



## *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology*

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### Special Issue: Religious Studies in South Asia: The Dhaka Initiative

With **Joseph T. O'Connell** as the Guest Editor

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## Note from the Editor

The study of religion occupies a central place in the sociological literature. All major thinkers, sociologists inclusive, have grappled with the idea of religion and its place in social life. Our first issue also looked at Max Weber and his contributions to religion. We had since planned to take out a special issue on religion, which suddenly became a reality when Professor Joseph T. O'Connell suggested the publication of the papers presented at a workshop on religion at the newly established Department of World Religions and Culture in the University of Dhaka.

The workshop, and subsequently the papers published in this issue, served a double purpose. Firstly, it fulfilled our desire to deal with religion as a special topic of discussion in an academic setting. Professor O'Connell makes the importance of such a discussion abundantly clear when he argues that in spite of so much religion around us, religion has not been dealt with in the academia in a major way in Bangladesh, indeed, in the whole of South Asia. It is a curious phenomenon, and very few of us realize this, that religion, or the critical study of religion, is almost a "taboo topic" in South Asian academic circles. Few ventures to deal with religion beyond the day to day practices; experts on religion are to be found typically among those who profess it. Critical appreciation in public is dampened by the fear of backlash. As a result, very little serious discussion exists in the literature on religion, even the universities lack courses on religion.

Secondly, Bangladesh has been a seat of major religions all through history, largely coexisting peacefully. Often, one majority religion has been replaced by another, in a succession. So that Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam, the three major religions of the Sub-continent, have had their heydays in the lives of the people and the country. From rulers to the downtrodden all have been affected by one religion or the other while religion, in turn, has left its mark on the society and culture. The history of religion in Bangladesh, therefore, is probably as fascinating as the religions themselves. This feature alone makes a serious study of religion in Bangladesh a worthwhile project.

I am therefore, thrilled by the opportunity to present these studies, albeit in an introductory fashion, in a special issue of the BEJS. I would consider this as the first of many future attempts to bring religion to the forefront of academic discussion, including as courses taught in the universities. The University of Dhaka, as has been noted, in many of the following papers, has made a great contribution by opening up a Department of World Religions and Culture. It is hoped that this attempt will generate further interest in the academia of South Asia, and particularly of Bangladesh, towards the critical study of religion. Sociologists, for obvious reasons, should, and, dare I say, must, play a leading role in such endeavors.

## Introduction to Religious Studies in South Asia: The Dhaka Initiative

Joseph T. O'Connell\*

**Abstract:** *This special issue of the Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology is 'special' in that it is comprised not of sociological research articles as such but of presentations made in seminars on religion in Bengal sponsored by a pioneering initiative in comparative academic study of religion, the Department of World Religions and Culture in the University of Dhaka. The new department has served as focal point and catalyst for intensified interest in religious phenomena in relationship to diverse aspects of culture, society and politics by scholars in other departments of the university, not least Sociology, History and Philosophy. This introductory essay addresses the striking disparity between the obvious prominence of religious aspects in human life, individual and collective, in South Asian countries and the virtual exclusion of comparative academic study of religion (i.e., world religions) from most South Asian universities. Several reasons are identified, but the main focus here is on the severe tension between secularist and communalist / fundamentalist mentalities and interests that are salient throughout the region. The emergence and distinctive character of the new Department of World Religions and Culture and its related Centre for Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue are here viewed as reflecting the relatively balanced manageable tension between secularist and Islamist advocates in a largely non-ideological and generally tolerant Muslim-majority Bangladeshi population.*

### Background

This issue of the *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology* is special in a special way. It is not a collection of sociological papers as such, though there are several that either discuss sociological study of religion directly or address social aspects of topics in the history of religion in Bengal. Rather it is a sampling of essays emerging from a pioneering academic venture in Bangladesh, namely the University of Dhaka's Department of World Religions and Culture, the only such department in Bangladesh and almost unique in all of South Asia. At the outset, let me thank the university's Department of Sociology and its distinguished Professor A.K.M. Saaduddin for the crucial support they have been extending to this academic venture and also acknowledge the Bangladesh Sociological Society and its *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology*, its Editor-in-Chief, Professor Nazrul Islam, and his editorial team for making their journal available to inform readers about this significant Bangladeshi initiative, now but one decade old. With such collaboration by

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scholars from within the university and beyond and thanks to the heroic dedication of department's founding chairman, Professor Kazi Nurul Islam, the University of Dhaka has the potential to produce the kind of inter-disciplinary research and to stimulate the kind of creative thinking and teaching about religion that could make it a leader in this crucial but neglected field throughout South Asia.

The articles that follow in this issue arise from a series of weekly seminars sponsored by that new Department of World Religions and Culture in which scholars from several disciplines plus experts from beyond the university participated along with the host department's own staff. The objective of those seminars and of this special issue of the *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology* is to create momentum for study and research on religion in Bangladesh and throughout the South Asia region. This can best be done by engaging scholars in appropriate disciplines, including sociology, to apply those disciplines plus their own insights and experience to study and research on aspects of religion, individual and social. Those introductory seminars, like the essays herein, concentrated primarily on religion in the Bengal region for two basic reasons. One is the ready access scholars in the Bengal have to relevant sources, historical and contemporary, and their capacity to utilize them effectively thanks to their knowledge of relevant languages and the ability to conduct field research relatively close to home. The other is the potential contribution such study and research could make to resolving religion-related problems and stimulating more constructive and creative understanding of religion so as to enhance the quality of human life here and now in Bangladesh and in adjacent West Bengal. A secondary benefit of more and better scholarship on religion and religion-related issues in the Bengal region, if done by Bangladeshi scholars, is that they could begin to overcome ignorance and misconceptions globally about religion in Bangladesh due to the glaring lack of research in that field till now by scholars, foreign and local.

For various reasons, some quite obvious, some not so, there has been across South Asia an extreme reluctance of scholars and universities in the area to address religious phenomena directly or the religious aspects of psychological, cultural, social and political life in any depth. So, before introducing the essays that constitute this special issue of the *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology* I would like to address what seems to me a troubling anomaly, namely the striking disparity between the prominence of religious factors in personal and collective life of so much of the population of South Asian countries and the extreme rarity of study and research explicitly on religion in the universities of those same countries. This anomalous disparity has recently become a subject of concern to a number of scholars within South Asia as well as to some

elsewhere who focus their own scholarship on religion in South Asia.<sup>2</sup> The better part of this introductory essay therefore deals with this issue with special reference to Bangladesh and the University of Dhaka. It draws heavily from my presentation made to the 20<sup>th</sup> Quinquennial Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions, held at the University of Toronto in August 2010.

### **The disparity between the prominence of religion in South Asian life and its absence from university studies**

There is a striking disparity between the richness of human phenomena in the South Asia region that may be deemed religious and the paucity of departments, centers or even programs for academic (as distinguished from confessional) study of religion in South Asian universities.<sup>3</sup> There are, of course Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh and Christian institutions where confessional (i.e., from the perspective of a particular faith commitment) study and practice of a favored religious way of life is fostered. There is also considerable good quality study and research on particular religious texts, movements, institutions and systems of thought conducted in departments and programs of history, philosophy, the social sciences in some leading South Asian universities, especially in India.<sup>4</sup> But in such discipline-specific contexts the distinctively religious aspects of subjects of study or research are at risk of being marginalized theoretically or treated dismissively. Even when commendable treatment on religion is done in such discipline-specific contexts, the basic question still presents itself with force: why is there so very little academic study of religion as such on a comparative / pluralist basis, when other disciplines developed in the West have been successfully transplanted in South Asian academic soil?

### **Partial answers to the recurring question: Why?**

#### ***Western origin***

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<sup>2</sup> The state of religious studies in South Asia has been addressed in several recent professional gatherings: Rethinking Religion in India Conferences I & II (New Delhi, January 2008, January 2009); Workshop on Academic Study of Religion in India (Visva-Bharati, February 2008); American Academy of Religion Annual Meetings (2008, 2009, 2010); Global Congress on World Religions after September 11-An Asian Perspective (Jamia Millia Islamia, January 2009); Conference on Interface Between East and West: Multiculturalism and Identity (Jadavpur, June 2009); Consultation on Prospects for Dialogue and Religious Studies in South Asian Universities (Dhaka, March 2010); 20<sup>th</sup> Quinquennial Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions (Toronto, August 2010).

<sup>3</sup> The main university loci for academic study of religion in South Asia that I am aware of are: Visva-Bharati's Department of Philosophy and Religion (Santiniketan, West Bengal); Punjabi University's Guru Gobind Singh Department of Religious Studies (Patiala); Banaras Hindu University's Department of Philosophy and Religion (since 1990, when Philosophy was merged with Indian Philosophy and Religion); University of Madras's cluster of small Departments of Christian Studies, Jainology, Saiva Siddhantaand Vaisnavism; and a Centre for Islamic Studies (Chennai); Jamia Millia Islamia's Centre for the Study of Comparative Religions and Civilizations (New Delhi); Jadavpur University's brand new Centre for Religion and Society in its Department of Sociology (Kolkata); Department of Comparative Religion and Social Harmony in Eastern University of Sri Lanka; Department of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka.

<sup>4</sup> The South Asian section of Alles, 2008 by Rowena Robinson indicates that while a great deal of research publication on religion in India has been done by scholars based in or hailing from South Asia, almost all is done within such disciplines as history, anthropology, sociology and political science, virtually none by scholars of religion as such.

Thus far, numerous factors have been proposed as contributing to the disparity. Among these, one possible factor is that academic study of religion is not pertinent to South Asia because it first crystallized as a distinct field of scholarship in Europe in relation to particular late nineteenth-century European religio-cultural and political circumstances. (Sharpe, 1975) But the mere fact of European origin need not prevent a type of scholarly or intellectual endeavor from transplanting itself and flourishing in South Asia or elsewhere as have English language, law and political institutions, ideologies, scientific theories and diverse academic disciplines. Why not academic study of religion? Obviously there is no dominant Christian theological-institutional foil against which academic religious studies might have emerged and defined itself in India, Bangladesh or elsewhere in South Asia as was the case in nineteenth-century Europe. But, if one thinks in terms of the more generalized, flexible and critical conceptions of 'religion' or 'religious' and other categories as used in contemporary religious studies,<sup>5</sup> it should not be difficult to identify powerful Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Sikh religious establishments in different parts of South Asia that are analogous to the Christian religious establishment in Europe. These might well have been, and in some cases demonstrably are, in tension with pluralistic non-confessional study and research on religion, i.e., with academic study of religion. The precise forms of such non-confessional religious study as might have emerged, or may be emerging or may yet emerge, in South Asia need not be clones of their Western analogue (which indeed itself continues to transform). We should expect that to the extent that academic study of religion does take root in South Asia it will not only distinguish itself from any received Western tradition but also develop varying forms reflecting varying systems of religio-cultural and political dominance within different parts and populations of South Asia. But where are they?

### ***Novelty and attendant lack of educational resources***

Another possible explanation for the paucity of religious studies in South Asian universities is that it is too novel a way of studying religion to have become well enough known in South Asia to create a demand for it.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, there is scarcity of suitable textbooks and other educational resources, to say nothing of trained scholars, for teaching the subject in the region. That there are extreme shortages of suitable instructional materials and teachers for academic study of religion in South Asia is painfully obvious and such shortages pose huge obstacles, especially for those whose English is weak or non-existent. But novelty has not prevented other types of study and

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<sup>5</sup> To anachronistically and anomalously define 'religion' as a particular type of nineteenth century Protestant denomination would be arbitrary and unhelpful, though there are those who persist in doing so.

<sup>6</sup> Even in the United States, for instance, it was only from the 1960s, following a Supreme Court decision that pluralistic or comparative study of religion in public schools would not constitute 'establishment' of a religion, that the burgeoning of religious studies departments in government-supported schools took place.



research from being espoused rapidly by South Asian academics and related educational resources developed; why then not academic study of religion?

### ***Disparity between Western and South Asian cultural mentalities and languages***

Compounding the difficulty of extending academic religious study to South Asia is the Euro-American cultural particularity of so much of its scholarly literature and the mentality animating it.<sup>7</sup> The fact that the vast bulk of scholarly publications in the field so far are in English or European languages obviously presents a major challenge, especially for students and teachers beyond the most elite universities. (O'Connell, 2009b) To the extent that categories and sentiments integral to Western-originated religious studies may be alien to or dissonant with South Asian cultural mentalities, the challenge of reading or translating becomes daunting and the results harder to assimilate. Likewise, the absence of fundamental categories, symbols and sensibilities integral to South Asians' conceptions of religion and culture can render even an otherwise well-translated Western religious studies text disappointing for what it fails to convey. This problem of cultural disparity may be growing less severe as scholarship on religion become more sensitive to non-Western cultures as more non-Western scholars enter the field, but there is still a long way to go.

