13th century AD., and its extent expanded till the 15th century and downwards. It is on the Dhaka-Dinajpur high way a few miles from the diversion of Dhaka-Rajshahi high way.

Rajshahi is one of the early urban settlements in North Bengal. The shrine of Shah Makhdum Abdul Quddus, a descendant of Abdul Qadir Jilani of Baghdad is situated in the Dargapara Muhalla of Rajshahi town. Tradition records that Shah Makhdum, to redress the wrong done to Shah Turkan who came earlier, started from Baghdad with a number of warrior-saints in around the year 687 A.H./ 1289 AD.⁵¹ He was successful in his mission and established his *Khanqah* in this place. He died on 27th Rajab in 731 A.H./ 1331 AD. and buried there. An inscription in Persian over the entrance of his mausoleum records the erection of a dome over the grave by 'Ali Quli Beg in 1045 A.H./ 1639 AD.⁵² It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that urbanization started the process in a new direction under Muslim rule at the early time and continued its extension in subsequent times around the sacred place of the saint.

Sherpur about twenty kilometers south of Bogra town is assumed to be an early urbanized settlement of North Bengal. It preserves the memory of Shah Turkan in the remnants of *Sir Maqam* and *Dhar Maqam*. Legend has it that there was an encounter between Shah Turkan and Vallala Sena, and that the former lost his life in the fight and was buried in two places known as *Sir Maqam* (where head was buried) and *Dhar Maqam* (where his body was buried).⁵³ Though the veracity of this legend is questioned yet other pertinent points lead us to believe that Shah Turkan's advent in this place may be placed to a period immediately after the conquest of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji in the beginning of the 13th century AD. Gradually the urbanization expanded centering round the sacred burial ground of saint Shah Turkan. The Kherua mosque, the Khandakartola mosque and other such non extant architectural edifices⁵⁴ tell to its being an old urbanized town. It is claimed that this town in later time was named after Sher Shah Suri. This town grew up in the east bank of the Karatoya river though at present it is almost silted up.

Bagha is situated about thirty five kilometers south-east of Rajshahi town within the same district. This place was within Lashkarpur *pargana* of the *sarkar* Barbakabad according to the version of *Ain-i-Akbari*. Mawlana Shah Dawla is lying buried at Bagha, and the urbanization of this place got momentum from his time. His real name was Mawlana Shah Muazzam Danishmand. According to tradition he was a descendant of Harun al-Rashid (786-807 AD.), the Abbasid caliph of Baghdad. During the time of Sultan Nasir al-Din Nusrat Shah (1519-1531) he came from Baghdad to preach Islam and made his abode at Bagha.⁵⁵ He married the daughter of a noble 'Ala Bakhsh Barkhurdar Laskari of Makhdumpur (at that time Bagha was called so). He built his *Khanqah* and a *madrasah* in that place. From these two institutions he imparted the Knowledge of *Shariah* and spiritual guidance to the learners and devotees. It is said that Mawlana Shah Dawla developed in himself an extra-ordinary spiritual forces. He is said to have refused

rent free lands offered by a ruler of Gaur. It was later accepted by his son, Hamid Danishmand. An inscription fixed on the tympanum of the main entrance of the Bagha mosque records that the mosque was built by Sultan Nasir al-Din Nusrut Shah in 930A.H./1523-24 AD.⁵⁶ The extant and non extant establishments and architectural edifices of Bagha bear witness to its having been a rich urbanized area of North Bengal. It was upgraded to the *Qasbah* as an administrative unit of Bengal Sultanate.

Kusumba a place of Manda Police Station in the district of Naogaon seems to have originated as an urbanized habitation of North Bengal under the Sur dynasty in the 16th century AD. The mosque built by Sulayman in 966 A.H./1558 AD. during the time of Ghiyath al-Din Bahadur Shah (1556-1569)⁵⁷ on the high terrace along with other antiquarian relics and a big *dighi* in the east side of the mosque testify that Kusumba emerged as an urbanized settlement at least before the construction of the mosque in 1558 AD. Kusumba is situated about forty kilometers north of Rajshahi town.

