

Reflections on Islamisation in Bengal

Abdul Momin Chowdhury*

Abstract. The presence of a very large population of Muslims in present-day Bangladesh and Indian West Bengal is remarkable. It is a region far from the Arabian 'homeland' of the Muslim tradition and is separated by nearly a thousand miles from the other large concentration of Muslims in South Asia, namely Pakistan. Various explanations have been offered, some untenable (e.g., biological descent from prolific incoming dominant groups), some plausible but partial (e.g., conversion by Sufi saints, recruitment of local inhabitants for rice cultivation by Muslim entrepreneurs). The socio-religious factor focused on in this essay is the underlying tolerant and adaptive character of the collective 'personality' of the Bengali people, many of them influenced by Buddhism. Disturbed by the twelfth-century Sena efforts to impose rigidly caste-discriminating Brahmanical orthodoxy, many, especially in northern and eastern Bengal were attracted to the more egalitarian and accommodating Islamic way of life.

In Bengal, which in this paper is used in the sense of the new country of Bangladesh and the state of West Bengal in India, live one of the largest Muslim populations anywhere in the world. Their concentration is the densest in the Indian Subcontinent and their present aggregate makes them the second largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia. This fact assumed added importance and significance in two historical happenings of the recent past: first the partition of India in 1947 and then the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971. In historical hindsight another very significant phenomenon comes to the forefront: how was the overwhelmingly Hindu-Buddhist¹ population turned into a Muslim majority population over a period of five hundred years or more of Muslim rule in the area? This question proves to be a very significant one in the social history of the region. As a result scholars working in the field (e.g., Roy 1983, Eaton 1994, Khan 1996) have done considerable research to find an answer to the question, though it must be admitted that possibly not all the inter-related phenomena have been brought to light. The present attempt is to focus on the socio-religious aspects of the question, since the question itself is social and religious at the same time. It is also assumed that there are certain aspects of the society which are deep-rooted in the history of the people and that the socio-religious attitude and aptitude of the people linger on through various phases of history. The present author is a firm believer in the 'personality' of a people and is convinced that anything new that comes into their perception is absorbed or rejected by the 'personality' they have acquired over a long period of history.

*Professor, History, University of Dhaka.
e-mail: momin.chowdhury@gmail.com

¹Evidence of Jainas in the population of pre-Muslim Bengal is meager and it is fair to assume that they formed a very insignificant part.

That the Muslims form a very high percentage of the total population of Bengal came to be recognized for the first time in the first ever census carried out in 1870. The percentage of the Muslims in the western Burdwan Division was only 12.7% and in the west-central Presidency Division 48.2%; whereas their preponderance in the northern Rajshahi-Jalpaiguri Division was 56%, in the east-central Dhaka Division 59.1% and south-eastern Chittagong Division 67.4%. Moreover, the census of 1901 revealed that the vast majority of the Muslims were agriculturists and rural. This led to the conclusion that Islam, generally considered to be a religion of the townspeople (Grünebaum 1961, 142; Mujeeb 1967), had become a religion of the rural masses in Bengal and that too in the northern, southern and south-eastern areas and not in the western (old Gauda) and south-western (old Radha) parts of Bengal. The rural concentration and the regional distribution of the Muslims in Bengal have attracted the attention of recent scholars (e.g., Eaton, Roy and Khan) and they have attempted to explain the phenomenon. Each interpretation deserves notice and possibly through their interplay all the factors brought out by these scholars can be said to have played their parts, if not to the same degree.

The claim of a group of protagonists led by Khondoker Fuzli Rubbee(1895) who believed that the vast majority of the Muslim population in Bengal were descendants of the Muslim immigrants does not hold ground on the basis of a table found in the Census Report of 1870(Ahmed 1981). The table contains the division-wise figures of the Muslims who claimed that their ancestors had come from lands in the west: only about 2% of the total Muslim population of Bengal claimed foreign origin. Dispassionate studies have not failed to recognize the fact that conversion played a more dominant role in swelling the ranks of the Muslims in Bengal. Recognizing conversion as an important factor in the spread of Islam in Bengal, Abdul Karim (1959) emphasized the role of the sultans, Muslim *ulema* (legalists and scholars) and *mashaikhs* (spiritual guides) in the growth of the Muslim society in Bengal.

A very important characteristic of Islam in Bengal is what Asim Roy calls “the Islamic syncretistic tradition”. He goes on to assert: “syncretism remained integral to the process of Islamisation in Bengal as a result of an interaction between ‘an intrusive religion and an indigenous culture’ that formulated the religious, social and cultural life pattern of Bengali Muslims (1983:248).” Islam in Bengal attained a character quite different from its exogenous fundamental entity (Sarkar 1972, 27-42). Tarafdar (1986, 93-110) termed this local character of Islam a “regional type of Islam”. This characteristic can be explained by assuming that Islam had to accommodate a wide variety of local religio-cultural elements. The masses of Hindu-Buddhist and tribal peoples with their inseparable links with past traditional cultural and religious practices came under the influence of the newly

arrived Islam. But they retained their old ideas and customs and assimilated to a new faith their earlier socio-religious experience.