### ***Emergent South Asian approaches to comparative religious studies?***

One might claim, however, that there has already emerged from India at least one ostensibly non-confessional approach to comparative academic study of religion. I am referring to the work of the late Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and others who from the perspective of Indian philosophy address a number of issues integral to comparative religious thought: ontology, language, symbolism, ethics, religious consciousness and experience etc. Their work is, I think, deserving of serious consideration as an alternative approach (or at least a significant contribution toward such an approach) to the reflective or philosophical dimension of religious studies. This approach may be open to criticism, however, for alleged Neo-Vedanta confessional bias and the arguably uncritical assumptions that historical particularities and dogmatic claims to religious authority indicate an inferior level of religious experience and philosophic insight when compared with Upanishadic monism or absolutism. Whatever its merits and limitations, this Indian philosophic approach to comparative study of religious thought seems not (or not yet) to have established itself as an alternative pattern for academic study of religion even within India.

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<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere I have argued that within the several major religio-cultural traditions of India [and all the more so for South Asia as a whole], there is a considerable wealth of conceptual and symbolic resources that could be tapped to develop variants of academic study of religion more authentically congenial to the peoples of South Asian region. Tapping into these resources could also render more cosmopolitan (i.e., more sensitive to the diversity of human religious phenomena) academic study of religion at the global level, as to some extent is being done but not sufficiently as yet. (O'Connell, 2008)

It may also be asked if in Bangladesh from within the Department of World Religions and Culture, which began a decade ago and has since added a Centre for Interfaith and Inter-cultural Dialogue, there may be emerging a distinctively Bangladeshi or more broadly South Asian approach to academic study of religion, an approach that attempts to balance critical research with engaged dialogue. To this question I return later in this essay. We may also note here that 2010 has seen the launching of a Centre for Study of Society and Religion within the Department of Sociology in Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India in conjunction with the Swedish-sponsored International Forum for the Study of Religion and Society (IFSSR). This Centre and the IFSSR, like the Dhaka University's Department and Centre, aspires to combine critical academic work with advocacy of religion for peace and harmony.<sup>8</sup> Both the Dhaka and the Jadavpur initiatives involve some foreign collaboration, it may be noted: Dhaka in a minor way (and only after it was already in operation) by the seasonal volunteered services of a retired scholar from the University of Toronto, Canada; Jadavpur in a major way through institutional collaboration with the University of Gothenburg, Sweden at its inception.

### ***Precedent of colonial British educational policy***

One of the most basic historical reasons for delayed development of religious studies in South Asian universities is British colonial educational policy. The pattern-setting public universities and curricula established in 1857 simply did not include religious studies. This conformed to the basic British policy of keeping 'hands off' sensitive religio-cultural matters and in any event the premier universities were established before the new 'comparative religion' or 'science of religion' was developed in Europe. A precedent was set, however, and, like so many other precedents set in colonial British India (which embraced present-day Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and smaller South Asian states), has been followed long after independence in 1947. But this answer avoids the nagging question: why with the dawning of independence in 1947 and the opportunity to express long-suppressed cultural aspirations should the exclusion of religious study from academia be so rigidly maintained in South Asian countries in which religion was and still is so salient an aspect of life?

### **Another answer to the 'why' question: tensions between religio-political communalists / fundamentalists and secularists in South Asia**

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<sup>8</sup> The title of the most recent [11-13 December 2010] Jadavpur conference: Religious Coexistence and Tolerance: Challenging Borders in a Global Context. "It aims at bringing together scholars from various parts of the world to discuss the issue of how to promote religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence in a global context. Imagined and real borders challenge processes of cooperation and mutual understanding among various religious communities leading to conflicts, terror and anarchy."  
<http://www.ifssr.net/Conferences> (accessed 6 November 2010).

In the remainder of these remarks I'll address one more major factor, though not necessarily *the* major factor, stunting the development of academic study of religion in universities in South Asia even after independence. That factor is persistent tension, not infrequently expressed as hostile polarization and violence, between politically mobilized religio-cultural communalist interests on the one hand and politically mobilized elite secularist interests on the other.

*India.* In India, right from independence in 1947, the secularist elite, relatively small in number but strongly committed and influentially positioned inside and outside the Congress party, the Government of India and higher education, systematically discouraged expressions of interest in religion in the public arena, including public education. In more recent decades, a powerful religio-political Hindu communal resurgence has intensified secularist concern lest initiatives for religion in education provide opportunities for Hindu communalism.<sup>9</sup> For their part, the advocates of *Hindutva* (Hinduness) or Hindu *jagaran* (awakening) have exhibited hostility toward rather than commitment to even-handed treatment of non-Hindus or to empathetic study of their religious traditions. Indian Muslims for most of the period since independence have tended to be defensive and inward-looking. With the exception of a minority of secular intellectuals, they have remained quiet while more conservative *ulema* of the Deoband School or the fundamentalist Jamaat-e-Islami would speak for them, thus not fostering a milieu conducive to comparative academic study of religion.

*Pakistan.* The founding father of Pakistan, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, himself a decidedly secular individual, died a year after 1947 independence and with him died his ideal of Pakistan as a tolerant, pluralist, constitutionally secular Muslim-majority state. While the more secular elites have so far resisted turning Pakistan into a contemporary instance of a shariah-bound Islamic state, they have not been able to prevent more traditionalist and fundamentalist Muslims from exerting more and more influence over state and society. With virtually all Hindus and Sikhs having fled from West Pakistan in 1947 and the few remaining Christians there ever at risk, with unstable civilian governments alternating with unpopular military regimes, with Ahmadiyya Muslims being massacred by fundamentalist Muslims, (West) Pakistan clearly has not provided an environment favorable to comparative academic study of religion.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>The recent proposal of Chief Minister Modi of Gujarat (widely held responsible for abetting massacres of Muslims in Gujarat) to open a Centre for Religious Studies in M.S. University in Ahmedabad (Express News Service Posted online: Saturday, Jan 16, 2010 at 0150 hrs) is likely to raise such suspicions not only by Indian secularists but by anyone genuinely supportive of academic study of religion.

<sup>10</sup>The former head of the prestigious Agha Khan University based in Pakistan, Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, in the Q & A session following his University of Toronto lecture on 11 December 2009, when asked about religious studies in that university, replied that it was too sensitive a matter to be attempted there.

In East Pakistan, however, the balance between Islamists and secularists has been more even and, apart from the extremely bitter 1971 struggle for Bangladeshi independence, the tensions between them generally have been less virulent than in (West) Pakistan. Most Hindus in what became East Pakistan initially chose to stay there in 1947 and Hindus, reinforced by small but vocal Christian and Buddhist communities, continue to form a not insignificant, though shrinking, minority of the population (from ca. 20% in 1947 to ca. 10% at present). The bulk of the East Pakistani / Bangladeshi, population, moreover, while self-consciously Muslim, is neither politically Islamist nor ideologically secularist. There are, however, strongly committed and well organized Islamist organizations which run the gamut from the politically sophisticated Jamaat-e-Islami Bangladesh political party through other Islamist parties and a medley of traditionalist orthodox groups to clandestine terrorist networks. On the other hand, there is also an articulate body of committed secularists, themselves mostly Muslims, dispersed among small leftist political parties, the currently ruling Awami League, NGOs, academia, journalism, literary and artistic circles. Widespread corruption and the politicizing of public institutions has not spared the public universities in Bangladesh, where there is a pervasive sense of malaise, misdirection and insecurity, not a very nurturing milieu in which to expect academic study of religion or scholarship of any sort to flourish. Yet there did emerge ten years ago a Department of World Religions (currently World Religions and Culture) in the University of Dhaka, the premier public university in Bangladesh. (O'Connell, 2009)

### **The Department of World Religions and Culture in the University of Dhaka**

The emergence of the Department of World Religions in the University of Dhaka (hereafter DU) was something of an anomaly. There was no precedent for it in Bangladesh, nor in erstwhile East Pakistan. Like its older Indian counterparts, DU was founded in colonial India following British patterns of academia and without any department for comparative or academic study of religion.<sup>11</sup> Launching the new department was due overwhelmingly to the unstinting conviction, persistence and personal diplomacy of Professor of Philosophy Kazi Nurul Islam with the support of some like-minded colleagues within the faculty of DU. After a decade-long campaign, the university authorities agreed to establish a miniscule Department of Comparative Religion in the Faculty of Arts. But that nomenclature brought out opposition from two quarters: those Muslims who insisted that Islam was simply incomparable and those Hindus who feared negative comparison of their religion by the Muslim scholars who would dominate the department. Nonetheless, with its name tactfully changed to World Religions (since modified to World

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<sup>11</sup> If the University of Calcutta was modeled after the University of London as primarily an examining and research university overseeing numerous colleges, the University of Dhaka was modeled after the University of Oxford as a residential teaching university, with some faculty members living as tutors in residential 'halls' (with grounds spacious enough to be Oxford colleges).

Religions and Culture), the new department was launched in 1999 initially to teach M.A. students. After two years, an M. Phil. program was added and a few years later a four-year Honours (i.e., undergraduate) program. The department is authorized to offer the Ph. D., though till now only one candidate may have completed a doctoral program. (World Religions and Culture, website) Recently a Centre for Inter-faith and Intercultural Dialogue was established in conjunction with the department, again thanks to the efforts of Professor Kazi Nurul Islam. In formal and quantitative terms the Department of World Religions and Culture in DU has shown remarkable growth in the space of a decade, but in practice its hasty expansion and future development are somewhat problematic.

**Departmental ethos: authentic religion everywhere is peaceful; religious scholarship and dialogue go hand in hand**

Thanks to the tireless exhortations of the founding chairman, there is a widespread conviction among students and staff—a departmental ethos, if you will—that genuine religion is humane and tolerant and an influence for peace; and that intolerance and violence in the name of religion are in fact falsifications of religion, be it Muslim, Hindu, Christian or religion of whatever other sort.<sup>12</sup> Interfaith dialogue is integral to the vision of world religions of the department's founder as reflected in the department's mission statement:

Though all religions of the world teach love, preach sympathy for others and encourage man to exercise utmost self-restraint and have most profoundly been a source of inspiration for the highest good of mankind, the world today is torn by conflicts, enmity and religious hatred. In this predicament a peaceful society is impossible unless people belonging to different faiths understand each other better. (DU World Religions and Culture, website)

Accordingly, in 2008, a second institutional initiative by Professor Kazi Nurul Islam was brought to fruition, namely a Centre for Interfaith and Intercultural Dialogue attached to the DU Department of World Religions and Culture.<sup>13</sup> His zealous advocacy of interfaith dialogue for mutual respect and peace provides a certain élan, a sense of purpose, to the department. In the process it tends

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<sup>12</sup> His zealous commitment to world religions scholarship and interfaith dialogue redeems a pledge to his dying father to do something effective to reduce communal hostility between Muslims and Hindus, a commitment he tirelessly strives to share with his students and colleagues.

<sup>13</sup> "Today, throughout the world, many scholars feel that there are two options before us: Either we opt for dialogue, or we face sure confrontation and destruction." (Islam, 2008) In addition to local and national activities, this Centre hosts an annual international conference on religion for peace. The 2nd International Conference on Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue-2010 (Nov. 27-29, 2010) lists among its joint sponsors the Bangladesh National Commission for UNESCO (BNCU) and the Ministry of Education, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh and among dignitaries attending: the Minister of Information and Culture, Minister and Secretary of Education and State Minister of Religious Affairs, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. Among other speakers are academics, religious representatives and peace advocates from the U.S.A., India, Australia, Iran, Italy, Japan, Nepal and Bangladesh.

to instill a departmental view or ethos, based on axioms that 'true religion' is 'religion for peace' and that all genuine religion is based on similar benign humane principles. These are edifying views, no doubt. But there may be a downside if they are assumed uncritically and without qualifications. There is a risk that students' and even teachers' perceptiveness of complexities and ambiguities may be dulled or inhibited. There may develop a tendency to rely on platitudes rather than reasoned, evidence-based arguments and conclusions, to confuse research with edification and advocacy. I do not mean to say that dialogue necessarily undermines rigorous academic study and research on religion. It need not. Indeed at its best participation in dialogue implies listening to and speaking with others respectfully and attentively. This should enhance one's sensitivity to the religious meaning, feelings and intentions of others, which are fundamental to scholarship on religion as the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1959) so forcefully contended. But to negotiate an optimal marriage of dialogue and scholarship without diminishing either party is not without its challenges.

Assertions of the peaceful character of authentic religion and of the underlying similarity of all true religion may well be entertained as hypotheses to be tested against the evidence of human religious history or as noble ideals to strive for. But to take them as uncritically as axioms would be to introduce an element of dogmatism into the domain of academic study, teaching and research on religion. This, I would argue, would be a mistake. There is much to be learned about human religious behavior (peaceful and not so peaceful, 'authentic' and 'inauthentic') and its institutional functioning (its uses as well as abuses) from research employing historical, social scientific, psychological and other critical disciplinary theories and methods. Such research should remain open to acknowledging whatever evidence presents itself, however positive or negative that evidence may be vis-à-vis one's hypotheses, assumptions or ideals.