Sultanganj is situated about thirty kilometers from Rajshahi town to the west on the side of Rajshahi-Chapainawabganj high way. Tradition relates that there was a tomb of eminent saint Sultan Shah by name. Epigraphic evidence shows that a mosque-cum *madrasah* was built here in 835 A.H./1432 AD. during the time of Sultan Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah (1415-1432).⁵⁸ The place Sultanganj called also Jahanabad being situated on the confluence of the Ganges and Mahananda controlled the trade route of North Bengal. Through this mart possibly the food-grains of the Varendra were sent to other deficit areas of eastern and southern Bengal. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that Sultanganj had been an urbanized habitation at least at the beginning of the 15th century AD.

A brief survey about the urbanized settlements of North Bengal during the period of 1204-1576 reveals the fact that under various categories the population increased in those stations referred to above for the their security and the betterment of their livelihood. Now let us see the growth and development of Muslim population in the important and strategic places of North Bengal during the period of our study.

Before the conquest of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji in A.H. 600/1204 AD. the society of Bengal particularly of North Bengal was represented by two major religious groups – the Hindus and Buddhists – as were evident from the accounts of *Sunya Purana*.⁵⁹ 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*⁶⁰ 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 Laksmna Sena in matters of administration and policy-making.⁶¹ 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 chronicle⁶² as well as in the epigraph⁶³ of Bengal.

With Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji's occupation of Nudia,⁶⁴ the temporary capital of Lakshmana Sena and the establishment of his authority over the Lakshnawati 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.⁶⁵ 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.⁶⁶ 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. Lakshnawati was the capital of Muslim rule in this period. But Bakhtiyar Khalji's return to Dewkot⁶⁷ instead of to Lakshnawati from unsuccessful expedition of Tibet, shows that he made it his second capital. Ghiyath al-Din Iwaz Khalji's transfer of the capital again from it to Lakshnawati⁶⁸ supports the contention. It is, therefore, not unreasonable to support that like Lakshnawati, Dewkot was an important station of Muslim community in the high land of North 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.⁶⁹ The soldiers recruited for the Tibet expedition are stated to have been ten thousand in number,⁷⁰ 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 Ghiyath al-Din Iwaz 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,⁷¹ Santush⁷² and Narkuti⁷³ of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Barsul or Barsuli of *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*⁷⁴ and Barsala of *Ain-i-Akbari*⁷⁵ 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 therein⁷⁶ support the contention. In the first quarter of the 13th century AD. 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 Safahani⁷⁷ (i.e. Ispahan in Persia) 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 Khalji⁷⁸ 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 Ghiyath al-Din Iwaz Khalji⁷⁹ 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 Tabrizabad⁸⁰ 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 North Bengal at the early period.⁸¹

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 Iwaz Khalji in 624 A.H. 30/1227 AD. 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.⁸² 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 AD.), was one of active expansion of Muslim dominion in Bengal and the adjacent countries.⁸³

The coins struck at Hadrat Lakhnawati out of the Kharaj of Bang⁸⁴ or eastern Bengal in 690 A.H./1291 AD. 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).⁸⁵ 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 AD. 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.⁸⁶ Yaqut al-Ghiyathi, a servant of Sultan Ghiyath al-Din A'zam Shah of Bengal (1392-1410 AD.), was an Abyssinian. He was entrusted with carrying out the construction of Madrasah at Makkah.⁸⁷ It is stated that Sultan Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah of Bengal (1459-1474 AD.), 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.⁸⁸ 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 AD.), because of their high handed manners expelled them from this land.⁸⁹ But that does not rule out the possibility of a few of them being settled in the land of our study. 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.⁹⁰ 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.⁹¹ At the time of Sultan Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah, Shah Isma’il Ghazi who is stated to have belonged to the Qurayshite family⁹² landed in Lakhnawati. He got killed due to the intrigue of a Hindu noble, Bhandusi Rai of Ghoraghat⁹³ 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 retainers 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 (1392-1410 AD.) and Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah (1415-1432 AD.) at Makkah and Madinah⁹⁴ reminds us of the relation of Bengal with Hijaz. This might have induced some Arabs to come to live in North 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.⁹⁵ The very connotation *Sayyid* prefixed with his father’s name followed by suffix *al-Husayni* in the epigraph⁹⁶ 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 apostles⁹⁷ 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 North 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.⁹⁸ 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.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰

This study shows that the racial identity of the immigrant Muslims of Bengal in general and North Bengal in particular may be traced to the Turks of various tribes such as the Khalji, the Ibari 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 AD. to 1576 AD. 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 North 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 besides North 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 North 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 passage 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 army¹⁰¹ 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 administration¹⁰² bear testimony of this policy. This warning of the saint proved rather prophetic,¹⁰³ and the Hindu Raja Ganesh of Bhaturia (in North Bengal) got *istila* or supremacy in administration.¹⁰⁴ 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 North 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.¹⁰⁵ 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 AD. 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.¹⁰⁶ 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 east Bengal attained numerical superiority over the Muslim population of North Bengal. In this connection it will be most pertinent to investigate into the immigrant Muslims and the mode of conversion of local people of Bengal as a whole.

Being acquainted with Islamic way of life, the local people accepted Islam on their own accords, and thereby swelled in 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 epigraphs¹⁰⁷ 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.¹⁰⁸ 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 Bengal¹⁰⁹ accepted Islam at the hands of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji and received the name of 'Ali, the Mech.¹¹⁰ 'Ali, the Mech even after his acceptance of Islam commanded respects from both from the 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 Dewkot¹¹¹ after the latter's defeat in the Tibet expedition. As aboriginal people they were expected to hold the animistic form of religion.¹¹² 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.¹¹³ The foundation of *Khanqat* by Muhammad Bakhtiyar and his Khalji *Amirs*¹¹⁴ 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 -AD.) at the court of Lakhnawati in the North Bengal and had religious discourse with Qadi Rukn al-Din Samarqandi.¹¹⁵ 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*.¹¹⁶ 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,¹¹⁷ though

apocryphal, depicts the conversion of Vijaya Vahu, the son of high class Hindu noble to Islam in the early 14th century AD. at the time of Ghiyath al-Din Bahadur Shah (1322-1328 AD.), 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.¹¹⁸ 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.¹¹⁹ 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 language¹²⁰ 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 AD. visiting the court of Pandua confirm this point.¹²¹ 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.¹²² 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 Brahmins¹²³ 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 Jalaluddin (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."¹²⁴ 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.¹²⁵ His conferring of *Raymukuta* and other titles on Vrihaspati would reasonably contradict their views. 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."¹²⁶ 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.”¹²⁷ 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.¹²⁸ 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.¹²⁹ 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 specially by Khundker Fazli Rubbee. He seems to have traced the origins of Bengali Muslims to the Muslims of foreign extraction.¹³⁰ 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.”¹³¹ 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.”¹³²

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 Meches¹³³ and the high born Hindu like Jadu,¹³⁴ 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.

In fine it can be said that as the urbanization under the categories referred to in the main theme, expanded all over North Bengal so also in the similar modes it spread to all others parts of Bengal. The Muslim population of both the immigrants and converts had their habitations in all the urbanized cities and towns of the then Bengal sometimes their numbers increased in a part and decreased in other for the causes analyzed in the paper.

SOURCE: Obtained directly from the author

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- ²⁰ H.N. Wright, *IMC*, pp. 142-152.
- ²¹ Muhammad Mohar Ali, *op.cit.*, p. 134.
- ²² E.V. Westmacott, "Note on the site of fort Ikdala, District Dinajpur" *JASB*, 1874, pp. 244-245; quoted in Mohar Ali, *op.cit.* p. 134,

²³ M. Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, Vol. II (Reprint Delhi: Cosmo publication, 1976; First Print 1838), p. 640 (Henceforth *Eastern India*).

²⁴ Minhaj Siraj, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* (Vol. I) Text ed. Abdul Hai Habibi (Kabul: Historical Society of Afghanistan, Second edition 1963), p. 431; A K M Yaqub Ali, ASCV, p. 155.

²⁵ ASCV, p. 155.

²⁶ *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* (Vol.1) (Kabul: edition) p. 436 (Henceforth *TN*)

²⁷ ASCV, pp. 345-346.

