

Religious and Cultural Syncretism in Medieval Bengal

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to focus religious and cultural syncretism between the Hindus and the Muslims in Bengal during medieval period for more than five hundred fifty years from Turkish conquest of Bengal to the Battle of Plassey (C: 1204-1757) on the basis of original sources with special reference to contemporary Bengali Vernacular literature. In this connection it is necessary to mention that the connotation of Medieval Bengal here is not the partitioned Bengal of today but the geographical Vangadesa where the people of the land speak in Bengali. Medieval Bengal comprised the modern provinces of West Bengal, some parts of Bihar, Orissa, Tripura, Assam and the modern state of Bangladesh. I have also sought to study in this paper how this syncretism between the Hindus and the Muslims was revealed in the religious and cultural spheres of life of the Bengalis through Sufism, Pirism, Nathism, Vaishnavism, Kartabhaja sect, Mullaism, life style of the scroll painters, etc. under the period of study. Syncretism was also noticeable between the two communities in their way of lives as reflected in popular cults, local customs, superstitions, religious rites, marriages, social ceremonies and gamut of literature during contemporary Bengal. It was visible in art, architecture, painting, music and some other field of Bengali mind. However, the main objective of the present paper is to finally focus the trends of syncretism in religion and culture of Bengal under the period of study.

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Medieval Bengal has neither any authoritative nor any continuous contemporary socio-cultural historiography. Mirza Nathan's Persian work *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi*, "an oasis in the desert of historical ignorance", in Sir J. N. Sarkar's words, is a political history, which hardly throws light on the social condition of Bengal.¹ Nevertheless, Bengali literature had attained its maturity and had definitely come into being during the period under review in Bengal. Though no original work on the social history of Bengal exists, the typical Bengali mind was truly portrayed in the literature of this period.

Theoretically Islam has no relation with Hinduism. Islam and Hinduism stand in marked contrast to each other. Islam stands for transcendence; the command of Allah is all, Islam is complete resignation to the will of God and the Muslims are the resigned ones. Hinduism stands for immanence; the "divine without" is an expression of the "divine within". Its ultimate wisdom is the aphorism, "Thou art that", and this leads to incarnations of the deity and his worships in many forms. On the plane of social teaching Islam inculcates the idea of brotherhood making every man equal before God, irrespective of caste, nationality, race or colour.² Contrasted with this is the religiously sanctified inequality of castes in Hindu society.³

Islam and Hinduism, the two disparate religions came to exist and thrive side by side with each other after the Turks (Muslims) became rulers of Bengal and indeed, of the whole of India. On the one hand, there was the ancient and tolerant Hindu civilization constituted various elements, on the other, there appeared the

dynamic and expansive Islam of Semitic origin, which believes in one God, one Prophet, one scripture and one empire.

The Hindus and the Muslims have been living together in Barak-Surma Valley as well as Bengal for about 800 years. Islam penetrated Indian lives into three phases: 1. Conflict, 2. Mutual Appreciation and 3. Assimilation.⁴ The third phase of assimilation is very significant in the cultural and religious lives of Bengal under the period of review. This trend of assimilation among the Bengalis will be highlighted in this paper. The contemporary vernacular literature informs us that both the Hindus and the Muslims broke the barriers of religious injunctions and performed common worships in many cases- such as Pir Worship. It is to be noted that syncretism was visible in Sufism, Pirism, Nathism, Neo-Vasnavism, Kartabhaja sect, life-style of the Bauls, practices of the scroll painters etc. and the gamut of Bengali literature namely *Mangal Kavyas*, *Vaisnava* literature, translated works, *Pir* literature, *Sufi* literature, Punthi literature, *Atharo Bhatir Panchali*, *Purba Banga Gitika*, *Mymensing Gitika* etc. witness syncretism in the Bengali society.

Pirism:

The Pirs fostered Hindu-Muslim syncretism in Bengal including Barak-Surma Valley during the medieval period. 'Pir', a Persian word, literally means "old" but it denotes a "mystic guide" (e.g. Shah, Sheikh, Murshid or Usthad), who initiates disciples (murids) into mystic orders. While all Pirs are Sufis, all Sufis are not Pirs. The belief in Pirs and worship in their shrines did not originate in India but were brought from Afghanistan, Persia and Iraq by the immigrants, along with their religious orders. But in India in general and Bengal in particular, certain factors facilitated the penetration of saint worship into Muslim society. Pir worship was a form of joint worship of the Hindus and the Muslims in Medieval Bengal. The large settlement of foreign Muslims side by side with the Hindus and the converts enabled Islam to strike its root deep in society. The worship of local god and goddesses largely contributed

to it. On the other hand, in 1831 Garcin de Tassy held the saints to be “substitutes for the Musulmans, in the place of the numerous gods of the Hindus... As amongst the saints, venerated by the Musulmans, there are some personages who professed the faiths of the Vedas, so several of the Musulman saints of India, are venerated by the Hindus.”⁵ *Ghazi Vijaya* and *Satya Pir Vijay* of Faizullah (16th Century); and *Ray Mangal*, *Shasti Mangal*, *Sitala Mangal* and *Kamala Mangal* (17th Century) of Krishna Das and *Dharma Mangal* of Ruparam all indicate clearly that Bengali Hindus were devoted to Pirs in the late 16th and the 17th centuries, because the Vaisnavas had lost some of their influences over the society at that time. A large number of Hindus began to regard these pirs as their gods, and their tombs were visited by the Hindus and Muslims alike. Again the pre-existing *guru-chela* relationship of the Hindus found a similar ideal in the *pir-muridi* relationship of Islam. To the convert Muslims, pirs are like the Tantric gurus and their tombs and *dargahs* (shrines) were like the Chaitayas and stupas of the Buddhists. As a result of Hindu-Muslim cultural synthesis, worship of numerous pirs originated in Bengal, e.g. Satya Pir, Manik Pir, Kalu Ghazi, Bara Khan Ghazi and others. A medieval Bengali poet wrote,

“The pirs of the Muslims became the gods of the Hindus.
They manifested themselves and were worshipped by both the
communities.”⁶

So pir worship was a great example of syncretism between the Hindus and the Muslims and it developed cordial relation between the two communities.