### **Scope and warrant for religious studies provided by secularist vs. communalist / fundamentalist tension**

The success thus far of the DU initiative would seem to illustrate that communalist (in this case Islamist) vs. secularist tension need not necessarily prevent academic study of religion. On the contrary, such tension may be highlighted to justify the need for comparative academic study of religion. The DU initiative also may illustrate how such tension can influence the way study of religion is conceived, including its proffered partnership with dialogue. In Bangladesh sporadic harassment (with relative impunity) of non-Muslims and certain categories of Muslims (e.g., Ahmadiyyas, traditional *pirs* and their *mazar* institutions, communally marginal Baul minstrels) by unscrupulous land-grabbers or by groups seeking extra-legally to impose fundamentalist Islamic norms is frequent and flagrant enough to be appealed to as warranting both world religions study

and interfaith dialogue as antidotes. It can be claimed, and with some plausibility, that genuine study of religion, one's own as well as others', will show how false are the claims of the intolerant and often violent voices of those who allegedly exploit, falsify and debase Islam (or in principle any other mode of religion) for material, political or fanatic religious gain. Moreover, where there is widespread unease over the harsh polarization of secularist and Islamist polemics, the claim that peace lies at the heart of all religion, Islamic no less than others, if only we understand religion aright, may ring true to many God-fearing Muslims and other men and women of religious faith, i.e., the vast majority of the Bangladeshi population. This too may contribute to a congenial milieu for world religions scholarship as well as interfaith dialogue.

With most Bangladeshis being of neither strongly fundamentalist nor strongly secularist mentality, there is potentially broad support for studying religion in a calm unbiased way that aspires to disclose and promote more humane and authentic expressions of religious faith. World religions teaching as practiced currently in DU does not single out the Islamic tradition as uniquely prone to intolerance but rather subjects any religious tradition to similar assessment, guided by the same harmonizing assumption that in its authentic form religious faith anywhere is humane and peace-loving. This irenic and respectful line of argument may serve to deflect or disarm opposition from potential Muslim and other staunchly religious critics. By much the same argument, secular-minded potential critics of religious study may be reassured that an even-handed empathetic approach to the plurality of religious traditions will undermine the appeal of the fanaticism and intolerance that secularists loathe and fear. One of the most pervasive of communication gaps in Bangladesh is that between secularists and Islamists. While those far to the extremes may not be willing to acknowledge any common ground for dialogue, there must be many others of less extreme secular and Islamic convictions between whom constructive dialogue would be feasible and beneficial, especially, perhaps, if facilitated by competent scholars of world religions, or so it seems to me. In the current Bangladeshi context in particular it would seem appropriate for the conception of 'interfaith dialogue' to be construed to embrace persons of secular humanist, agnostic and even atheist convictions as well as those affirming Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Buddhist or other more explicitly religious modes of personal faith. (O'Connell, 2007)

### **Essays comprising this special issue of the *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology***

The essays that follow are a representative sampling of presentations made in recent annual seminars in the DU Department of World Religions and Culture. The full list of speakers and topics in those seminars and in the March 2010 Dhaka Consultation on Religious Studies and Dialogue in South Asian Universities is given in an appendix. There have also been a number of other lectures and dialogue sessions on aspects of religion sponsored by that department or, at

its initiative, by the DU Centre for Advanced Research in the Humanities. The present selection reflects the range of seminar presentations, from formal academic papers, to more speculative essays to shorter sketches of topics inviting more study and research. Four are by fulltime members of the hosting department, three by adjunct professors from sociology, philosophy and history departments respectively, one by a visiting professor of religious studies, one by an assistant professor of history, one by a former DU librarian-cum-author.

We follow this Introduction with a review essay of classical sociology of religion and guidelines for research in Bangladesh by Professor of Sociology [DU] K.A.M. Saaduddin. This is followed by a survey of the religiously plural history of the Bengal region, and modern Bangladesh in particular, with an emphasis on the tolerant aspects of that history, by Professor Kazi Nurul Islam, founding Chairman of the Department of World Religions and Culture [WRC / DU]. Professor of Sanskrit [DU] Paresh Chandra Mandal, offers a brief introductory note on Brahmanic, Jaina and Buddhist religion in Bengal from Gupta through Sena periods (fourth through twelfth centuries), with emphasis on the Brahmanic. This is followed by a more detailed survey of Buddhism in Bengal by Professor of Philosophy [DU] Niru Kumar Chakma. Professor History [DU] Abdul Momin Chowdhury reflects on the how there came to be so great a population of Muslims in central and eastern Bengal, so far removed from the Middle Eastern heartland of the Muslim tradition. Visiting Professor [DU] Joseph O'Connell [Study of Religion, University of Toronto] explores in some depth the ethical implication of Vaisnava devotion (*bhakti*) and how this contributed to socio-cultural integration of Bengal during the period of independent Sultanate rule. Assistant Professor of History [DU] Iftekhar Iqbal offers a novel ecological perspective on the Faraizi movement of the nineteenth century, which he situates conceptually between what he calls 'puritan reformist' (though others might prefer 'Wahabist') and what he, following Asim Roy (1983), calls 'syncretistic' Muslim traditions in Bengal. Assistant Professor [DU / WRC] Md. Shaikh Farid offers a brief historical sketch of the emergence and growth of the Christian tradition in the wider Bengal region and Adjunct Professor [DU / WRC] Dr. Fr. Tapan De Rozario provides a more detailed account of contemporary Christian groups and their conceptions of mission in Bangladesh proper. Assistant Professor [DU / WRC] Md. Jahangir Alam reports on a little known sector of recent Bangladeshi religious life on which he has done research, the Bahai community. Our final essay on particular religious groups in Bengal is by Assistant Professor Eva Sadia Saad, second Chairperson of the DU Department of World Religions and Culture. She provides an overview of the typical characteristics of the many Adivasi (indigenous or 'tribal' peoples) concentrated largely in the Chittagong Hill Tracts along the eastern border of Bangladesh coupled with an appeal for more study and appreciation of these peoples, whose ways of life and security, as also reported by Professor Chakma in his essay, are endangered. The final essay is a proposal by Dr. Fazlul Alam, former DU Librarian for Planning and Development and prolific author, for compiling a



reference bibliography (in print and online) for research on religion in the Bengal region. An appendix lists topics and speakers in seminars on 'Academic Study of Religion', 'History of Religion in the Bengal Region' and 'Research on Religion in Bengal' and a three-day consultation, 'Prospects for Religious Studies and Dialogue in South Asian Universities' sponsored by the DU Department of World Religions.

### **Summary comments**

Let me finish this Introduction by reiterating the striking disparity between the richness of human religious phenomena in South Asia and the scarcity of institutional bases for academic study of religion in all but a handful of South Asian universities. The factors contributing to this disparity are multiple: Western origin of religious studies, novelty and lack of resources, disparity in cultural mentalities and languages, British colonial precedent, tension between secularists and religio-political communalists. I choose to focus on the latter factor while arguing that an early predominance of secularist influence in independent India and a rapidly established Islamist predominance in West Pakistan drastically inhibited the introduction and development of academic religious studies in both those countries, more severely in the latter. In erstwhile East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, however, neither secularist nor Islamist interests and mentalities have as yet gained overwhelming predominance. Given the rough balance between the two orientations and the relatively tolerant non-ideological character of the bulk of the population, there is in Bangladesh both scope and warrant for introducing world religions scholarship and interfaith / intercultural dialogue as mutually reinforcing means to mitigate what secularist-Islamist tensions do exist there. The Bangladeshi experience may suggest that in religiously plural but still Hindu-majority India, where secularist and Hindu communalist interests are now more evenly balanced than before, there may be increasing scope and warrant for developing world religions scholarship, i.e., comparative academic study of religion, for reasons analogous to those in Muslim-majority Bangladesh.

In any event, successful development of genuine academic study of religion in any department, centre or program for religious studies in a South Asian university will depend upon effective collaboration with scholars in many other disciplines and departments. In the case of the University of Dhaka its Department of World Religions and Culture is exercising the role of catalyst by inviting scholars from across the university to focus their attention on aspects of religion that can be examined from the perspectives of their respective disciplines. The readiness of so many senior professors and promising younger scholars (as recorded in the Appendix) to apply their expertise and experience to the university's multi-disciplinary enquiry into religion is encouraging. In particular the contribution to this shared endeavor by members of the DU

Department of Sociology and the *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology* has been substantial and shows promise of stimulating sociological study and research on religion in Bangladesh and elsewhere in South Asia. May Professor Kazi Nurul Islam and his colleagues in World Religions and Culture and all those in and around the University of Dhaka who are responding to his initiatives succeed in the scholarly and humane undertaking they have embarked upon and may it have the impact for religious peace and harmony for which they so much aspire.

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## Sociological Approach to Research on Religion: Bangladesh Perspectives

K.A.M. Saaduddin\*

**Abstract.** After brief comments on the launching of the Department of World Religions in the University of Dhaka, this paper reviews concisely the contributions of significant sociologists to comparative academic study of religion, in some cases having had foundational impact on how the field or discipline variously called 'history of religion' or 'comparative religion' or 'science of religion' came to define itself in contrast to theology or 'confessional' study of religion. The influence of these and other sociologists has also been significant for developing the subfield of sociology of religion. In general sociologists have been rigorous in seeking objectivity in research, although objectivity may include observing the feelings and intentions of human beings which influence their overt actions. The relations of religion to politics as well as to social norms and morality have attracted much attention from sociologists. In anticipation of more and better sociological research on religion in Bangladesh, four main elements may be considered as factors for study: a) faith and belief system, b) rites and rituals leading to common practice and community, c) ethical norms and morality and finally d) spiritual elements, which cover a wide range of epiphenomena impacting on society.

The bewildering variety of religious beliefs, practices and denominations defies any classification.<sup>1</sup> In fact modern study of religion is so fraught with dangers of complex and noxious controversies that to any student of religious studies it remains unfathomable. In 1857 it was Friederich Max Müller who first advocated a 'scientific study of religion' with a promise of two kinds of enquiry: a) a factual scientific enquiry which essentially meant for him comparative study of religion or history of religion; and b) a study of significance and credibility of the belief systems enjoined in the theologies of different religions with specific philosophic outlooks. (Lewis and Slater 1969, 12) Thus the initial thrust of scientific study of religion had two main divisions, History of Religion and Philosophy of Religion.

The study of World Religions in this university probably started with this basic idea of two streams when it was first approved in 1999 as a Department of Comparative Religion. Interestingly this nomenclature was initially opposed by some members of the Academic Council who are Hindu by religious denomination. Whatever might have been their motivation, it transpired as if they were apprehensive of misinterpretation of their religion. The founder of the department, Professor Kazi Nurul Islam, after a decade of relentless

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<sup>1</sup> The latest edition of *Encyclopaedia Britannica* lists 22 different religious or non-religious denominations. The percentage of population belonging to major religions and atheists are as follows: Christianity 33% (2.1 billion), Islam (21% (1.56 billion), non-religious 16% (1 billion) Hinduism 14% (.96 billion.), Primal Indigenous and African Tradition 6%, Chinese Tradition 6%, Buddhism 6%, Sikhism .36%, Judaism .22%. [http://www.adherents.com/Religions\\_By\\_Adherents.html](http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html)

effort, succeeded in his mission, but different kinds of threats from the fundamentalist groups of the Muslim community compelled him and his associates to shift to the current title, 'World Religions'. It may be pointed out here that for very different reasons Comparative Religion had come under criticism for its lack of objectivity in some countries of the European continent. Thus W.B. Kristensen(1960, 1-13) pointed out that 'Comparative Religion' has come to mean a comparison to determine the value of different religions...the values which are affirmed by the believers themselves.

The question of objective analysis is also not beyond of criticism. Furthermore, the false obsession with objectivity became a matter of concern for scholars in humanities. For example W.C. Smith sees that "the primary value of humane scholarship is threatened" by the so-called methodological rigour. (I shall come back to this aspect later in this presentation.) The question of objectivity particularly in the study of religion is nowhere so clearly delineated as in sociology. The involvement of sociology with religion is not adventitious; rather it was Auguste Comte, the founder of sociology, who entered into protracted polemic against the 'theological stage' of human existence that prompted him to propound his own 'religion of humanity.' Thus he recognized, in a way, the universal need for religions. However, it appears that he did never try to bring this concept in line with his fundamental concept of the new science which he named 'sociology' in 1822.

However natural is the involvement of sociology with religion, it was for a very different reason that the contours of religion came to be closely analyzed by classical sociologists and anthropologists. It was Karl Marx whose sharp observations on religiosity of human beings in society provoked intense and prolonged discussion on the role of religion in society. Nineteenth-century social thinker Karl Marx, who never considered himself a sociologist, conceived of religion as an epiphenomenon which would disappear ultimately with the disappearance of 'false consciousness.' In his opinion it is "the heart of the heartless, the sigh of the oppressed". It works as the opiate for the masses. What Marx wrote about the disappearance of religion from society found support from anthropologist J.G. Frazer (*The Golden Bough*, abridged,1944), who conceived of the intellectual progress of mankind as a passage from the age of magic to the age of religion and then to the age of science.