Against the backdrop of the above discussion let us try to find out the 'personality' of the Bengali people, a personality that Niharranjan Ray termed as "*baitashi vritti*", the flexible character of the cane plant. Bengali people have always assimilated things that have come their way not by giving up their own but by retaining their own and accepting the incoming trends in their own way. This has been a pattern in Bengal's socio-religious culture from a very early period in its history.

Let us elaborate this point further by taking into consideration certain salient points about the pre-Muslim society in Bengal, namely: i) late Aryanisation in Bengal and the firm root of pre-Aryan tradition; ii) formation of social pattern and cultural heritage as a result of fusion of indigenous and foreign elements with the predominance of indigenous elements; and iii) the tolerant attitude of Buddhism and more particularly of the Buddhist ruling class.

Bengal's late Aryanisation is an important factor in the formation of Bengal's 'personality'. Archaeological discoveries in the last three decades in parts of West Bengal have furnished evidence of a comparatively advanced pre-Aryan culture and dismantled the thitherto accepted notion of the Aryan origin of the culture and civilization of Bengal. The pre-Aryan population of Bengal did possess a highly organized and civilized way of life. Added to this was the "feebleness" of the Aryan tide when it reached the borders of Bengal. During its long eastward march for approximately one thousand years Aryan culture, by the time it reached Bengal, had lost its virility and had, to some extent satisfied itself in settling down in the western part of the Bengal region. The eastern and south-eastern parts of the delta did not interest the Aryans due to their geophysiography. This explains the dominance of Hindu culture in the western part as also the firm root it had in the region. The rest, the less 'Aryanised' area, remained to a great extent pre-Aryan or only partly Aryanised. S.K. Chatterjee (1960, 31) has clearly attributed many of the traits of Hindu culture of Bengal to non-Aryan and possibly pre-Aryan origin. The force of the non-Aryan population was so strong that the large majority of the people preferred to remain outside the pale of the Hindu caste-ridden society. It was they who accepted Buddhism in the early centuries of the Christian era. And eventually it was they who underwent some cultural change and accepted conversion to Islam at the hands of Muslim saints and teachers.

It is interesting to note that the advance of Aryan culture 'purified' only one branch of the Ganges, the western Bhagirathi. The other, the eastern branch, the Padma, and the Jumna / Brahmaputra and Meghna streams, which form the main arteries of the eco-system of the Vanga-Samatata country, formed the abode of non-Aryanised people of Vangāla, a termed abhorred by the cultured

classes of the Aryan west. It was in this area during the late Pala period that a new sect of Buddhism called Vajrayana or Tantrayana took its birth and it is from this part of Bengal that this form of Buddhism spread to the eastern countries, Tibet and China.

Similarly during the Muslim rule the Sufistic form of Islam, as preached by the Muslim saints, caught the imagination of the Bengali people of this region. They created their own rituals and practices that distinguish their religious culture from the common types seen in other Muslim countries or even in other areas in northern and western India. It is worthwhile to note that the worship of Buddha's footprints was transformed into veneration of the holy Prophet's footprints (*qadam rasul*) and the five Bodhisattvas may have inspired the new concept of *panch-Pir* (five saints) in eastern Bengal. It is from these points that one has to understand the conversion of the Buddhists to Islam.

Barrie M. Morrison (1970, 84 ff., 154 and Tables 6-12) by analyzing the epigraphic data of pre-Muslim Bengal concluded that "Vaisnavism rather than Buddhism was the religion which was most popular with the rulers of the Delta (Bengal)". This preference for a particular form of god and other typical features in the religious life and ceremonies of the people of Bengal have been explained by Niharranjan Ray (1949, 850-863) by pointing to the pre-Aryan heritage, the mixture of racial elements in the composition of the population, and the weak current of the Aryan influence. Ray has further discerned a love, respect and extreme eagerness for 'humanism' in the personality of Bengal and has gone so far as to say that this 'idealistic humanism' is the best and greatest legacy of the ancient period to the medieval age. That humanism had grown in the society due to the long practice of catholicity and tolerant spirit in religion.

The Senas, however, coming from the conservative and orthodox Deccan, were not likely to practice the social liberalism that had been encouraged during the Buddhist Pala period. Trevor Ling came to the conclusion that in Bengal it was not Islam which overcame Buddhism, but a more jealous rival of nearer origin. Ling (1978: 321-324) correctly argues that Buddhism did not die in Ceylon or in Burma or in Siam or in China. But it did run into difficulty in Brahmanical Sumatra and Java and Malay.

The revival of orthodox Hinduism in the Sena period, when the society emphasized and upheld the caste differences, produced another significant result. The 12th century saw the growth of 'mysticism' (of both Buddhist and Hindu varieties), which can be traced in the *Charyapadas* and in the early Vaisnava literature, the Sahajiya literature and the literature of the Nathas and Bauls of Bengal. The humanistic personality of Bengal survived for long.