Every pir belonged to a mystic order. The Muslim reverence for the living pir had its counterpart in the Hindu veneration for the guru or gosain. *Sijdah* (Prostration) of the *murid* (disciple) to the *pir* was comparable to the *Sastanga Pranipath* of the Hindu *chela* to guru. This was considered by orthodox Muslims as most sacrilegious. The *pir* was supposed to possess miraculous powers: curing diseases, making sterile women conceive, and even reviving

the dead to life and causing rain to fall (as Shah Karam Ali of Jagannathpur reportedly did in Tippera).⁷

Gradually the sanctity of the sites of the pirs also spread among the Hindu masses. There is mention of the old *pirs* and hermitages of the *pirs* of Bengal in the adorations of the various directions (*digvandana*) in *Dharma Mangal*, *Chandi Mangal*, *Manasa Mangal*, *Purba Banga Gitika (East Bengal Ballad)*, *Mymansieng Gitika* (ballad) and other poetic works. In other words it can be safely asserted that Hindu popular literature had spaced earmarked in *Mangal Kavyas* for Muslim *pirs* and the places associated with them. So it is an irrefutable sign of Hindu-Muslim syncretism. The opinion of those historians who have drawn a picture of uninterrupted intolerance and oppression during this age is not true. As a result of the growing influence of pirs on Bengali society, the intensity of the clash and hostility of the initial Muslim conquest gradually decreased. Had it not been so, there would certainly have been no reference to such adoration in popular Hindu religious poems.

Towards the end of the 17th century Sitaram Das, a Hindu poet adored the Muslim pirs in the long invocation of his work from the core of the heart. This seems to be a very good symptom of cultural assimilation. Again, in the early 19th century, Faizullah, the author of *Satya Pir Panchali*, wrote in the *vandana* of his work,

“I shall first of all salute Pir Niranjana and then sing in praise of Muhammad Mostufa and Panjatan. After making concentration I worship Sher Ali and Fatima for whom Hassan and Hussain were born. I worship the goddess Sati and other chaste women. I worship Daibaki, Rohini and mother Sachi who gave birth to Gorachand (Sri Chaitanya). The poet Faizullah dedicated to truth sings thus.”⁸

Here the Muslim poet showed his regard for the great personalities, so we can argue that there was a suitable environment of syncretism in the society that is why the Muslim poets invoked and adored Hindu goddesses in his verses, otherwise the voice of the poet would have been different.

In the literature that grew on the Pirs, i.e. The Pir ballads, we get a blending of Dharma Thakur of the Buddhists, the pir of the Muslims and the Narayan of the Hindus in the *Pir Panchalis* (poetical works praising the glory of the Pir) composed in the 17th century, especially towards its later part.

Towards the closing period of the Mughal rule in Bengal the first effort towards the fusion of religions between the Hindus and the Muslims through the Medium of the ballad of Satya Pir and Satya Narayan. Sukumar Sen says that the scribes of the pir ballads were Hindus, the singers were Muslims, but their composers were the poets of both communities. Sen states further that numerous Hindu writers from West Bengal to Assam composed Satya Narayan or Satya Pir Panchalis by equating Rahim of Mecca and Rama of Ayodhya. There are considerable similarities between the ballad of Faizullah of West Bengal and the Panchali of Rameshwar Bhattacharya. The story of Faizullah contains clear hints of cultural assimilation. He has saluted the adorable deities of both communities in the beginning and then writes,

“You are Brahma, you are Vishnu and you are Narayan,
Listen, O Ghazi, pay heed to yourself to preaching in the
assembly (i.e. instead of fighting)”.⁹

As regards the contrariety between Brahminism and Islam the Brahman says that one loses his caste by reading the Quran as at its very beginning there is the word Bismillah. In reply Satya Pir gives the following argument,

“Except one Brahma, no two Brahma exist, the Lord of all is one Niranjana Gosain, in whose name Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar utter prayers. In one pore whose skin lies the endless universe. Without hands, without legs, he holds the world. He has no mouth to eat, he hears without ears, sees without eyes. None can recognize Him though He is omnipresent. Bismillah is but another name of that very same Niranjana: Vishnu and Bismillah are not at all distinct”.¹⁰

So Satya Pir, Satya Narayan, Vishnu and Bismillah, Allah and Niranjan have all become fused into one. Hence the view of Ramesh Chandra Majumdar that Satya Pir was the God of the Muslims and Satya Narayan of the Hindus does not appear to be correct, at least at the time of the rise of this worship.