But, apart from this assumption of epiphenomenon or superstructure, religion in social life has not been so bitterly castigated <sup>2</sup> by any other thinker as by Karl Marx, who felt that the criticism of religion is the beginning of all criticisms. Apart from his belief in materialistic philosophy, his observations on the abuses of religion may be of great importance to religious researchers even in our own country. Thus

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, however, in his correspondence with Engels was more liberal in his view on religion. Unlike Engels, he was not at all critical about Islam. Rather, he expressed his eagerness to know more about 'Mohammadan Religion', which established a society of a different sort.

when we find hardened criminals with records of dozens of murders going to the 'pir' and touching his feet with his forehead asking forgiveness, not from Allah but from the *pir*, so as to escape from the imminent danger of being caught, what can that be other than the "heart of the heartless and the sigh of the oppressed"? And again when the *mazar* (burial place of a Muslim religious figure) cult sometimes manifests the wildest kinds of behavior, which are more intoxicant than a drinking orgy, what can it be other than people's opiate? Orthodox Muslims abhor such practices. Nevertheless, they are so pervasive that to any casual outside observer they may appear to be matters of universal acceptance.<sup>3</sup>

An alternative approach to the study of religion was formulated by Émile Durkheim (French 1912, English tr. 1915) by propounding his theory that all societies make a distinction between sacred and profane. He defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices which unite individuals into one single moral community. Thus in his opinion the function of religious rituals is to affirm the moral superiority of the community over individual members so as to maintain the community's solidarity. In this sense "the god of community is nothing but the community itself." Thus Durkheim's rejection of philosophical pretensions and individual or psychological understandings of religious phenomena has led to a new functionalist account of religion. In effect then religiosity is expressed more in group cohesion than in mystical or spiritual experience. Thus we find almost all over the world confrontational situations rising out of adherence to community leading to communal acrimony or even riots where the participants are not necessarily great votaries of religion. It is common experience in the communal riots of this sub-continent that quite a large portion of participants in killing squads are not so religious in practice.<sup>4</sup>

A significantly different approach was taken by Max Weber and L.T. Hobhouse. Taking a position covertly against the Marxist position, Max Weber sought to analyze in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* how a religious ethic (Calvinist ethic) can influence economic systems by giving rise to an attitude influencing the economy in its totality. In this sense the Marxist concept of 'superstructure' is more powerful than the economic base of the Marxists. In this book as well as in all his other volumes on religion<sup>5</sup>Weber's emphasis was on the normative content with the avowed purpose of finding parallels of

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<sup>3</sup> I have seen myself amid 1950 riots in Barisal town a person who never practiced any religious rites except the two Eid festivals, bragging with blood-stained knife and blood on his face and shirt about murdering three Hindus, probably all innocent day laborers. Of course, recent suicide bombers in the Middle East are imbued with the community feeling along with a deep religious commitment. That also may be interpreted by the functionalists as community feeling reinforced by a deviationist interpretation of original religion.

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<sup>5</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* 1930; *The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* 1958; *Religion of China: Confucianism and Taoism* 1951.

Calvinist or Puritan doctrines. In his opinion the 'spirit of capitalism' is the product of a rational attitude towards life which is conspicuously absent in all other religions.

The Weberian treatment of religion did not result in a specific theory besides his discovery of an ideal type in the rational ethic of Calvinist Protestant religion. In dealing with a wide variety religious sects and sub-sects Weber showed unusual insight in understanding, but in effect these contributions remained in the form of anecdotes and not theories. Thus his treatment of salvation religions, prophesy, the role of intellectuals and literati and class and caste differences are all excellent expositions of the systems, but they do not add up to any theoretical formulations for religions of India, China or Judaism. In effect then his theoretical formulation hinges on the tenuous link of all the world religions in their deviations from ethical rationalization.

The position of L.T. Hobhouse is somewhat different, though his main concern is with ethics and morality particularly of Christianity. In his book *Morals in Evolution: A Study in Comparative Ethics* (1921) he was concerned with the moral codes primarily of Christianity and then of other major religions. Much in the same manner E. Westermarck in his seminal work, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas* (1906-1908), developed the same theme, i.e., the idea of rational ethics developed through an evolutionary process such that there is a close connection between social evolution and moral ideas. The role of religion in this respect was considered basic or fundamental, but with the development and proliferation of civil religion this view is often challenged. This separation between morality and religion is one of the prominent features in the cultural change in the West but not so in the rest of the world.

In the fitness of things, therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between rituals and morality in the sense that with the steady decline of traditional religious belief it has become necessary to find out a new basis and new contents for moral rules. For the sake of objectivity sociologists are compelled to set aside their personal beliefs to treat religion as a social phenomenon. It may be that through this analytical pursuit their religious and moral values could have an enhanced role in formulating a more rational basis of faith/unfaith and of moral qualities. Thus toward the end of the last century several sociologists sought to find new definitions of religion in line with the views of classical thinkers.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gerhard Lenski (1961): "Religion is a system of beliefs about the nature of the forces shaping man's destiny and practices associated therewith, shared by the members of the group." Melford Spiro (1966): [religion as] "an institution consists of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings." Clifford Geertz (1972) : "A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." Ronald L. Johnstone (1975): [religion is] "a system of belief and practices by which a group of people interprets and responds to what they feel is supernatural and sacred." Meredith B. McGuire: (2002) "Religion is both individual and social ... the most intensively subjective mystical experience is given meaning through socially available symbols, ... it is both empirical and objective."

These definitions, however, lay their emphasis on one or another element which appears to them most significant in sociological understanding of religion. But a closer view is taken by some of these to distinguish and enumerate the elements which are fundamental. Thus Johnstone (1975) listed five basic elements: a) group, b) sacred-miracles, c) creed which defines supernatural, d) rituals and e) norms. Meredith B. McGuire (2002) has classified four aspects of religion which subsume the positive aspects of all religions of the world. These are: a) religious belief, b) religious ritual, c) religious experience and d) religious community.

It appears that a more comprehensive view of the elements which may be suitable for religious research in Bangladesh may be formed by taking both positive and normative aspects simultaneously and trying to focus on the changes in each of these elements in different ages and in different geographical areas. The variations can be seen as impacting upon the general moral standard as well as belief system, depending on the nature of the circumstances. Thus we may find four broad classifications which may not be exclusive but deserve separate treatment. Both classical and modern sociologists as well non-sociologists have laid their emphases on one or the other. For example Marx laid greatest emphasis on corrupt rites and rituals as well as on non-belief. Durkheim's emphasis was on collective consciousness which is enhanced and enriched by rituals and beliefs. In this way the differential emphases called for differential treatment which in essence gave rise to their respective theories. We may list four elements as factors: a) faith and belief system, b) rites and rituals leading to common practice and community, c) ethical norms and morality and finally d) spiritual elements, which cover a wide range of epiphenomena impacting on society.

In the absence of time and space we will refrain from a fuller explanation of these elements and their interconnections which may be particularly relevant to research on religion in Bangladesh.<sup>7</sup> But one aspect which is very much relevant for research on religions in Bangladesh calls for close scrutiny, though I am not going into detail here. The ethical question, which remains one of the most controversial themes in actual practice of religion, can be seen as being more and more divorced from rites and rituals. While ethics has become more social, it is increasingly becoming a social virtue rather than an individual virtue. In Bangladesh more and more the doctrinal and ritualistic aspects of religion tend to tone down the significance of individual virtuousness. Thus if a person is not found guilty nor penalized for any offense about which there is no dearth of common knowledge, the person, nevertheless, is held in high social esteem. He thus enjoys all kinds of privileges, which has far-reaching effect on the political behavior of the people. Moral questions are also pertinent in terms of the issues that are significant in the modern world. Issues such as social equality, position of women in society and secularization of

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<sup>7</sup> In a seminar in the Department of Sociology which was a continuation of the seminar in Department of World Religions I presented a sketch of this subject. It requires fuller description and exegesis.

education are ethical questions which are variously addressed by different sections of people. In fact the resolution of such issues is becoming more and more difficult with the increasing reactionism from the orthodox elements. Karl Mannheim in his *Essays on Sociology of Culture* defined the problem in the European context, but it may be significantly applied to our situation. He distinguished between orthodoxy and reactionism. While orthodoxy is based on traditionalism, reactionism is positively opposed to change and has a political connotation. Thus we find a recent upsurge against equal rights of women in Bangladesh that is a gross reaction perpetuated by specific political groups. This deserves more attention from the sociologists and this can be viewed in terms of the four-fold classification of religion.

Finally I must express my apprehensions that such formulations as sketched may appear provocative to scholars in humanities as more and more empirical researchers are trying to set their findings to one or another of the theories formulated by sociologists and social thinkers. But I venture to get into this classificatory systematizing of elements of religion since these categories may genuinely encompass religious faith with its expressions in cumulative tradition. It is interesting to note here that while W. C. Smith's criticism of methodological obsession by social scientists is largely true, the latter does not necessarily constitute an all out crusade against the humanistic, particularly the classical, thinkers. In fact many of the sociologists start the methodology course with a note from French mathematician Henri Poincaré, who once observed that "sociology is the science of most methods and fewest results". (Jha 2002, 22)

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## Historical Overview of Religious Pluralism in Bengal

Kazi Nurul Islam\*

**Abstract.** In the contemporary world, Bangladesh is possibly the only country which has had its name changed three times in less than twenty-five years. Before 1947, the present Bangladesh was known as East Bengal; from 1947 to 1971 it was East Pakistan; and in 1971 it emerged as Bangladesh. The purpose of the present paper is to give a brief historical overview of religious pluralism in the wider Bengal region of which Bangladesh comprises the larger part and to relate this historical background to the present condition of religion-based politics in Bangladesh. Despite major changes of ruling elites and occasional eruptions of violence and repression of competing religio-cultural traditions in the past, the underlying tendency of the people and their rulers in the Bengal region has been to tolerate and even support religio-cultural and social pluralism. The present survey is not intended as an in-depth analysis of the complex factors that might explain how through two millennia the people and rulers in the Bengal region have coped with marked diversity among elite 'Great Traditions' and countless 'Little Traditions' and ethnic minorities. It aims rather to present in broad terms the prevailing current of tolerant pluralism against which certain ideologically driven religio-political interests are attempting, futilely it would seem, to establish a repressive monolithic conception of an Islamic state in Bangladesh.

To understand religious pluralism in Bangladesh we need to know the historical background of the country. Before the 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E., Bengal was a land of many kings and their small kingdoms. In the beginning of that century, Buddhist rulers established the Pala dynasty and gave a proper shape to Bengal, and ruled the country for about four hundred years. The rulers were people of the land and they were quite respectful towards people of other faiths. Hindus, Buddhists and the indigenous peoples lived in such a harmonious way for many centuries that the period is known in the history of Bengal as a golden age of inter-religious harmony. Then a South Indian king conquered Bengal and established the Sena Dynasty. The Sena kings suppressed and oppressed the Buddhists. When Iqtiak Uddin Muhammad Bakhtiar Kjlji, a Muslim warrior of Turkish origin, conquered Bengal in the beginning of the thirteenth century, the Buddhists in this country felt a sign of relief. Some historians are of the opinion that when the Muslim rulers came to Bengal, the Buddhists not only welcomed them, but felt as if the Muslims were sent by the gods and goddesses to save them.

From 1203 C.E. to 1757 C.E. the Muslims ruled Bengal. During this period the rulers in Bengal generally were quite respectful towards the people of other faiths. But after the British had conquered Bengal, they adopted the 'divide and rule' policy and Hindu-Muslim conflict appeared in this land. This Hindu-Muslim conflict ultimately prompted Muhamad Ali Jinnah, the founder of Pakistan, to come forward with the 'Two-Nation Theory', which holds that though Hindus and <sup>1</sup>Muslims live in the same land, they are different nations – their religion is different and their

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cultural heritage is different. On the basis of this 'Two-Nation Theory' Jinnah claimed that the Muslims in India deserved a separate homeland. It may be mentioned here that this same Jinnah was a great advocate of the unity of these two communities and he was called the "Ambassador of Hindu-Muslim Unity" by some very prominent Hindu leaders of that time. But the British rulers did not sincerely want the unity of the Hindus and the Muslims and their policy created certain situations in which Jinnah, a believer in secular philosophy of life, was virtually compelled to demand a separate state for the Muslims of India.

Jinnah's 'Two-Nation Theory' became popular among the Muslims living in the western part of India and in some of the eastern part of the country. In 1947, when India won independence, the land was divided into two: India and Pakistan. Pakistan had two wings: East Pakistan and West Pakistan. At the partition of India, East Bengal became East Pakistan. It may be mentioned here that Pakistan is the only country in the world which was established in the name of religion: Islam. However, except religion, there was nothing common between the Muslims of East Pakistan and West Pakistan. From the very beginning, trouble started between the two wings. Within one decade, East Pakistan virtually turned into a colony of West Pakistan. This continued for one more decade and a half.

A great leader of East Pakistan named Sheik Mujibur Rahman led the country to independence in 1971. After a liberation war of nine months with the sacrifice of possibly three million lives, Bangladesh emerged as an independent and sovereign state. While Pakistan is an Islamic Republic, Bangladesh became not only a People's Republic but also a secular state. Within ten months of liberation the new government presented the nation a new constitution unanimously approved by the Parliament. Secularism was one of the four basic principles of the Constitution. The Constitution also prohibited any kind of politics in the name of religion. It may be mentioned here that the term 'secularism' was not understood and interpreted in the sense it is understood in the West. By 'secularism' the leaders of Bangladesh meant 'equal opportunity for the people of all faith.'