The rational spirit of the age and its freedom of thought found vent in a few scattered statements of the *Dohakosa* of Saroyavajra. This spirit was long known in medieval Sufism and was cultivated by

Bengal Bauls. A few examples of the statements that we get in the *Dohakosa* would illustrate the rational spirit of the age:

- (a) Whether sacrificial fires bring out salvation no one knows, but the smoke produced by them certainly troubles the eye.
- (b) If nudity (in Kshapanaka mendicants among Buddhists and Jainas) brings salvation, then jackals and dogs would be the first to get it.
- (c) They say the Brahmins are born from the mouth of the Brahma, but what then? Now they are born exactly as men of any other caste; then wherein lies the superiority of the Brahmins?
- (d) If you agree that the Brahmins became superior by virtue of their *Samskaras* (rites & ceremonies), I would say, let the Chandalas have those *Samskaras* and become Brahmins. If you say that knowledge of the Veda makes one a Brahmin, let the Chandala read the Vedas.

If these are taken to represent the mental framework of the age, we may very well think of a situation when any new thought will have easy acceptance. This may partly explain why Islam found an easy and good ground in Bengal.

From the above we may draw an end to our discussion with the view that Islam got easy acceptance in those areas of Bengal where, in the pre-Muslim Period, Buddhism and Hinduism lived side by side in harmony and in an atmosphere of toleration. Such a situation was prevalent in northern and south-eastern Bengal but not in western Bengal. So when with the coming of the Senas Brahmanic orthodoxy tried to gain an upper hand, the socio-religious equilibrium was disturbed in the Hindu-Buddhist regions of north and south-eastern Bengal. The preponderance of the Muslims in these parts of Bengal can possibly be explained through this process.

We may conclude with Niharranjan Ray (1945, 47) that the strongest hold of Brahmanical orthodoxy was Bengal west of the Ganges...the more east and north the country lay from the center of Brahmanical orthodoxy the lesser was, and even today is, its grip on the social organisation, which explains the more liberal sociological outlook of the upper grades of the society in Northern and Eastern Bengal and even in Lower or South Bengal.

In a society which had absorbed all in-coming socio-religious ideas with its own liberal social attitudes, where Brahmanical religious ideas could not find firm roots in the society, where the aboriginal rights and rituals persisted to such a degree that the incoming religious rites had to undergo changes and transformations, where the humanistic ideas of Buddhism found a congenial atmosphere and had imbibed the 'personality' of the region with its sense of tolerance and humanism, the fresh imposition of orthodoxy and the resultant stringent socio-religious stratification of the society were bound to create a reaction. Against the backdrop of this socio-religious turmoil it is not unnatural to think of large-scale conversion. The 'personality' which had long nursed liberal ideals found 'asylum' in the liberal brotherhood of Islam.

References

- Ahmed, Rafiuddin. 1981. *The Bengal Muslims; A Quest for Identity*. New Delhi: OxfordUniversity Press.
- Chatterjee, Suniti Kumar. 1960. *Indo-Aryan and Hindi*, 2nd ed. Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay.
- Eaton, Richard M. 1994. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier (1204-1760)*. Oxford: OxfordUniversity Press.
- Grünebaum, Gustave E. von. 1961. *Islam: Essays in the Nature and Growth of a Cultural Tradition*. 2nd edn. London: Routledge & Paul.
- Karim, Abdul. 1959. *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal*. Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, Chapters 3 & 4.
- Khan, Ali Akbar. 1996. *Discovery of Bangladesh: An Exploration into Dynamics of a Hidden Nation*. Dhaka: University Press Ltd.
- Ling, Trevor. 1978. "Buddhist Bengal, and After." In *History and Society: Essays in Honour of Professor Niharranjan Ray*, edited by D. Chattopadhyaya. Calcutta: K. P. Bagchi, 317-325.
- Morrison, Barrie M. 1970. *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Mujeeb, M. 1967. *The Indian Muslims*. London, UK: Allen & Unwin.
- Ray, Niharranjan. 1949. *Bangalir Itihas, Adi Parva*. Calcutta: Book Emporium.
- _____. 1945. "Medieval Bengali Culture: A Socio-Historical Interpretation." *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, May-June, XI: 47.
- Roy, Asim. 1983. *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*. Princeton, NJ: PrincetonUniversity Press.
- Rubbee, Khondoker Fuzli. 1895. *The Origin of the Mussalmans of Bengal*. Calcutta.
- Sarkar, Jagadish Narayan. 1972. *Islam in Bengal*. Calcutta: Ratna Prakashan.
- Tarafdar, Montazur Rahman. 1986. "The Bengali Muslims in the Pre-colonial Period: Problems of Conversion, Class Formation and Cultural Evolution." *Purusartha* (Paris), no.9: 93-110.