²⁸ Mir Jahan, "Mint Towns of Medieval Bengal", *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society (JPHS)*, Vol 1 Part 1 Karachi, 1953 pp. 409-410; A.H. Dani, *Bibliography of the Muslim Inscriptions of Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1957), p. 28 (Henceforth *Bibliography*; A. Karim, *Corpus*, p 162.

²⁹ ASCV, pp. 48-49.

³⁰ *TN*, Vol. 1 p. 433.

³¹ *Manaqib al-Asfia (Maktubat-Sadi)*, p. 339

³² Pir Muhammad Shattari,, *Risalah al-Shuhada* Persian Text in *JASB*, Vol. XL 111, 1874, p. 230.

³³ S. Ahmed, *IB*, Vol. Iv, p. 90; A.H. Dani, *Bibliography* p. 28.

³⁴ ASCV, p 349.

³⁵ A.K.M Yaqub Ali, "Mahisantosh: A Site of Historical and Archaeological Interest in Bangladesh", *Islamic Culture* Vol. LV 111 No. 2 Hyderabad, India, 1984, reproduced in *Varendra Barennya (A Celebrity in Barind)*, ed. Dr. A K M Shahnawaz and Dr. Ruhul Kuddus Md. Saleh, Samoya Prakashan, Dhaka, pp. 775-777

³⁶ A.K.M Yaqub Ali, "Pundranagara: An Emporium of North Bengal", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* (Humanities), Vol. 53 No. 1 June 20008, Dhaka, p. 78.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 80.

³⁸ Shah Sufi Mostafizar Rahman, "Recent Discovery of Northen Black Polished Ware in Mahasthan garh Region: An Archaeological Perspective," *Journal of Bengal Art* Vol. 3, the Intentional Center for the Study of Bengal Art, Dhaka 1998, p. 75 (Henceforth *JBA*).

³⁹ A.K.M Yaqub Ali, "Pundranagara:....." *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* p. 83.

⁴⁰ P.C Sen, *Mahasthan and its Environs*, VRS Monograph No. 2 (Rajshahi: Varendra Research Society, 1929), p. 2.

⁴¹ A.K.M Yaqub Ali, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* p. 85..

⁴² P.C. Bagchi, "Political Relation between Bengal and China in the Pathan Period", *Visva Bharati Annals*, Vol. 1 Calcutta 1945, p. 136.

⁴³ A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, Vol. 1 (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society 1963), p. 387.

⁴⁴ A.K.M Yaqub Ali, "Pundranagara:", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh*, Dhaka, p. 87.

⁴⁵ N.K. Bhattasali, *Coins and Chronology of the Early Independent Sultans of Bengal* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1922), p. 171.

⁴⁶ *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol. 11, p. 136.

⁴⁷ *TN*, Vol. 1 (Kabul edition), p. 127.

⁴⁸ Abid Ali, *Memoirs*, pp. 170-71; S. Ahmed, *IB*, Vol. Iv, pp. 80-81.

- ⁴⁹ Ahmed, *IB*, Vol. IV, pp. 77-79.
- ⁵⁰ A K M Yaqub Ali, *ASCV* p. 176.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 186.
- ⁵² S. Ahmed. *IB*, Vol. IV p. 274.
- ⁵³ Both the shrines are on the western bank of the Karatoya, the distance between the two being a quarter mile, cf. *ASCV*, pp. 174-175.
- ⁵⁴ cf. A.H. Dani, *MAB*, pp. 175-179
- ⁵⁵ *ASCV*, p. 186
- ⁵⁶ S. Ahmed, *IB*, Vol. IV, pp. 212-214
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 242-244.
- ⁵⁸ A K M Yaqub Ali, *Select Arabic and Persian Epigraphs* (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1998), pp. 38-41.
- ⁵⁹ Ramai Pandit, *Sunya Purana* ed. N.N. Vasu (Calcutta: Vangiya Sahitaya Parisad, 1314 B.S.), pp. 140-42.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid*.
- ⁶¹ *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.
- ⁶² *TN*, Vol. I, p. 423.
- ⁶³ 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:
- 1st line : اما بعد حمد الله على نعمائه والصلوة على النبي واحبابه ولما اظهر شعابير الشرع و احركه امنه سلطان العصر و الزمان ناصر الدنيا و الدين ابوالمظفر محمود شاه السلطان خلد الله ملكه و سلطانه فى خطة رفيعة موسومة بسملاباد و لما اهدى جناب الاعظم
- 2nd line : صار اكرم المصر و الاسلام الذى خوطب بخطاب مجلس منصوص مازال كاسمه منصورا و لما عزم لعرف مسجدا ليحمله ذخيرة فى دار الجزاء الى يوم الساعة خان المعظم عضد الاسلام و المسلمين خان الاعظم و خاقان المعظم الغ رحيمخان بيقى الله ثراه و جعل الجنة مثواه و وفقه
- 3rd line : الله قلع اعداء الله من الكفار و المشركين و ادارا لانعام على العلماء و المتعلمين مورخا فى الثانى و العشرين من ذى القعدة فى يوم الجمعة سنة ثمان و خمسين و ثمنماية.