Bangladesh is a country of 160 million people. Of them about 88% are Muslims, 10% Hindus and the rest are Buddhists, Christians, Bahais and animists. To give equal rights to different faiths the government made it compulsory that all the national programs conducted within the country and outside the country should start with recitations from the Quran, the Gita, the Tripitaka and the Bible. Possibly, nowhere in the world has such a tradition existed. The government declared one of the songs of a poet-philosopher of Bengal, Rabindranath Tagore, to be the national anthem of Bangladesh. It may be noted here that another song of this great poet is the national anthem of

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India. Though Tagore was not a Muslim, the government of a Muslim-dominated country showed great respect to this great man by making his song their national anthem and by declaring him one of their national poets.

Now let me review the four major religious traditions of Bangladesh and their attitudes towards the people of other faiths in the country. I hope this will help you to understand religious pluralism in Bangladesh better. Hindu religious practices were followed by the people of this land from time immemorial. Vedic Hinduism developed slowly in Bengal and merged with folk religions and local customs. The Hindu religious rites and practices of Bangladesh are similar to those of the Hindus of West Bengal, but in many respects are different from the Hindus of the rest of the subcontinent. For centuries, the Hindus of this land have been influenced by the Vaishnava philosophy of Sri Chaitanya. The basic teaching of his philosophy is selfless love for God and His creation. Later on the Hindus of Bangladesh were tremendously influenced by the teachings of some great saints and philosophers of Bengal. Among them the names of Raja Rammohan Roy, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Swami Vivekananda are worth mentioning. The Hindus and the Muslims of Bangladesh have been much influenced by some contemporary Hindu saints and philosophers like Sri Anukul Chandra, Swami Swarupananda, Dr. Govinda Chandra Dev and Dr. Mahanambata Brahmachari.

Raja Ramamohan Roy, who is called the father of modern India, was immensely influenced by the teachings of Islam. As a result, he became an ardent believer of monotheism and a great advocate of Hindu-Muslim unity. He vehemently opposed traditional Hinduism and established the Brahmo Samaj, which means a society of the followers of the Supreme Being. Members of this society do not believe in any kind of discrimination among castes and creeds. Some of the teachings of the Brahmo Samaj are quite similar to the teachings of Islam.

A great advocate of the unity of mankind, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, was born in a Hindu Brahmin family. At certain stages of his endeavour to know God, he tried to practice Islam and Christianity like genuine members of these traditions. After this spiritual journey, he was convinced that all religions have the same goal, but only their paths are different. The essence of Ramakrishna's philosophy is: do not care for doctrines, do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches, or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each (person), which is spirituality. Learn that first, acquire that, and criticize no one, for all doctrines and creeds have some good in them. Saint-philosopher of Bengal, Swami Vivekananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, propagated a philosophy that service to any living being means service to God. He did not believe in any kind of discrimination based on caste and creed. He believed in inter-religious harmony, particularly harmony among the people of the two major faiths of the sub-

continent. In a letter to one of his friends, he stated that the future of a harmonious India depends on the Upanisadic brain and the Quranic heart.

Among recent Hindu thinkers of Bangladesh Dr. Govinda Chandra Dev devoted his entire life for unity among people of different faiths. Though a confirmed bachelor, Dr. Dev adopted a Muslim girl and a Hindu boy and brought them up under the same roof, but provided each of them with their respective modes of religious education. When they were highly qualified adults, they were married, each according to their own religious traditions. I am fortunate that Dr. Dev was my professor at Dhaka University. In his classes, when he was asked about his religion, he used to say that he was neither a Hindu nor a Muslim but a man and his religion was to serve humanity.

Dr. Mahanambata Brahmachari, a saint-philosopher of Bangladesh who received his Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of Chicago in 1933, was Secretary General of the Fellowship of Faiths for more than a decade and spent the rest of his life in Bangladesh for the promotion of human values and interfaith understanding. He used to tell everybody that a dog is a dog and dies also as a dog, but a dog can neither acquire dogness nor cease to be a dog. So is the case with any other animal. But a human is unique. A human baby is born with all the potentiality of a human being, but has to turn that potentiality into actuality. That is, she or he has to acquire the qualities of a true human being and maintain them or risk becoming inhuman. Through this and many similar examples and stories, he used to urge millions of his followers belonging to different religious traditions to realize that their primary goal of life should be to acquire the qualities of a true human being, no matter whether they are Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists or Christians. It may be mentioned here that when Dr. Brahmachari was a small boy he was miraculously saved from a sure death by a Muslim neighbour. He never forgot that and till his death in 1998 at the age of ninety-seven he used to tell everybody that a Hindu father was responsible for his birth and a Muslim father for saving his life and that, therefore he must work for the unity of both communities.

Now about Buddhism in Bangladesh. The Bengal region was the last stronghold of Indian Buddhism, where it prevailed through the eleventh century. In modern India, renewal of Buddhism usually is attributed to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who led the mass conversion of millions of low caste Hindus to Buddhism beginning in 1956. However, back in 1887, the Chittagong Buddhist Association had been founded. This was the first Buddhism society in the subcontinent in modern times. I have reason to feel proud of this since Chittagong is in Bangladesh. I have already mentioned that on the basis of Jinnah's 'Two-Nation Theory', Pakistan came into being in 1947. The areas of Muslim majority in western India and in part of eastern India formed Pakistan. It is quite interesting to note that the king of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, an area then with more

than 90% Buddhist population, opted for Pakistan and so this area became a part of East Pakistan and subsequently of Bangladesh. It is also interesting to note that until 1956 the total number of the Buddhists living in Bangladesh was more than the Buddhists living in the rest of the subcontinent.

Bangladesh can feel proud of many great Buddhists this region has nurtured. One especially notable is Atisha Dipankara. He played a vital role in making Buddhism popular in Tibet and in promoting harmony among people of different faiths. To show respect to this great son of the soil a university was established in his name in Dhaka city in the year 2002. This is possibly the only university throughout the subcontinent which has been named after a Buddhist scholar. Among recent Buddhist scholars Venerable Vishuddhananda Mahathero deserves to be mentioned. A Buddhist philosopher of Bangladesh, Venerable Mahathero dedicated seventy years of his life to promoting understanding among people of different faiths in Bangladesh. He is no more in this world, but I am sure he is still alive in the hearts of those who knew him as a model of inter-religious harmony.

Now about Islam, which came to Bangladesh comparatively late. Though Arab Muslim traders came to coastal Bengal within a hundred years of the advent of Islam, proselytizing Muslim Sufi-saints came only from the eleventh century. Influenced by the teachings and ideals of the Sufi-saints, huge numbers of Hindus and Buddhists and other indigenous people embraced Islam. Islam entered here in full force, however, with the Turkish conquest towards the beginning of the thirteenth century. Islam, with its social justice and principles of equality and fraternity, came to downtrodden people as a saviour at a time when the society was steeped in inequality and caste oppression. It may be mentioned here that many of the Muslim converts retained their inherited customs and social behaviour, as is evident even today. Thus, while the social and religious life of the Muslims profoundly influenced Hinduism, conversely some practices of the Hindus entered into the life of the Muslims.

I have already mentioned that until British rule in Bengal, Hindus and Muslims were living harmoniously. Even when the British Government, through its 'divide and rule' policy, created misunderstanding among these two communities, there were many Muslim scholars and others who worked for the unity of the people of different faiths. The names of Lalan Shah, Hassan Raja, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Kazi Abdul Wadud, Abul Hussain, Abul Fazal, Muhammad Shahidullah and Kazi Motahar Hussain are prominent among them. Several were professors in Dhaka University. Through their writings over many decades, they were successful in promoting free thinking and making people accommodating and respectful towards persons of other faiths. In their personal lives they practiced inter-religious harmony.

Lalan Shah was a folk-singer. Throughout a life of more than ninety years he was active composing and singing songs to remove misunderstanding among people of different faiths. To fulfill his mission he became so intimate with both Hindus and Muslims that he did not even care for his own identity as a Muslim. He is equally loved by the Muslims and the Hindus throughout the country. Kazi Nazrul Islam's contribution in this respect is unique. He wrote quite a good number of poems and composed hundreds of songs against social discrimination and in favour of inter-religious harmony. These have inspired millions of people of Bangladesh and West Bengal to stop discriminating against others in the name of caste, class and creed. As these are ever inspiring, one can confidently assert that Nazrul's writings will inspire generation after generation, as is equally true of the songs of Lalan Shah. It may be mentioned here that Nazrul's wife was a Hindu and that he was so much devoted to Hindu-Muslim amity that he named his first son Krishna Muhammad, Krishna being a Hindu god and Muhammad a prophet of Islam. Nazrul's uniqueness is evident from the fact that he composed hundreds of songs in appreciation of Prophet Muhammad and the teachings of Islam and likewise composed an equal number of songs praising the gods and goddesses of Hinduism. This great soul is a national poet of Bangladesh.

Now let me say a few words about Christianity, which came to Bengal first in the sixteenth century, as Portuguese Christian men married Bengali women. In Bangladesh converted Christians are mostly from low caste Hindus and backward tribal peoples. Colonial missionaries' attitude towards Hinduism and Islam was highly critical and confrontational for most of the nineteenth century. This naturally caused a considerable amount of resentment from the Bengal intelligentsia. However, this negative attitude did not continue for long. The missionaries changed their policy and started devoting their time and money for social service, which helped them change the situation. It may be mentioned here that educational work represents their main contribution to the development of modern West Bengal and present-day Bangladesh. People belonging to this faith are highly respected for their social work. They are so much respected that people in present-day Bangladesh feel proud of being able to send their children to the Christian missionary schools and colleges. In Bangladesh there are many organizations for the promotion of interfaith understanding. The first organizations of this kind were established by the members of the Catholic Church and these have their branches throughout the country. The main purpose of these organizations is not to convert people into being Christians but to convert them to being better human beings. That is one of the reasons why the Christians are highly respected in Bangladesh.

Now let me address certain changes in the government and some amendments to the

Constitution and their impact on the different religions of Bangladesh. The first President of Bangladesh presented the nation a Constitution where special emphasis was given to 'secularism'. He was assassinated in 1975 and soon after General Zia Rahman came to power with the help of the military. To consolidate his power General Zia took a number of political steps that helped return reactionary Muslims to the political arena. Through a martial law order he first dropped 'secularism' from the Constitution in 1976. In 1977 another article of the Constitution was amended to legitimize religion-based politics in the country. In the same year, a new clause, namely, 'Islamic solidarity' was added to the Constitution. This allowed cultivating fraternal relations among Muslim countries. In principle there was nothing wrong with this, but eventually it opened the flood-gates for using religion for political purposes. Many Islamic NGOs sprang up in the wake of politicizing religion. These Islamic NGOs have served as instruments for political Islam. Millions of dollars have been pumped into the country to cater to the politically motivated mullahs whose political aspiration is to turn Bangladesh into an Islamic Republic.

In 1982, General Ershad took over power as a military ruler. He went one step further than General Zia and used Islam to counter the political opposition to his dictatorial rule. He drove the last nail into the coffin of secular ideals at the state level. By his dictatorial power he got the Constitution amended in 1988 to declare Islam as the state religion of Bangladesh. This virtually degraded the members of the minority religious communities to second class-citizens. In 2001 a nationalistic political party with the support of some Islamist political parties came to power. After that the religio-political scenario changed beyond imagination.

From October 2001 to October 2006, fanatic Muslims became a threat not only to the non-Muslim minority but also to the smaller sects among the Muslims. For example, some fanatic Muslims, evidently with support and guidance of a revolutionary Islamist party named Jamaat-e-Islami, a partner in the coalition government, killed one imam of a mosque and made several attempts to demolish all the mosques belonging to the relatively small Ahmadiyya sect in Bangladesh. They tried to force the government to declare the Ahmadiyya Muslim community as non-Muslim. This was absolutely unfortunate. These fanatics wanted to replace all the existing laws of the country by Islamic Sharia laws. In August 2005 fanatic terrorists exploded about five hundred bombs throughout the country simultaneously to demonstrate their strength. This was a great challenge to the government, which was forced by pressure from civil society and the international community to take action against them. It is also worth mentioning that the most powerful of the Islamist political parties, namely, the Jamaat-e-Islami, disowned these terrorists. Many of the terrorists implicated in the five hundred bomb blasts were arrested and death sentences of their six top leaders were carried out.



In Bangladesh there is a unique provision in the Constitution. After the five-year term of an elected government is over, the Prime Minister resigns and the President appoints a ten-member Advisory Board for a brief period to oversee a national election. The Chief Advisor of the Board becomes the executive head of a neutral caretaker government. After the election is held, the caretaker government hands over power to the newly elected Prime Minister. At the time of this writing Bangladesh is being run by a caretaker government. Fortunately all the members of the Advisory Board are against any kind of fanaticism.<sup>2</sup>

I am quite hopeful that the people of Bangladesh will be able to permanently resist the emergence of religious fanaticism and religion-based politics. This is not merely wishful thinking. I have reasons for my confidence in the people of Bangladesh. As mentioned at the beginning of this account, Bangladesh may be the only country in the world where people have given their lives for the prestige of their mother tongue. Bangladesh may be the only country in the world where three million people sacrificed their lives for the independence of their motherland and that, too, within a span of nine months. Bangladesh is the only country in the world where the birthdays of Sri Krishna, Gautama Buddha, Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammad are celebrated with equal importance and with equal respect by the government and also at the private level. These days are also celebrated as national holidays. Again, Bangladesh is the only country in the world where during the major religious festivals of all faiths adhered to by large sectors of the population public schools and colleges remain closed as a symbol of respect to the people belonging to the religious traditions concerned. Bangladesh may also be distinguished for special and substantial annual budget provisions for the development of minority religious traditions. For example, the Hindus, Buddhists and Christians are provided with special financial support for the development of temples and churches – and for celebrating religious festivals in a befitting manner.