From 16th to 18th centuries various local Pir cults grew up in Bengal with traditions and legends around some Muslim saints (pirs) and mythical heroes of uncertain identity which became very popular among the masses of the both communities, the Hindus and the Muslims. Khawajah Khizir, Pir Badr, Zindah Ghazi, Madar Pir, Panch Pir etc. are very important among them. They were worshipped by the masses irrespective religion. The Muslims forgot Islamic dictum that a Muslim would worship none except Allah and the Hindus did not confine them to the narrow wall of religious boundary and both of them became the devotees of the pirs and made them busy in the invocation of the Pirs. So it is a clear evidence of syncretistic culture of Bengal.

Sufism:

The contribution of the Sufis in the field of religious syncretism in Bengal deserves mention. Before judging the role of the Sufis for syncretism it would be profitable to see how Sufism is defined. If mysticism deals with the inner and emotional life of man, Sufism seeks to give a mystic interpretation of the religious life in Islam. Though not a sectarian religion outside Islam, it differs from orthodox Islam in its view of the attitude of the heart towards God and problems of life. The Sufis seeks to explore the spiritual world not through the cold formalism of the law (Shariah) but through the warm mystic path of way (Tariqah), of yearning after and coming to union (wasl) and fellowship with God. Essentially, therefore, it is a faith, representing a spiritual, emotional and esoteric reality. Browne has rightly described Sufism as a “system of pantheistic, idealistic and theosophical mysticism.” According to Islamic theory Sufism was born in the bosom of Islam. Louis Massiagnon, the

French orientalist and Reynold Arnold Nicholson and Arberry, the two British scholars, imply that Sufism is essentially Islamic, the Quran and Hadith supplying its basic frame work. No doubt, they told about early stage of Sufi terminology. But it is not historically correct to hold that Sufism was not influenced by foreign ideology and elements. Even mysticism was prevalent before Islam among different peoples- the Chinese, the Indians, the Jews, the Persians and the Greeks. So with the expansion of Islam in different parts of the world, Sufism or Islamic mysticism came to adopt different forms.¹¹

Sufism came to India from central and west Asia and penetrated Indian lives both in the towns and villages. It came to Bengal before the Turkish conquest of Nadia by Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad-bin-Bakhtiyar Khalji. Since the middle of the 13th century the number of the Sufis was increasing and in the 14th century they reached their zenith. They established shrines in different parts of Bengal and propagated Islam. The Brahminical society of Sena period lost its control on the masses then. There was neither a religious personality nor a guru among the Hindus who could console the sufferers. In this critical juncture of Hinduism, the lower class Hindus were very much impressed by the liberal and democratic ideas of the Sufis and their supernatural activities and was interested to embrace Islam.¹²

Historians believe that there are apparent similarities between Indian Hindu thought and Sufi doctrine of Islam, especially in their developed form.

Arnold Nicholson was convinced that the idea of Fana (Self-annihilation, passing away into universal Being) “is certainly of Indian origin” (probably from Buddhist nirvana). The German scholar Richard Hartmann opined that Sufism (in its earliest period) is inwardly permeated by Indian theosophy. In the 17th century Prince Dara had noticed several Indian elements in Sufism. R.C.Zahner, Formerly Spalding Professor at Oxford University,

has recently examined this critically and concluded that Sufism is Vedanta in Muslim dress. He said that some fundamental tenets of Sufism about the Absolute or God and the relation of individual souls to it were possibly derived from the Vedanta of Sankara. On the other hand, Hindu mystic tradition, typified by Vaisnavism influenced Sufism. The relation between man and God is like master and servant in Islam. And in Vaisnavite Hinduism it is like lover and his beloved. In relation with God the Sufi concept of *Ashek-Masuk* is more influenced by Hinduism than Islam. So we can say that Sufism has changed its colour in Bengal as well as in India. Obviously it is a trend of Syncretism. Enamul Haque writes, "In the lowly *Khanaqahs* of the Sufis and the humble *Astanahs* of *darwishes*, both the Hindus and the Muslims used to meet together and exchanged their views. Liberal views and fraternizing influence of the Sufis were daily drawing the two people of different religions closer and closer, and ultimately during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the two communities were greatly united together by the inalienable bond of the mutual toleration and fraternity."¹³

In the later period the role of the Sufis for the development of syncretistic culture between the Hindus and the Muslim was remarkable. The Bauls and the Sahayias are the off-shoots of Sufism in Bengal. They also played very important role for peace and harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims in the society of United Bengal. Lalan Faqir is the most famous among the Bauls. One of his song is quoted below for better understanding of the role of the Bauls for assimilation and syncretism in Bengal---

"God ever presents at the door of the devotee and he does not make any distinction of caste and creed, between a Hindu and a Muslim. As the world is lighted by the rays of the moon, so every living being is born out of the same Divine Spirit."¹⁴

Here Lalan is arguing oneness of human being and it is more than a sign of syncretism. The Bengali society responded to Lalan's call.

Nathism:

Nathism was born of the fusion of the old Yoga system of Patanjali, Tantricism of the Buddhists and the Hindus and the Saiva-Agama theory of the Pala age. Adinath (Siva) was its supernatural originator. His attendant Matsyendra Nath or Mina Nath was the first human guru. In the 10th century this Natha doctrine extended to Bengal, Assam, Nepal, Tibet and Northern India and later to Peshwar and Kabul.¹⁵ The Natha saints were not Brahmins. They were liberal and accepted the essence of different doctrines. Anybody could profess the Natha doctrine, irrespective of caste and religion.