Translation:

1st 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, AD

⁶⁴ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 426; *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*, Vol. I, p. 51.

⁶⁵ *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.

⁶⁶ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 425.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 431; *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* Vol. I, p. 54.

⁶⁸ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 426.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 431; A. Karim, "Expansion of the Muslim Society in the 14th century AD" (in Bengali), *Bangla Academy Patrika*, No. 2, 1372 B.S. Dhaka, p. 23.

⁷⁰ *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.

⁷¹ *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.

⁷² *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.

⁷³ *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 greater Rajshahi district. For some other factors Nurkuti may presumably be identified with Natore, cf. *Indian Culture*, 1944, p. 44, f.n. 2.

⁷⁴ *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* Vol. I, p. 55.

⁷⁵ 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.

⁷⁶ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 433.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 433; *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*, Vol. I, p. 56.

⁷⁸ *TN*, p. 424; *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* Vol. I, p. 56

⁷⁹ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 436.

⁸⁰ *JASB*, Vol. XLIII, 1874, pp. 296-97; *Archaeological Survey Report (ASR)*, Vol. XV, pp. 94-95.

⁸¹ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 436.

⁸² Ziya 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.

⁸³ H.E. Stapleton, "Contributions to the History and Ethnology of North Eastern India," *JASB*, Vol. XVIII, 1922, p. 411.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 410; A. Karim, *Corpus*, p. 25.

⁸⁵ *HB*, Vol. II, p. 68.

⁸⁶ *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* Vol. I, pp. 224-25.

⁸⁷ Zia Uddin Desai, "Some new data regarding the pre-Mughal Muslim rulers of Bengal," *Islamic Culture*, Vol. XXXII, 1958, Hyderabad, pp. 199-200.

⁸⁸ C. Stewart, *History of Bengal* (London, 1813), p. 51.

⁸⁹ *HB*, Vol. II, p. 144; A. Karim, *Corpus*, p. 51.

⁹⁰ 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.

⁹¹ Ghulam Husain Selim, *Riyaz al-Salatin*, Tr. Abdus Salam (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1904), p. 113; M. Martin, *Eastern India*, Vol. III, p. 618.

⁹² *Risalah al-Shuhada*, Persian Text in *JASB*, Vol. XLIII 1874, P. 223.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

⁹⁴ *Islamic Culture*, Vol. XXXII, 1958, p. 200 & 204.

⁹⁵ *Riyaz al-Salatin*, p. 131; C. Stewart, *History of Bengal*, p. 71.

⁹⁶ A.H. Dani, *Bibliography*, pp. 49-50; S. Ahmed, *IB* Vol. IV, P. 163.

⁹⁷ Michael Mitchiner, *Oriental Coins and their Values* (London: Hawkins Publications, 1977), p. 71, Coin No. 2758.

⁹⁸ *Riyaz al-Salatin*, p. 132.

⁹⁹ *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.

¹⁰⁰ 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.

¹⁰¹ Barani, *Tarikh-i-Firuz Shahi*, p. 593; Sirhindi, *Tarikh-i-Mubarak Shahi*, Text ed. M. Hidayat (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1931), p. 1253

¹⁰² S.H. Askari, "The Correspondence Bengal," *Journal of the Bihar Research Society (JBRS)*, Vol. XLII, Part 2, 1956, pp. 186-87.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Tabaqat-i-Akbari* Vol. III, p. 430.