Because of all these factors, I am quite convinced that religious fanaticism, intolerance and religion-based politics cannot last long in a country where people have been accustomed to inter-religious harmony for centuries. Bangladesh cannot be a permanent safe haven for any form of religious fanaticism. Rather, because of her unique cultural heritage, Bangladesh is poised to be a lasting abode of religious pluralism and inter-religious harmony.

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<sup>2</sup> Editor's note: In December 2008 a general election returned to power with more than a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly the Awami League, of which Sheikh Hasina Wazed, daughter of former Prime Minister and President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, is the leader and has become Prime Minister.

## Aryan Religious Traditions in Bengal from Gupta through Sena Periods: An Introductory Note

**Paresh Chandra Mandal\***

**Abstract.** Due to scant historical evidence the extent and character of the early Aryan socio-cultural presence in Bengal, scholars are not sure about the details of religions that prevailed there prior to the Gupta period. There are, however, numerous evidences of diverse elite Aryan religious cults—Brahmanic, Buddhist and Jaina—in Bengal from the Gupta period onward. During the administration of the Palas, which extended about four hundred years (750 to 1155 A.D.), multiple definite religious systems were established in Bengal. The Senas in the latter twelfth century A.D., however, seem to have patronized Brahmanic religion exclusively.

### Religious Pluralism from Gupta through Pala Periods in Bengal

Vaishnavism, as a part of Sanatana Dharma, was in practice in Bengal. The Krishna-legend seems to have formed an essential element of Vaishnavism in Bengal as early, at least, as the sixth or seventh century A.D. In this regard sculptures of Paharpur illustrate various incidents from the life of Krishna such as uprooting the twin *arjuna* trees and killing the demon Keshin. Incidents of the early life of Krishna at Gokula are also depicted. The Krishna-legend was highly popular and the Krishna cult had a special hold in Bengal by the seventh century A.D. From the eighth century onwards development of Vaishnavism in Bengal is proved by a large number of epigraphic records. Vaishnavism in Bengal probably made a contribution to the systemization of the theory of *avatara*, or divine descent. Bengal Vaishnavism also included the Radha-Krishna cult.

### Saivism

Saivism, represented in the inscriptions of the Guptas, continued to be prevalent in the Pala period. The Pala and Sena inscriptions both contain references to the worship of Siva. For instance, there is mention of the installation of a four-faced image of Mahadeva during the reign of Dharma Pala. Probably Saktism had some sort of relation with Saivism during the period of Pala rulers in Bengal.

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### **Other Brahmanic Sects**

Brahmanism in Bengal would remain incomplete without reference to some gods and goddesses whose sculptural representations are found in the region. The images of gods such as Kartikeya, Ganesa, Indra, Agni, Kuvera, Brihaspati etc. were found in Bengal. According to *Rajatarangini* there was a temple of Kartikeya at Pundravardhana in the eighth century A.D., which presupposes his worship there in early time. Two other gods, Surya and his son Revanta, however, enjoyed special favour in ancient Bengal. The number of images of this sun god dating from the Pala period is very large.

The Pala emperors were mostly Buddhists by faith, but in practices they were not hostile to other forms of religion especially to Hindu religion. In the Pala period the Vedic culture of the Sanatana Dharma gathered strength in Bengal. Inscriptions of the Pala period contain abundant references to grants made to Brahmans versed in the study of Vedas, Vedangas, Mimamsa and Vyakarana. The author of *Haricharita* refers to grants made by Dharmapala to Brahmans adept in Vedic studies. These evidences, as a sample, show the existence of Brahmanical religion in Bengal.

### **Buddhism**

The Pala Emperors were the followers of Buddhism. They call themselves *paramasaugatas* and the Buddha is regularly invoked at the beginning of their official records. During the four centuries of Pala rule, Bengal and Bihar remained strongholds of Buddhism. However, we are not going into Buddhism in details as this is covered by Professor Chakma in his essay.

### **Jainism**

Jainism, like Buddhism, originated in Eastern India. Mahavira, one of the great tirthankars, or gurus, in the Jaina tradition, visited western Bengal. There are frequent references to Vanga in the Jaina canon. The earlier name of Jainas was Nirgranthas. It was by this name that the Jaina community was known till the Gupta period. It appears from the statement of the Chinese traveler monk Hiuen Tsang that the Nirgranthas formed a prominent religious sect in northern, southern and eastern Bengal in the seventh century A.D. Referring to them as heretics, the pilgrim observed that the Digambara Nirgranthas were very numerous in Pundravardhana and Samatata, northern and southern Bengal respectively. However, Jainism seems to have almost disappeared from Bengal in a subsequent period.

### **Brahmanic dominance in the Sena period**

After the Palas, the Senas came to rule Bengal. The Sena kings were the followers of Brahmanic Hinduism. Under their patronage the Hindu religion flourished to a great extent. Hindu culture in various forms was given impetus. Sanskrit language, which had been given the status of religious language in Hindu religion, was cultivated. By the patronage of the Sena kings Sanskrit language and literature entered into a new era of development. The scholars of the country call it a 'golden age' in the history of Sanskrit language. Interestingly most of the Sena kings were highly intellectually oriented and some cultivated the literature themselves. Obviously Sanskrit scholars were tremendously patronized at the court.

Lakshmana Sena, the last Sena king to rule over most of Bengal, had five great poets in his court, among them Govardhana, Sharana and Jayadeva. Of the five court poets Jayadeva was the author of a famous poem *Gita-govinda*. Some critics put this poem into the class of erotic religious lyrics. The *Gita-govinda* has been enjoying the status of a religious poem among the Vaishnavas of Bengal. The *Gita-govinda* is actually sung in many of the temples of Vishnu by the temple girls in accompaniment with dancing. The poem fills the minds of the devotees of Hari (God) with the splendour of the divine amour between Radha and Krishna. To a devout Vaishnava it is not so much an expression of the longing of the human soul symbolized in Radha and God symbolised in Krishna, as it is the delineation of the transcendental amour of Radha and Krishna into which the devotee enters through religious sympathy and devotion.

Without going into details, we can say that the Sena kings gave much protection and encouragement for the cultivation of Hindu religion and Sanskrit literature. Hindu religion had been nourished by the Pala kings but it was given much more impetus by the Sena kings in Bengal.

## Buddhism in Bengal: A Brief Survey

Niru Kumar Chakma\*

**Abstract.** The history of Indian Buddhism may be understood in relation to the thriving and decaying of the state of Buddhism in Bengal. Bengal holds a unique place in the history of Indian Buddhism for several reasons. First, it was in Bengal that Buddhism survived and flourished longest, until the twelfth century A.D., well after its disappearance from other parts of India. Second, Bengal is said to be the home of what is called a degenerate and corrupt form of Buddhism known as Tantric Buddhism that developed during the Pala period (ninth to twelfth century). This assertion raises some pertinent questions that need to be considered with caution and care. Third, Buddhism was eventually wiped out from Bengal for several reasons, the most important ones being the withdrawal of royal support, the revival of Brahmanism and the Turkish Muslim invasion. Fourth, Buddhism in much later times made a resurgence in the eastern part of Bengal in what is now independent Bangladesh. The small minority of Buddhists inhabiting this area, with roots going back to before the arrival of the Mughals and the British, makes an interesting subject for further study and research.

In the time of Gautama Buddha in the sixth century B.C., Bengal was not mentioned as one of the sixteen regions, *mahajanapadas*, that constituted the political structure of ancient India. The entire area that is known now as Bengal was divided into several small kingdoms such as Samatata, Harikhela, Anga and Banga in the east, Tamralipti and Radha in the west, and Pundra and Barendra in the north. The Vedic religion that was prevailing in India and predominant in that period could not be termed an organized religion as such – it was rather a cluster of complex rites and rituals associated with nature worship and animal sacrifice. The rise of Buddhism challenging the justification of the Vedic rites and rituals heralded the beginning of the history of definite and systematic religious traditions in India as a whole and so in Bengal.

For lack of historical evidence it is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of the political state and its relation to religion in India before the Magadhan empire came into being in the sixth century B.C. The rise of the Magadhan empire not only constituted the emergence of a strong monarchical state in ancient India; it also marked the beginning of a definite history of relations between the state and religion. It is in relation to the policies of state power regarding different religious traditions that the history of Indian Buddhism and so of the Buddhism of Bengal has to be seen. The thriving of Buddhism throughout India and especially in Bengal was due largely to royal patronage at different times by the reigning monarchs, the most notable ones being Bimbisara and Ajatasatru of Magadha, Ashoka of the Maurya dynasty, Kanishka of the Kushanas, Harsavardhana of Thaneshwar and in Bengal the Palas and Chandras as late as the twelfth century A.D. This, however, is not to say that Buddhism received unflinching support and

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sympathy from all Indian rulers. Some of them, notably Pushyamitra of the Sunga dynasty, Sasanka of Gauda and the Senas, were very hostile to its progress. The latter were instrumental in the eventual collapse of Buddhism in Bengal, its last stronghold in India.

It is difficult to say if Buddhism first made its appearance in Bengal during Magadhan rule, although it may be suggested that since Bengal was adjacent to Magadha (modern Bihar), perhaps Buddhism was not unknown to the people of western and northern Bengal bordering on Magadha. That Buddhism was firmly established in Bengal during Mauryan rule in the third century B.C. is evident from epigraphic and other sources such as a Mauryan inscription in Brahmi characters found at Mahasthana in the district of Bogra (northcentral Bengal) and a large number of Mauryan coins as well as other artifacts. In his travel record the Chinese traveler, I-tsing is said to have seen Ashoka's *stupas* (monuments enclosing relics) in several places such as Tamralipti (Tamluk), Karnasuvarna (Burdwan and Murshidabad) in western Bengal, Pundravardhana in northern Bengal and Samatata in eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh).

Not long after Ashoka's death, the Mauryan empire came to an end when its last emperor, Brihadratha, was killed by his commander-in-chief, Pushyamitra. This political upheaval was a severe setback for Buddhism as not only did it lose all Mauryan support and sympathy, but also it encountered the hostility of the regime of Pushyamitra, the founder of the Sunga dynasty. A foremost patron of Brahmanism, Pushyamitra is said to have revived the Brahmanic ritual of animal sacrifice forbidden during Ashokan rule. Pushyamitra is described in *Divyavadana* and by Tibetan historian Taranatha as a cruel persecutor of Buddhism. (Hazra, 1984) Some Indian scholars, notably, R. C. Majumdar (1963/1943), Dr. R. S. Tripathy and H.C. Chaudhury, however, hold different views and argue that the Sunga kings were in fact quite tolerant of Buddhism. (Hazra 1984 and B.N. Chaudhury 1969) They cite as evidence the erection of the gateways at Bharut and Sanchi during the Sunga period. That Sanchi, Bodh-Gaya and Saranath remained important Buddhist centers during the Sunga period shows that Buddhism was still in a robust state even under Sunga rule. The discovery of terracotta figurines at Mahasthangarh, two votive inscriptions recording the gifts of two inhabitants of Pundravardhana (both sites in northern Bengal) and a terracotta tablet found at Tamralipti (in southwestern Bengal) and exhibited at the Ashutosh Museum of Calcutta University all attest that Buddhism was surviving in Bengal during the Sunga period in the second century B.C.

If Buddhism was persisting despite encountering some hostility from the Sunga kings in Magadha and northern Bengal, it was, on the other hand, positively thriving in north-western India at the hands of the Indo-Greek kings. Kushana rule gave Buddhism a new impetus and helped it flourish gloriously again during the reign of Kanishka. The greatest Buddhist emperor to rule India since Ashoka, Kanishka raised Buddhism to the status of state religion and undertook various measures to promote its cause. These measures included building monasteries, erecting *stupas* and *caityas* (votive monuments), rock-edicts

and pillar-edicts, and, like Ashoka, sending missions abroad. It is, however, difficult to ascertain if Bengal was a part of Kanishka's vast empire. The fact that Kushana coins were discovered in many places of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa cannot be taken as evidence that Bengal as a whole or any part of it was under Kushana rule for the simple reason, according to R. C. Majumdar (1963/1943), that coins cross the frontiers of their origin and go far beyond by way of trade and travel.