Matsyendra or Minanath and Goraksanath were very important Natha saints. The Natha literature has grown around the stories associated with them. In the subsequent ages there were Muslim devotees of Nathism. Natha and Sufi literature mutually influenced each other for four hundred years (13th-16th centuries). They transformed Matsyendra first into 'Machhandar-Machhandali' and still later into 'Mochra Pir'. Hence innumerable Muslim words and similes have been used here and there in Natha literature. The influence of Islamic spirit and literature on it can be imagined. On the other hand the influence of the Natha philosophy on the Muslim Sufis is seen in a Hathayogic Tantrik religious book of the Nathas written in Sanskrit, the *Amrita Kundu* (The Reservoir of Nectar).¹⁶ During the 15th-18th centuries the Sufi poets being inquisitive of yoga (abstract devotion and communion with the Supreme Being) had translated the system into Bengali. The name of Shukur Mahud's *Gopichander Sannyas* and Faizullah's *Goraksha Vijaya* can be mentioned in this context for their contribution to Natha literature. Sayyid Sultan of Sylhet effected a fusion between Yoga and Sufism and composed *Jnana-Pradip* and *Jnana-Chautisa*. Of course he strongly announced that he did not Hinduise Islam. But Hindu elements were found in his writing.

Vaisnavism:

While Islam was spreading in Bengal, a new force arose which was destined to arrest its pace with the philosophy of equality and brotherhood under the leadership of Sri Chaitanya (1486A.D.-1533A.D.). The Bengalis became transformed into an entire and integrated nation by the cords of Bhakti of Chaitanya. He had deep love and vast sympathy for human beings. Many poets composed verses about him and his philosophy. The poems versified by the love of God and Radha-Krishna love or dalliance are known as 'Vaisnava Kavya'.

The evidence gleaned from Vaisnava literature throws light on both sides of the picture of social and cultural syncretism in Bengal.

Brindaban Das and Krishnadas Kaviraj were the two most famous authors of the Vaisnava literature in the Sultanate Bengal. They wrote that the qazi of Nabadwip tortured the Vaisnavas. But they were not tortured out of communal feeling but for political reasons. The non-Vaisnavas like the Saktas and the Naiyaiks complained to the qazi against the Vaisnavas to ban Namkirtan. The qazi ordered to ban Namkirtan for avoiding conflict between the Vaisnavas and non-Vaisnavas among the Hindus. But it is true that there is not a single instance that the Muslim masses opposed Vaisnava movement in any way.¹⁷

It is to be noted in this connection that being angry at the decision of the qazi Sri Chaitanya raided the house of qazi with his followers in Nadia, the latter referred his friendly relations with Chaitanya's maternal grandfather, Nilambar Chakrabarty.

“According to village relationship Chakrabarty is my uncle,
Village relationship is purer or truer than even blood relationship.
Nilambor Chakrabarty is your grandfather,
So in this connection you are my nephew.”¹⁸

R.C. Majumdar has ridiculed qazi's expression. No doubt the qazi has referred to the village relationship for self-defence, but

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it is also important to live in a society peacefully. There was a difference in the orthodox society between the two communities, but they maintained friendly and cordial relations.

Even the Brahmins used to imitate the Muslim practices. Jayananda indicates the true identity of many Hindus of those days.

“The Brahmin will retain beards and read Persian
With socks on their feet and stick in hand, they will hold a canon.
A few will recite the *Masnavi*”.¹⁹

He further informs us that Jagai and Madhai, two brothers and Brahmins devoted to Vaisnavism used to read *Masnavi*.

“By reciting *Masnavi* they stay in forest of reeds.”²⁰

These are the clear indications of social and cultural rapprochement between the Muslims and the Hindus in medieval Bengal.

Vainavism borrowed many Islamic elements, particularly Sufi elements. Enamul Haque have sought to trace parallels between Vainavism and Sufism, viz. *dasha* and *hal* (ecstasy); *Krishnanama* and *Zikr* (recital of God’s name); *kirtana* and *sama* (Sufi musical gatherings) and attribute the deep pantheistic monotheism of Vainavism, its emphasis of Divine love and anti-caste attitude to Sufi influence.²¹

It is very interesting to note that many Muslim poets appeared with Vainava inclination in Mughal Bengal. They preached the message of religious syncretism, tolerance and synthesis in their poems. Jatindra Mohan Bhattacharjee has traced 162 Muslim poets with Vainava sentiments in his book, *Banglar Vainavbhabapanna Mussalman Kavir Padamanjusha*. Unfortunately their dates are not always available. However irrespective of their dates the sentiments underlying their writings are significant and point to valuable conclusions. While Sashibhusan Dasgupta hold that most of them belonged to the 19th and the 20th centuries, it is quite plausible to hold, with Jagadish Narayan Sarkar that

traditions of such mutual toleration can be traced much earlier in contemporary literature even outside Bengal as well as in 'Islami Bangla Sahitya'. In the writing of Sufi Pir Qutban of Northern India (*Mrigavat*, 1512), and a few other authors such traditions are available. Again Malik Muhammad Jaisis, (of Awadh) *Padmavat* (1520-40 A.D.) in Awadhi preaches the message of Hindu-Muslim fusion. Mian Sadhan's Awadhi *Meinasat* (i.e. *Mayna Sati*) also bears the clear impress of Vaisnava lyrics. This tradition was also followed in Bengal. Jagadish Narayan Sarkar says that even most of the poets belonged to the 18th century; some at least belonged to the earlier periods. Most of these Vaisnava poets were inhabitants of Eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh) - versifiers of Srihatta (Sylhet), Chittagoan, Tripurra and Mymensingh exceed in number those of other places.²² Asim Roy says, "Ranging from the sixteenth down to the early years of the present century, these Muslim Pada compositions have been gradually recovered and published in relatively old and recent publications of Bengali Padas."²³ From these arguments we may hold that there were a few Muslim poets with Vaisnava sentiments during the Mughal period. It is needless to say that the cultural value of the poems and songs is very important and significant. Even though these are poems and historical source these are nonetheless valuable as throwing light on the mental outlook and approach of the writers. The trend of composing poems by the Muslims with Vaisnava sentiments is especially helpful in understanding the oneness of the Bengali people and broadness of their mind.