¹⁰⁵ M.R. Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1965), p. 37.

¹⁰⁶ A. Karim, "Early Muslim rulers", *JASP*, 1959, p. 83.

¹⁰⁷ The title like *Khan al-A'zam*, *Khaqan al-Mu'azzam Ulugh*, *Majlis al-Majalis*, etc. cf. 'Abid 'Ali, *Memoirs*; A.H. Dani, *Bibliography*; S. Ahmad, *IB*, Vol. IV.

¹⁰⁸ *Sunya Purana*, p.140; A. Rahim, *op.cit.*, p. 70.

¹⁰⁹ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 436. It is stated therein – در اطراف ان کوهها که میان تبت و بلاد لکهنوتی است، سه جنس خلق است: یکی را کوچ و دوم را میچ و سیوم را تھاروا.

Tr. In between Tibet and Lakhnawati in the hilly and high land three types of people lived - Kuch, Mich and Tharu.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *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 - چون محمد بختیار از اب بیرون آمد جماعت کوچان و میچان را خبر شد - علی میچ را هیر قرا بتان (خودرا) بر ره گذر داشت، پیش آمدند و استقبال کردند و خدمتی بسیار آوردند چون بدیکوت رسید.

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.

¹¹² L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Rajshahi* (Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1916), p. 54.

¹¹³ Halaydhu Misra, *Seka Subhodaya*, ed. Sukumar Sen (Calcutta, 1927), Chaps. I & XVIII.

¹¹⁴ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 427; *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*, p. 51.

¹¹⁵ Qazi Ahmad Mian Akhtar, "Amrit kund," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, (JPHS), Vol. I, 1953, Karachi, p. 47.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 53.

¹¹⁷ 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 Sirajganj district and southern portion of Bogra district at the junction of Bogra, Sirajganj 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 AD. 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.

¹¹⁸ *Riyaz al-Salatin*, p. 116; 'Abid 'Ali, *Memoirs*, p. 28; *BPP*, No. 130, p. 33.

¹¹⁹ A. Rahim, *op.cit.*, p. 66.

¹²⁰ Kalikinkar Dutta, *Survey of India's Social life and Economic Condition in the Eighteenth Century* (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhpadhya, 1961), p. 17.

¹²¹ P.C. Bagchi, "Political relations", *Visva Bharati Annals*, Vol. I, 1945, p. 113.

¹²² *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.

¹²³ Sri Jadava Chandra Chakravarti, *Kula Sastra Dipika* (Calcutta: New Britannica Press, 1314 B.S), p. 9; Mahim Chandra Majumdar, *Gaude Brahmana*, p. 138.

¹²⁴ H. Beverly, *Census Report of Bengal, 1872* (Calcutta: Government Printing Press, 1872), p. 30.

¹²⁵ *Riyaz al-Salatin*, p. 116; 'Abid 'Ali, *Memoirs*, p. 30.

¹²⁶ Brindavanadasa, *Chaitana Mangala*, Part I, V. 16; A. Rahim, *op.cit.*, p. 67, f.n. 2.

¹²⁷ M.L. Dames, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, Vol. II (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1921), p. 148.

¹²⁸ *Rasul Vijaya* by Shaikh Chand, *Sahitaya Parisad Patrika*, 1343 B.S., Calcutta, Part III, pp. 100-101.

¹²⁹ H. Beverly, *Census Report*, *op.cit.*, p. 132.

¹³⁰ Khundkar Fazli Rubbee, *Haqiqat-i-Musalman-i-Bangalah* (Calcutta: Thaker Spink & Co., 1895), Photostat Copy, p. 63.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47

¹³² C. Stewart, *op.cit.*, p. 60.

¹³³ *TN*, Vol. I, p. 427; *Tabaqat-i-Akbari*, Vol. I, p. 52.

¹³⁴ *A'in-i-Akbari*, Vol. II, pp. 148-49; *Riyaz al-Salatin*, p. 116.