The religious history of India took a new turn with the rise of the Gupta empire in the fourth century A.D. The period extending about a century between the downfall of the Kushana rule and the rise of the Guptas, however, has been termed "one of the darkest in the whole range of Indian history." Virtually nothing is known about the state of Buddhism during this period. With Gupta rule came political integration and restoration of political unity to much of India and such remarkable progress in every field of Indian culture that it has been called the golden age of Indian civilization. What is especially significant about Gupta rule in Bengal is that while Brahmanic Vaisnava and Saiva theisms were predominant, Buddhism was still flourishing in Bengal and other parts of India. The reason is that Gupta rulers, while patronizing Brahmanism, at the same time showed marked tolerance and even sympathy towards Buddhism. To the Guptas Buddhism was never treated as a religious rival. Rather it was granted a favoured position in that the Buddha was accepted as an *avatar* of Vishnu by the middle of the sixth century A.D.

The story of Buddhism in the post-Gupta period, however, is often one of repression and persecution very similar to what Buddhism had encountered at the hands of Pushyamitra in the second century B.C. In the midst of the political disintegration that befell India after the downfall of the Gupta empire, several political powers emerged, of which the Pushyabhutis of Thaneswar in north India and two independent kingdoms, Gauda and Banga, in Bengal are worth special mention as far as Buddhism is concerned. Buddhism encountered severe hostility and repression from Sasanka of Gauda, who also captured Banga later. The atrocities that Sasanka carried out against Buddhism, as Hiuen Tsang's account tells us, included the king's standing order to exterminate the Buddhist monks, cutting down the holy Bodhi-tree at Gaya, removing the Buddha image there and replacing it with the image of Siva.

By contrast Harsavardhana of Thaneswar, like Ashoka and Kanishka, was a great patron of Buddhism. Unlike Sasanka's acts of cruelty against Buddhists and their religion, Harsavardhana's rule was one of rejuvenating and helping Buddhism to emerge as a cultural force of India and so of Bengal. Originally a worshiper of his two family gods, Siva and Surya (the sun), Harsavardhana, like Ashoka and Kanishka, became a devout Buddhist. The contributions of Harsavardhana as a Buddhist emperor to the promotion of Buddhism included building monasteries at Buddhist sacred places, erecting a thousand *stupas* on the banks of the Ganges and banning the slaying of animals. His activities also included benevolent works such as building hospitals and rest houses, construction of highways, planting trees

and digging tanks and wells and, most importantly, convening quinquennial Buddhist convocations. Harsavardhana is believed to have established his supremacy over Gauda (northwestern Bengal) after defeating Sasanka or after Sasanka's death. But there is no evidence that Harsavardhana ever ruled Banga or Samatata, further to the east and south. It is known from Hiuen Tsang that Samatata was ruled by a Brahman dynasty in the first half of the seventh century. This Brahmanic dynasty is believed to have been overthrown by the Khadga dynasty (ca. 625/650 to ca. 700/725 A.D.), the first Buddhist dynasty to rule an independent Bengal.

The next remarkable event in the history of Indian Buddhism and so in the history of Buddhism in Bengal was the rise of the Pala dynasty that ruled Bengal from the middle of the eighth to the later half of the twelfth century A.D. The Pala rule in Bengal is especially significant for three reasons. First, prior to Pala rule, Bengal was in a state of what is called *matsya-nyaya* meaning lawlessness, chaos and anarchy in which everyone was the prey of his neighbour. Gopala 1st, the founder of Pala dynasty, and succeeding Pala rulers brought an end to this miserable state of affairs and restored political integration and social unity in Bengal. Second, the Palas were the last Buddhist dynasty to rule Bengal and the only dynasty in India to reign for a period of four hundred years. Third, Pala rule is held to be responsible for the rise of Tantric Buddhism. The Pala era may well be regarded as the golden age of Buddhism in Bengal for the wide range of development and advancement of Buddhism during this period. The discovery of copper-plates and inscriptions stand as evidence that Buddhism received lavish patronage from the Pala kings. Epigraphic, archeological and other evidences also testify to the thriving state of Buddhism under Pala rule.

Amongst other activities that the Palas undertook in promoting the cause of Buddhism were establishment of religious schools, building the great Odantapuri Vihar, the famous Vikramsila Vihar on the top of a hill on the bank of the Ganges, Somapura Vihar at Paharpur of Rajshahi district in northern Bengal, facilitating Buddhist philosophy taught at the religious schools and patronizing Buddhist writers and teachers. The Vikramsila Vihar, which was transformed into a famous international centre of learning, attracted Tibetan scholars who composed numerous books in Sanskrit and translated them into Tibetan. Among a good number of monasteries besides Odantapuri, Vikramsila and Somapura that were built during the Pala rule were Jagaddala, Troikutaka, Pandita, Devikota, Pattikeraka, Sannagara, Phullahari and Vikrampuri. Pala rule came to an end with the death of its last king, Rampala, and with it Buddhism lost royal patronage for good.

Meanwhile, in the second half of the tenth century A.D., two small Buddhist dynasties, namely Deva and Chandra, are known to have ruled some parts of Bengal. Two kings of the Deva dynasty, named Kantideva and Layahachandra, are believed to have ruled a small independent kingdom known as Harikhela, and Trailokyachandra and his sons, Srichandra and Govindachandra, established their



supremacy in the eastern part of Bengal. The Salvan Vihar, the Buddha *stupa* and inscriptions found near the Mainamati hills in the district of Comilla testify to the fact that Buddhism was in a flourishing state under the rule of the Chandra kings. The famous Tibetan scholar, Atish Dipankar, hailing from a place called Vikrampur near Dhaka, is believed to belong to this Chandra dynasty.

As regards the development of Tantric Buddhism in Bengal during the Pala period, there are two lines of thought. Charles Eliot brands Tantric Buddhism as degenerate, decadent and corrupt, and attributes it to the Pala period. Trevor Ling disagrees, saying that the Buddhism of the Pala period was no different from the classical pattern of Buddhism that was prevailing from the time of Ashoka to the Pala period. Quoting the views of Barrie Morrison, Suniti Kumar Chatterjee and Taranatha, Ling (1973) opines that the Pala period was an era of progress in culture, religion, education, literature, art and sculpture. The Pala kings played a pioneering role in promoting Bengali language and literature. The earliest specimens of Bengali literature, known as *Carya-padas*, are a Tantric work of twenty-two Buddhist Tantric Acharyas known as Siddhas. (Rana 1981; Sen 1995; Dey 1960; Rahman 1998) The number of Siddhacharyas is generally put at eighty-four, the principal ones being Naropada, Tilopada, Luipada, Kahnupada, Saraha, Nagarjuna, Kukkuri, Dambi and Indrabhuti.

As regards the origin of Tantricism, there are the following conflicting views as cited in Joshi (1977) and Vasu (1986/1911). H. P. Sastri is of the opinion that "Tantra came from outside India. Most probably it came with the magi priests of Scythians." P.C. Bagchi finds the possible existence of foreign elements in Tantricism. Alex Wayman thinks that there are Graeco-Roman concepts in the Buddhist Tantras. On the other hand, L. M. Joshi, Gopinath Kaviraja, Pande and John George Woodroffe tend to trace the origin of Tantricism to the pre-Buddhist religious practices of India. Other scholars, such as Moriz Winternitz, B. Bhattacharya and Sushil Kumar De, trace the origin of Tantric Buddhism to Bengal in particular and adjacent Assam and Orissa. Joshi considers Andhradesa in central India to be one of the earliest seats of such esotericism and puts forward twelve points in support of his view.

Whatever may be the exact place of origin of Tantric Buddhism, there is no denying the fact that this esoteric form of Buddhism had profound impact on the course of history of Buddhism in Bengal. The Tantric elements in Buddhism made it assume a very distinctive form emphasizing mystic syllables (*mantras*), magical diagrams (*yantras*), ritualistic circles (*mandalas*), physical gestures (*mudras*), spells (*dharanis*) and other strange and sexo-yogic practices. As a result of these esoteric practices engulfing it, Buddhism evidently lost what may be called its original form and purity, or what Trevor Ling called the classical pattern involving the three-cornered relation among the Sangha, the king and the people. The earliest form of Tantric Buddhism is believed to be *Mantrayana*, deriving its name from the word '*mantra*.' In course of time, the cult assumed other forms, namely, *Vajrayana*, *Sahajayana* and *Kalacakrayana*. This Tantric type of Buddhism eventually was assimilated into Saktism with its focus on female

sacredness. The fusion of Buddhist mysticism with Saktism gave rise to other popular forms of religion, namely, Kaula, Nathism, Avadhuta, Sahajiya and Baul. It is in these newer marginal religious movements that Buddhist mysticism is believed by some to have survived to some extent. But precisely how the Buddhist mystical elements remain present in these newer forms is not easy to determine.

It is evident from the religious history of the Buddhist tradition of India and thus of Bengal that in order for Buddhism to thrive royal support and sympathy were needed. In the post-Pala period, Buddhism lost all royal patronage at the hands of the Sena dynasty. The Senas were orthodox followers of Saivism and Vaisnavism from Karnataka in southern India with little sympathy for Buddhism. As a result, while Brahmanic Hinduism was getting stronger and becoming dominant in Bengal, Buddhism was losing ground. There was another important factor which may be characterized as the internal weakness of Buddhism. Buddhism had no thorough system of domestic rituals to satisfy the aspirations of the common lay people. On the other hand, Brahmanic Hinduism was able to attract the attention and engagement of the common people by an array of rites and rituals focused on their domestic concerns. While Buddhism in its last phase in Bengal was in a state of disintegration and decline, it received the severest blow from Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji, a Turkish soldier of fortune who, by means of plundering raids, conquered Bihar and Bengal while destroying Buddhist monasteries and killing Buddhist monks. This sudden onslaught of the Muslim invaders led to the exodus of Buddhists lay persons and Buddhist monks to neighbouring countries, namely, Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan. Those Buddhist laity who did not manage to flee were either converted to Islam or integrated into the fold of Hinduism.

It is, however, believed by some that the decline of Buddhism in Bengal and Bihar did not mean its total disappearance from the place of its birth as it is said to have survived in many debased forms of popular practices such as Jagannath *puja* or Dharmathakur *puja*. The resurgence of Buddhism in modern independent India may be attributed to Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, who led the mass conversion of lower caste people (eventually several million) to Buddhism beginning in 1956 in Maharashtra and other places. In Bengal the revival of Buddhism seems to have taken place long before the neo-Buddhist movement inspired by Ambedkar. A small Buddhist minority in Chittagong and Chittagong Hill Tracts in the eastern part of what is now Bangladesh had been practicing a form of Buddhism blended with Tantric practices long before the Moghuls and the British arrived in Bengal. The practice continued until Theravada was established in Chittagong Hill Tracts and Chittagong after a reform movement that took place in the middle of the nineteenth century. The reform came into effect in 1856 when Saramedha Mahathero, the head of the Arakanese Theravada Sangha, paid a visit to the region and taught the futility of the Tantric practices while justifying the significance of the *vinaya* practice of the Theravada. A very small number of Buddhists also now live in the district of Patuakhali in south-central Bangladesh. There is no evidence, however, that the Buddhists of modern Bangladesh are directly linked to the Buddhists of ancient or medieval Bengal. From historical and other sources it is

known that the 'hill Buddhists' (Chakma and Marma) were originally the inhabitants of Arakan (area comprising the southeastern tip of Bangladesh and western edge of Myanmar) who fled to Chittagong between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries to escape repression by the Arakanese kings. The Chakmas have a very eventful history of their own. They fought several times against the Moghuls and the British to defend their independence. They were granted autonomy by the British, but this was curtailed during Pakistani rule (1947-1971) and again since the independence of Bangladesh. As regards the 'plains Buddhists', it is claimed that Magadha was their ancestral abode. But this claim needs to be substantiated. Another view, also in need of substantiation, is that during mass exodus of Buddhists to escape the Muslim invasion many fled to Assam and from Assam came to settle in Chittagong. These people are said to constitute the plains, or lowland, Buddhists. However it may be that Buddhists came to settle in what is now Bangladesh, the fact is that the Buddhist tradition is present here along with other religious traditions.

The future, however, of the Buddhist tradition and of the ethnic groups who adhere to it is in jeopardy due to serious threats and pressures from elements within the dominant Bangladeshi Muslim population. The migration of a huge Bengali Muslim population into the Chittagong Hill Tracts was sponsored in the 1980s by the military regimes of General Zia and General Ershad. These poor Bengali Muslims from the plains, some with criminal records, were given settlement in the lands of the ethnic peoples who fled into the Indian state of Tripura or were turned into internal refugees due to the insurgent activities of the Shanti Bahini, the military wing of the Hill peoples' political party, the Jana Samhati Samity (JSS). Insurgency ceased in the Chittagong Hill Tracts after the signing of a peace agreement between the Jana Samhati Samity and the then Awami League government in December, 1997. Unfortunately, peace accord is yet to be implemented thirteen years after the signing of the agreement. The land rights are yet to be restored to the original owners. The sponsored Muslim migrants who are now believed to be the majority in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have kept on occupying and gradually grabbing more of the lands of the ethnic peoples. This is a severe setback to the preservation and promotion of the ethnic cultures and traditions. The glorious tradition of holding century-old "Bouddha Melas" (Buddhist fairs) annually on the occasion of important Buddhist festivals has now come to a permanent halt. What is yet more alarming is that with the arrival of the Muslim migrants came also the Islamic missions to persuade and entice the poor ethnic peoples to embrace Islam and receive immediate financial benefits and other facilities.