Only a few Muslim poets with Vaisnava inclinations like Daulat Qazi and Alaol, of the 17th century, will be mentioned here. The Sufi devotee, the poet Daulat Qazi, was at once the greatest Bengali Muslim poet and one of the most poets of old Bengali literature. The Poem "Sati Mayna", which Daulat Qazi composed on the basis of Mian Sadhan's Awadhi "*Mainasat*" of the 16th century, is an incomplete Panchali poem. In "*Sati Mayna*" along with the adoration of Allah and Rasul (i.e. Prophet) is mentioned the Dwarka of Krishna, dramatic performances of description of twelve months

(Baromasya Pala), various melodies, stories of the Puranas, Hindu dresses and Kirtan. It also bears the clear impress of Vaisnava lyrics. The name of Alaol, an inhabitant of Faridpur district of Eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh), in the seventeenth century is very important in this field. His best work is '*Padmabat*', which was written in 1651 at the request of Magan Thakur, a minister of Arakan Raj. It is the Bengali adoption of '*Padmabat*' of the Awadhi poet, Malik Muhammad Jayasi.²⁴

This work can rightly be considered a bridge of Hindu-Muslim fusion. Alaol was a gifted Bengali Muslim poet. He adopted a pure Vaisnava theme for his lyric. He writes on Radha's secret meeting with Krishna going early in the morning and returning late at nightfall. For this she is taken to task by her sister-in-law. Radha finds some excuses to tide over the dilemma and difficulty. Such is the theme of the peace.

Most poems of the devout Vaisnavas can be regarded as Radha-Krishna allegories. The Sufi Pir and Vaisnava poet Syed Mortuza prays thus,

“Carry me across, carry me across, oh boatman Kanai
Oh Kanai, do thou ferry me across
Oh Kanai, thou art the custodian of the ferry ghat and the
watchman of the path.
I offer my fresh youth as the ferry fare.
The market time is well past, but there is no transaction.
See the sun has reached the meridian.
Says Syed Murtuza, oh, Radha, the milk-maid, Lost are all
milk-maids in the market of Kanaiya.”²⁵

Though Lal Mamud was born in a Muslim family, yet he was a devotee of Krishna; he says of himself,

“Though born as a Muslim, I do not ever think that I shall be deprived of the sacred feet (of Krishna). Now Lal Mahmud has indeed accepted the name of Hare Krishna as his be-all and end-all.”²⁶

He further says,

“Whether a Hindu or a Muslim, it is all the same to you, who consider the caste of one’s own son? A devotee (Bhakta) is best of all castes whether he is a chandal (low caste) or a chammar (cobbler). Some call you Kali; some call you Banamali (Literally, the gardener, here Krishna) and others call you Khoda and Allah: this is the secret (essence) of all secrets.”²⁷

Chand Qazi says that he was very much devoted to the songs of Krishna’s flute.

He writes,

“Chand Qazi says on hearing his (i.e. Krishna’s) flute I cannot restrain my tears.

In sooth, I will not live unless I see Hari.”²⁸

It is evident from the above examples that it was in Bengal that at one time the message of religious syncretism was uttered by the Muslims and what a degree of eagerness laid behind the message.

A few Muslim Vaisnava poets have indicated God by using the name of Radha-Krishna. To Hachhan Raja Chaudhury (Husain Raza) of Sylhet district there is no difference between Radha and Khoda. He addressed Radha as Rahim and Rabbani,

“I long for you, oh! You beautiful Radha, I yearn after you. For you Bengali Hasan Raja roams with tears. The Hindus call you Radha, I say you are Khoda. If I invoke you as Radha, the Mullahs and the Munshis prevent me. Hasan Raja says I will not allow this difference to exist whatever the Mullahs and the Munshis say is just nonsense.”²⁹

Again he says,

“Oh my precious Radha, oh my precious Radha, why does my mind hanker after you? Listen to me, Oh Radha you, the queen of the world. I do not agree that only the Hindus invoke you as Radha. Nothing exist except Allah, the rest is blank.

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Repeatedly does Hasan Raja call you Rahim and Rabbani and also Shuvani. He calls Allah-Allah, I know not except one.”³⁰

From the above verses we can easily understand that a revolutionary change came in the mind of the Bengali Muslim poets. Actually Islam does not believe in image worship. But here the picture was completely different from ideological point of view. They broke the narrow limit of religious injunctions, casting all hesitations, composed books on Hindu religion, composed song in honour of Radha, Krishna, Chaitanya and other Hindu gods and goddesses.

Even today after taking bath in the Ganges many orthodox Hindus, recite the Gangastak (hymn to the Ganga), composed in Sanskrit by Daraf Khan, the Muslim poet of Tribeni, Hooghly. Daraf Khan’s work proved his liberalism. But it is very interesting to note that Daraf Khan was felicitated by the contemporary Muslim poet instead of scolding him for his pro-Hindu attitude. The poet writes,

“At Tribenighat I adore Daraf Khan, whose water for ablutions was supplied by the Ganges.”³¹

The united devotional exercises of the two communities helped the integration between the Hindus and the Muslims in Bengal and it developed a common culture, a culture of syncretism.

Popular Cults, Local Customs, Superstitions, Religious Rites and Ceremonies

The Muslims ruled Bengal for more than five hundred and fifty years. During this long period both the Hindus and the Muslims came into close contact with each other. Jagadish Narayan Sarkar writes,

“As a result of long contact between the two communities, the lower classes of both the Hindus and the Muslims came to have common objects of worship. Members of one community appeared to the gods and saints of other, failing their own, during illness or distress”.

Buchanan found such mutual worship among the two communities. He suspected that some Qazis and Pandits used to do so in Rangpur, while in Gorakhpur even Muslims of foreign origin and high rank were influenced by Hindu practices through their womenfolk. Similar was the growth of the cult of Satya Pir (True Saint) and Satya Narayan (True God) among Muslims and the Hindus respectively without the use of any image; the god being 'very good natured and ever ready to 'concede trifles' in Bengal.

During medieval period a large number of poets, Hindus and Muslims of different places of East Bengal, composed lyric poems (*gitikas*) regarding the sorrows and joys of village people. Collectors gathered and preserved all these with care. Dinesh Chandra Sen collected these *gitikas* from them and edited and published books with the name of *Purba Banga Gitika* and *Mymansingh Gitika*. The exact date and year are not always available of all the *Gitikas*. In spite of that these are very important source-materials for the study of the social history of medieval Bengal under the rule of the Mughals and the Nawabs.

Purba Banga Gitika and *Mymansingh Gitika* manifest and witness amicable relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims in Bengal. These refer to good mutual understanding among the votaries of two religions during the Mughal rule. A Muslim poet wrote in the adoration of a ballad named *Nurnneha O Kabarar Katha* ,

The Hindus and the Muslims are rope of a same bundle; someone says Allah Rasul, someone says Hari. Bismillah and Sri Bishnu are the same; when they are made different, they are called Ram and Rahim.

The poet tried to unite the Hindus and the Muslims on the same platform. He did not find any difference between Rama and Rahman except calling them in different name. Muslim Pirs and the Hindu gods are the same in his eyes. The poet's liberalism can be compared with the outlook of a great philosopher. These verses

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have a deep message for present day India wherein lie various forces like language, province and religion.

Another Muslim poet writes in *Pir Batasi Pala*, “After adoring you, O brothers, Hindu and Muslims I extend my adoration for the pirs and also I adore Mecca, Madina, Kasi and Gayathan.”³²

One can easily argue that the ballads were neither product of Hindu or Muslim culture, but of a single Bengali folk culture.

Kartabhaja Dharma (Religion):

Mutual religious practices were noticeable between the Hindus and the Muslims in Bengal between 16th to 18th centuries. Out of the mutual practices of both the communities, a new religious sect named ‘Kartabhaja Dharma’ grew up in Bengal in the 18th century. This sect was also known as ‘Satya Dharma’, ‘Satimar Dharma’, ‘Ekmoni Dharma’ etc. Aule Chand (birth is unknown, but died in 1769) was the founder of this sect and preached his Dharma in the Nadia district of Bengal, and had as his disciples Muslims as well as Hindus. From the school of Sri Chaitanya the Kartabhaja sect branched out and this sect preached the ‘Satya Dharma’ (True Religion). He left behind Bais Faqir (22 disciples), Ram Saran Paul, his wife, Saraswati Devi (Satima), his son Ram Dulal (Dulal Chand) and Kanai Ghose. They took the responsibility of preaching the spirit of ‘Kartabhaja Dharma’.³³ They also organized the sect and laid down its precepts in a series of songs. The doctrine of the Kartabhajas is as noted by Tarachand³⁴ given below.

1. There is only one God, who is incarnate in Karta.
2. The spiritual guide ‘Mahasaya’ must be all in all to his *Barati* or disciples.
3. The mantra or religious formula of the sect must be repeated five times a day as a means of salvation and of obtaining material prosperity.

4. Meat and wine must be abstained from.
5. Friday must be held sacred and should be spent in religious meditation and discussion.
6. There is no distinction in the cult between the upper, the lower or between the Hindus and the Muslims. A Musalman has more than once got the rank of a teacher. The members of the sect eat together, at least once or twice in a year.
7. No outward sign of adherence to the sect is required. A Hindu may retain his sacred thread, and a Muslim need not shave on becoming a member of the sect.
8. Fervid love or Bhakti is the only religious exercise necessary.

From the above doctrine of Kartabhaja sect it can be stated that this new sect accepted the theory of the unity of God, five prayers a day, Friday prayers, egalitarian concept and the idea of one leader from Islam. The doctrines of the sect are the mixture of Islam and Hinduism. That is why it was equally popular among the Hindus and the Muslims. The credit of the sect is that it brought the two communities in close contact with each other in the 18th century Bengal.

Mullaism (Priesthood):

There is no place of *Mullaism* or priesthood in Islam. But contemporary Bengali literature gives us ample information about the growth of *Mullaism* and the influence of the *Mullah* or Priest in the society. The Mullah was fairly well-versed in religious principles and daily practices of Islam. They were consulted by the villagers in the Muslim society and paid for their services. In his *Kavi kankan Chandī*, Mukundaram Chakraborty records the historicity of the above-mentioned statement.³⁵ The influence of the *Mullah* of Islam is comparable to that of the Brahmin *Purohit* of the Hindus.

Marriages:

There are numerous evidences in our vernacular sources that during Muslim rule in Bengal from the conquest of Nadia (1203) to the Battle of Plassey (1757) inter-religious marriages were evident between the Hindus and the Muslims in Bengal. As for example we can mention that Ilyash Shah (1342-57) married a Brahmin girl named Phulmoti of Village Vajra Jogini in Vikrampur and Sultan Sikander married a Hindu lady. The future Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah was born of this latter married.³⁶ This trend was continued in Mughal Bengal not only in the ruling class but also among the masses of the two communities of an extensive and profound scale. The Muslims did not follow the rigidity of the *Shariat* in matters of marriages with Hindu girls in Bengal. The practice of Hindu-Muslim mixed marriages was prevalent in the 17th century Bengal. Most of the contemporary literatures inform us about the love affairs of Muslim boys with Hindu girls and their devotion to each other. What does it mean? It is the clear indication of the trend of the contemporary society under the period of review as reflected in the literature. Even the Hindu girls were not converted to Islam before their marriage. The Muslim considered them as *Ahl-i-Kitab* like the Jews and the Christians, who got revelation of God through their Prophets. On the other hand the Hindu girls did not treat them as untouchables, Yavanas and Melechchas. The Qazi used to perform Hindu –Muslim marriages according to Muslim practice, but never raised the question of conversion of the Hindu girls to Islam before marriage which was compulsory in Islam particularly for the cases of pagans. As for example we can mention the marriage Ratikala with Sultan Shah, the local king of Chamor. A contemporary poet writes,

“The Qazi wearing his dress come soon and performed the marriage ceremony thinking that Lord was within his easy reach.”³⁷

The Islamic *Shariat* was violated not only in this marriage but also many other inter-community marriages. This helped both the communities to come in close contact with each other.

J.N. Sarkar argues,

“It is very difficult to assess how far social union was secured through such inter-communal marriages. The Hindu women could not entirely give up the traditional manners and customs even after their marriages with Muslims. Numerous converted Hindus too have largely preserved their religious rites, manners and customs.”³⁸

His doubt is significant. To my mind, a man can change his religion, but it is not easy to change his ways of life. These neo-Muslims gave to Indian Islam as well as to that of Bengal an indigenous temper which made rapprochement between the two religions easy and natural.

Scroll Painters:

In the past many scroll painters lived in the districts of Midnapore, Burdwan, Murshidabad etc. But now this old-age community is going to be extinct. At present, the scroll painters are generally found in the neighbourhood of Midnapore. The religious faith of these painters is very popular. They do not belong either to the Hindu or to the Muslim community fully. Though they do not say their Namaj regularly, all of them say their Namaj on Id festival. Then they worship the god Vishwakarma with due pomp each year in the month of Bhadra.³⁹ The God Viswakarma is the chief artisan of the Gods and the presiding deity of all the branches of art.

Many customs of the social life of the scroll painters are similar to those of the Muslim society. For example, marriages between male and female cousins are very common occurrence. In the community of the scroll painter's widow marriage and divorce are being practised from the beginning as they are in the Muslim society. The scroll painters do not burn their dead bodies, but they bury them. It may be noted in some cases before burying the dead, the Hindu custom of singeing the mouth of the dead at cremations followed by the painters. The burial ground of the painter is situated

at a separate place. Since the religious rites and behaviours do not correspond either with the orthodox Hindus or orthodox Muslims. The pictures of these painters are an important instance of the folk-art of Bengal.⁴⁰ These pictures can in no way be described as having an Islamic trait in them. They were neither Hindus nor Muslims. Their life-style is still a symbol of united culture.

All the painters bear two names--- one is Hindu name and the other a Muslim name. When they visit a Hindu locality, they use for their Hindu names, but when they go to a Muslim-dominated locality they use their Muslim names.⁴¹ For example, the name of a painter may be Jatindranath Chitrakar and also Jainuddin Sheikh.

Conclusion:

Mughal Bengal was considered as the land of syncretism and assimilation. It was seen in every sphere of life in the society, religion and culture. The Muslims were largely influenced by the Hindu customs and ceremonies and vice versa in Bengal during the period under review. By observing such a life-style Emperor Babur rightly commented on it as "Hindustani way of life."⁴² This style was prominently visible in the religious and cultural lives of Bengal including Barak-Surma Valley during the period under study as reflected in the contemporary vernacular literature and other sources.

From the above evidence and analysis made in this paper, it can be safely concluded that not only an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding, tolerance and respect developed but also a trend of assimilation and syncretism was evolved in religious and cultural lives between the Hindus and the Muslim in Barak-Surma Valley and other parts of Bengal from the 16th to 18th centuries as reflected in the Bengali vernacular and other sources. This syncretism of the two communities marked the daily life of the masses outside the crooked circle of politics and above the complexities of the Holy Law of Islam and Hinduism. It must be admitted in this connection that orthodox Islam and Hinduism were also practiced in Bengal.

Orthodox Islam was practised in mosques, madrasahs, observance of fasts, saying of namaj, celebration of festivals and books written on *Hadith* and *Fiqh*.⁴³ Similarly, Hindu orthodoxy was also found in worship of gods and goddesses, celebration of *pujas* and their rituals and rites.⁴⁴ The two streams flowed side by side in Bengal. One was the popular religion more a way of life than strictly a religion and the other was the orthodox religion. But the syncretistic ideas influenced the entire nation as a whole during the period under review.

Notes and References:

- ¹ Sir J.N. Sarkar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, Dacca, 1948, p.501.
Bankim Chandra also wrote, "What is required is a history of Bengal, otherwise there is no hope for Bengal. Who will write it? You will, I will, all of us will write it. Come let us all writes the history of Bengal."
Bankim Chandra Chattapadhyay, 'Banglar Itihas Samhandhe Kayakti Katha', Bangadarshan, Agrahan, 1287 B.S.; Sri Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay & Sri Sajanikanta Das (ed.) *Bibidh Prabandha*, p.322.
- ² Md. Shah Noorur Rahman, *Hindu-Muslim Relations in Mughal Bengal*, Progressive Publishers, Calcutta, 2001, p.48.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Sir Wolsley Haig (ed.), *Cambridge History of India*, Vol.III, Delhi, 1958, p.167.
- ⁵ Quoted in J. N. Sarkar, *Hindu-Muslim Relations in Medieval Bengal*, Delhi, 1985, p.67.
- ⁶ Abdul Qadir and Rezaul Karim (ed.), *Kavya Malancha*, Calcutta, 1945, p.30.
- ⁷ J.N.Sarkar, *Islam in Bengal*, Calcutta, 1972, p.33-34.
- ⁸ Quoted in Ahmad Sharif, *Bangali O Bangla Sahitya*, Bangla Academy, Dacca, 1983, p.824.
- ⁹ Sarkar, op. cit., p.94.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in Sukumar Sen, *Bangla Sahityer Itihas*, 4 pts., Calcutta, 1948-1958, p.465.
- ¹¹ Jagadish Narayan Sarkar, 'A Study of Sufism- its background and its Syncretic Significance in Medieval India', *Indo-Iranica*, Vol. 38, March and June, 1985, No.1&2, pp.1-2.

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- ¹² Ahmad Sharif, *Bangali O Bangla Sahitya*, Dhaka, 1983, p.829.
- ¹³ Enamul Haque, *A History of Sufism in Bengal*, Dacca, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975, p.288.
- ¹⁴ S. N. Lutfur Rahman, *Lalan Shah Yiban o Gan*, Dacca, 1983, p.113.
- ¹⁵ J. N. Sarkar, *Hindu-Muslim Relations in Medieval Bengal*, Delhi, 1985, p.86.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Brindaban Das Thakur, *Sri Chaitanya Bhagabat*, 4th edition published by Mrinal Kanti Ghosh, Calcutta, 440 Gauranga Era (not later than 1540), pp.18, 75.; Krishnadas Kaviraj, *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, ed. by Atul Krishna Goswami, 3rd edition, Calcutta, 1325 B.S., p.122.
- ¹⁸ Krishnadas Kaviraj, *Chaitanya Charitamrita, Adi*, Qazis utterance, pp.17,65.
- ¹⁹ Jayananda, *Chaitanya Mangal*, Atul Krishna Goswami (ed.), Calcutta, 1307 B.S.
- ²⁰ Ibid. *Masnavi* is written by Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi in Persian who was a great Sufi. It is next to the Quran and Hadith in importance and reverence to the Muslims.
- ²¹ Enamul Haque, *Bangae Sufi Prahab*, Calcutta, 1935, pp. 165-78.
- ²² Ibid, pp.89-90.
- ²³ Asim Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Traditions in Bengal*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1983, p.i87.
- ²⁴ Md. Shah Noorur Rahman, op.cit. p.73.
- ²⁵ Quoted in original, Y. M. Bhattacharya, *Banglar Vaisnavabhavapanna Musalman Kabir Padamanjusha*, Calcutta University, 1984, p.317.
- ²⁶ Ibid, p.250.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid, p.346.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Abdul Qadir and Rezaul Karim (ed.), *Janganamah, Kavya malancha*, Calcutta, 1945, p.31.
- ³² Ibid, p.539; Richard M. Eaton also discussed about the syncretic tendency of Bengali culture in chapter10- 'The Rooting of Islam in Bengal' in his book

entitled “*The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*”, Delhi,1994, pp.258-315.

- ³³ Ratan Kumar Nandi, *Kartabhaja Dharma O Sahitya*, Calcutta, 1984, pp.1-10.
- ³⁴ Tarachand, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture*, Allahabad, 1936, pp. 219-220.
- ³⁵ Mukundoram Chakraborty, *Kavi Kankan Chandi*, Sri Sri Kumar Bandyopadhyay and Sri Biswapati Chaudhury (eds.), Calcutta, 1992, p.344.
- ³⁶ Atul Sur, *Bangla O Bangalir Bibortan*,, Calcutta, pp.175-76.
- ³⁷ Syed Muhammad Akbar, *Jabel Muluk Shamarokh*, cited in Md. Shah Noorur Rahman, op.cit., p.36.
- ³⁸ J.N.Sarkar, *op.cit.*54.
- ³⁹ Ibn Golam Samad, *Islami Shilpokala*, Islamic Foundation Of Bangladesh, Dacca, 1989, pp.176-78.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ op.cit.
- ⁴² Babur, *Tuzuk-i- Baburi*, Eng. tr. By A. S. Beveridge, Vol. 1., London, 1921, p.91.
- ⁴³ Md.Shah Noorur Rahman, op.cit. p.50.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