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## Reflections on Islamisation in Bengal

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**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-Buddhist<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup>Evidence 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 12<sup>th</sup> 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 Brahmans 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 Brahmans?
- (d) If you agree that the Brahmans became superior by virtue of their *Samskaras* (rites & ceremonies), I would say, let the Chandalas have those *Samskaras* and become Brahmans. If you say that knowledge of the Veda makes one a Brahman, 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.

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## Chaitanya Vaishnava Devotion (*bhakti*) and Ethics Socially Integrative in Sultanate Bengal

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**Abstract:** The Vaishnava Hindu devotional (*bhakti*) movement inspired by Sri Chaitanya emerged and flourished in sixteenth-century Bengal during the reign of Sultan Husain Shah. It was a time when a *modus vivendi* had been established between dominant political and military Muslim elites and influential economic and professional Brahmanic Hindu elites. While each of these elite sectors of society possessed legal and religious resources for integrating diverse interests within a society, their respective resources for such integration differed markedly in underlying principles, the Muslim assuming egalitarian social solidarity with exclusive monotheism, the Brahmanic Hindu assuming stratified social differentiation with religious diversity. The present paper argues that the Chaitanya Vaishnava movement contributed positively to the otherwise limited integrative capacity of late Sultanate Bengal in which elite Muslim and Brahmanic Hindu principles for social integration tended to neutralize each other. The gentle (*madhurya*) humane kind of devotion or *bhakti* characteristic of Chaitanya and his followers engenders—then and now—a pattern of personal attitudes, ethics and theological norms that facilitate harmonious personal relations with individuals of differing status and convictions. It also provides legitimacy for selective participation in public affairs by deeming them to be religiously neutral, i.e., secular.<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction: Historical social context

The Bengali society into which Sri Chaitanya (1486-1533) was born and within which he inspired a massive resurgence of Vaishnava *bhakti* (devotion) to God as Krishna was a divided society. A large portion of the population of Bengal at that time could be considered at least to some degree Muslim, another large portion to some degree Brahmanic Hindu. But to what extent the indigenous base population, especially in the forested and less intensively cultivated areas, could be considered either Brahmanic Hindu or Muslim at that time remains unclear, at least to me. At the relatively more elite levels of society, however, the religious and socio-cultural distance between orthodox Muslims and orthodox Brahmanic Hindus was certainly more pronounced than at poorer or subaltern levels of the population. Among the latter, it is safe to say, indigenous pre-

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<sup>1</sup> The present essay derives for the most part from material previously published in O'Connell 1976 & 1993. But, as those publications are not readily available in Bangladesh and as the content is pertinent to our effort to stimulate study and research on religion in Bengal, it seemed appropriate to present it in a seminar in the University of Dhaka and to include it in this issue of the *Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology*.

Brahmanic, pre-Muslim modes of religious life had survived to varying degrees modified by less or more accommodation to Brahmanic Hindu or Muslim religious, social and cultural patterns.

Any society, if it is to function well, requires some measure of socio-cultural integration that allows the different sectors of the population to cooperate and coordinate their activities in reasonably effective ways (Parsons 1965, 40). In modern societies it is primarily the legal system that serves best to integrate the diverse sectors and individuals of a society. In the case of more traditional societies, there may be systems of religiously legitimated norms and values that serve that function and underlie whatever legal system may be in place. In the case of Bengal under several Muslim dynasties, there were in fact two traditional major systems of religiously legitimated norms and values, each internalized within the respective Brahmanic and Islamic elites, namely *dharma-shastra* and *shariah*. Both systems (sometimes called 'Great Traditions') had in other regions proved to be effective instruments of socio-cultural integration of societies, even within societies that were internally divided and diverse. But the principles by which Brahmanic *dharma-shastra* and Islamic *shariah* organize their respective societies and effect internal integration differ sharply. The Brahmanic tradition integrates different and competing socio-cultural interests by restricting contacts between functionally and ritually distinct endogamous groups and by ranking them according to ascribed purity and actual power. The Islamic tradition, by contrast, integrates socio-cultural differences (ideally if not necessarily in practice) by including all Muslims in common ritual actions and imposing minimal common religious and social norms on all Muslims regardless of hereditary or other differences. By the sixteenth century A.D., both the Brahmanic and Islamic 'Great Traditions' were well represented in terms of cultural and other resources, cadres of religio-cultural professionals and masses of lay adherents. The rulers were Muslims and so were the dominant sectors of the military, but non-Muslims were prominent in business, learned professions and revenue collection and some held key posts in the Sultanate administrations. Neither system was dominant enough over the population at large to serve as the fundamental means of integrating the society as a whole. Indeed the more that either might be applied rigorously within the large portion of the population over which it had some influence, the more it might tend to alienate that portion from the other.<sup>2</sup>

There is relatively little explicit evidence of just what kind of legal system Husain Shah and other independent sultans of Bengal utilized in the face of the incompatibility of *dharma-shastra* and *shariah*. But for the sultans ruling in Gaur, the capital of Bengal during and around Chaitanya's time, it was imperative that they neither lose the loyalty of their own predominantly Muslim armies and *ulema* nor provide Muslim rivals a pretext for coup or invasion of Bengal in defense of Islamic

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<sup>2</sup> For political, social and cultural history of Bengal under the independent sultans see: R.C. Majumdar 1966, 1973; Tarafdar 1965, 1986; Eaton 1993; S. Mukhopadhyay 1966; Karim 1977.

interests. On the other hand, the rulers were constrained to placate their Hindu subjects as well, lest the latter withdraw their services and expertise or emigrate or resist authority in other ways that would undermine the regime. The rulers thus had to keep in their service and maintain the loyalty of both Muslims and non-Muslims within the various sectors of military, administration and economy, often enough working alongside each other.

There were, however, obstacles of a religio-social kind that worked against such collaboration. Placing Muslims under the command of non-Muslims ran counter to certain Islamic norms and expectations. On the other hand, close contact with Muslims and exposure to their practices could jeopardize the ritual purity and social status of Brahmins and other high-caste Hindus. Those engaged in communally mixed enterprises thus ran the risk of being ostracized or otherwise penalized by the more restrictive guardians of their respective religio-social traditions and they might well even blame themselves as sinners. Accordingly, if communally mixed practical or secular activities were to flourish in pre-colonial Bengal unfettered by religion-based subjective and objective inhibitions, modes of religious faith that would allow and even legitimate such activities would be constructive. It was in this sort of situation that socio-culturally integrative potential of Chaitanya's Vaishnava *bhakti* movement could make itself felt. There is considerable evidence that the Chaitanya Vaishnavas, more as a by-product, perhaps, than as an explicit goal, did indeed offer a kind of religious life that for many Hindus of respectable castes facilitated their participation in communally mixed activities. And in other ways as well the Chaitanya Vaishnava movement can be seen to have fostered what there was of socio-cultural integration in pre-colonial Bengal (O'Connell 1970, 1976)

### **Objective of paper**

In this paper I wish to concentrate on the typical personal religious experience cultivated by Chaitanya Vaishnavas, known as *bhakti* (devotion)—more precisely *prema-bhakti* (loving devotion) and articulate its relation to social values and ethics.<sup>3</sup> These remarks thus are at the interface of Vaishnavas' theology (and their religious symbolism generally), psychology of religion and sociology of religion. I propose to sketch how the subjective personal values and behaviors fostered by *prema-bhakti* to Krishna tend (among other implications) to legitimate and in some respects even encourage congenial interaction among persons of differing religio-cultural mentalities as well as socio-economic and political interests. To do so, I first point out that Chaitanya Vaishnavas insist that personal self-understanding (one's 'identity') and values can and indeed must change through a genuine commitment to Krishna-*bhakti*. In other words, in

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<sup>3</sup>For overviews of Chaitanya's *bhakti* community and its teachings, see: S. De (1961); M. Kennedy (1925); E. Dimock (1966a) (1966b/1989); R. Chakraborty (1985); Kapoor 1978; Krsnadasa 1999; and for the accounts of Chaitanya's life, see Stewart (2010).

their efforts to save or rescue suffering humanity through propagation of *bhakti*, they strive to bring about what amounts to a personal transformation or 'conversion' that can fundamentally alter one's personality and values. Embedded in this process of 'conversion' to *bhakti* (akin to what Evangelical Christians would call being 'born again') is a distinctive ethos and ethical pattern. If I understand it aright, the ethos and ethics of Chaitanya Vaishnavas made them effective instruments of social and cultural integration in the midst of their otherwise divided and disparate contemporary Bengal. That integrative effect operated within both the hierarchically segmented Brahmanic Hindu socio-cultural system and the over-arching Hindu-Muslim-indigenous socio-cultural complex of sultanate Bengal. In principle the same kind of devotional religious transformation might be expected to have similar integrative implications in other historical contexts as well.

### **Conversion: self-criticism and self-surrender, followed by deliverance and transformation**

There occurs again and again in Chaitanya Vaishnava literature and preaching the message that all persons—men and women, rich and poor, pure and impure—can and should be saved through the grace of God understood as Krishna (O'Connell 1981). That recurrent message contains a basic judgment about human character: that it is malleable, changeable. By 'conversion' here is meant a fundamental shift in self-image, a reassessment of values, a redirection of one's personal goals in life. Whether a person is already formally or nominally a Vaishnava, or for that matter a Brahman or any other sort of Hindu, does not really matter. He or she might even be a Muslim or a European foreigner. The 'conversion' intended here does not imply an external leaving of one religio-social community for another. Rather it is the interior change of heart, the deepening of commitment to loving God, that is crucial. The life stories of Chaitanya and his followers contain illustrative episodes where a repentant sinner confesses his sinfulness, submits himself at the feet of Chaitanya or a saintly Vaishnava and begs to be 'lifted up' (*uddhara*) from *samsara*, the sea or river of rebirth and redeath, to be delivered from sin and the grip of karma. There are also many pious hymns and short poems wherein even presumably pious Vaishnavas (like Narottam Das in the following extract) confess their failings and helplessness and beg for rescue and deliverance.

“O godly Vaishnavas, I make this confession (*nibedana*). I am very low (*adhama*), an evil-doer (*duracara*). Into the cruel sea of births-and-deaths (*samsara*), Fate (*bidhi*) has plunged me. Grab me by the hair and get me across (*kara para*). Fate (*bidhi*) is very powerful. It pays no heed to duty (*dharma*) and knowledge (*jnana*), but always entangles in the snares of action (*karma*). I see no sign of rescue (*trana*). All I see is suffering (*klesha*). In pain and without a master (*anatha*) I weep as lust and anger, greed and confusion, intoxication and pretence (*abhimana*) each pulls in its own way, so that my mind wanders like a blind man not knowing the right path (*supatha*) from the wrong one (*utpatha*). I have not held fast to true teaching (*sat mata*). My mind has sunk into falsity (*asat*). I have not placed my hope at

**your feet. Narottama Dasa says 'I fear what I see and hear. Have mercy (*kripa*) and make me your own servant (*nija dasa*)'." [Narottama Dasa, *Prarthana*, no. 7 (1963)]**

The Vaishnava conviction that a person can be changed fundamentally implies that one can and should break out of conventional self-images (artificial 'identities') supplied by the karma-driven 'accident' of one's birth, gender, occupation etc. These conventional self-images they consider mere *abhimanas*, roles that one plays or pretences that one assumes. They are not one's real self, though we tend to treat one's roles in social life as defining one's true identity. The Vaishnava conviction that a person's self-understanding or 'identity' can be changed fundamentally implies that one's ethical and behavioral patterns can be changed correspondingly. To the extent that one's ethics and behavior change, we may expect, the terms and quality of one's basic social relationships may be changed. This differs from the more traditional Brahmanical view that one's fundamental character is determined at birth and along with that one's basic social and occupational roles. But whereas it is traditional Brahmanical opinion that birth and character are fixed by one's matured or 'ripened' karma, which cannot be effaced, the Vaishnavas insist that even that 'ripened' karma can be wiped out, not by one's own efforts, they say, but by the grace or mercy, *kripa*, of God Krishna. Vaishnavas have faith that through the divine grace of Krishna, typically mediated by a saintly Vaishnava, human character can and should be changed for the better. And with character change should come the possibility of change in social relationships.

### **Chaitanya Vaishnava theology and conversion**

Chaitanya Vaishnavas, surprisingly perhaps, glorify the present, supposedly degenerate, age, the Kali Yuga, as the age of Krishna's, of God's, most intimate self-manifestation in the person of Chaitanya, apparently, but only apparently, the perfect human exemplar of loving devotion (*prema bhakti*) to God. They have faith that the loving devotion revealed by Chaitanya is in principle available to all humans (and other beings as well) and can deliver them from sin and entrapment in recurrent rebirth, suffering and redeath. They have faith that the fundamental religious duty (*dharma*) of the present age, the Kali Yuga, is loving devotion to Krishna, and are convinced that, God willing, it is a relatively easy way to gain deliverance. Initially loving devotion to Krishna may be expressed in the simple and pleasing forms of song, dance and above all recital of Krishna's names, *nama-kirtana* (*nam kirtan*). Chaitanya Vaishnavas, accordingly, should live with a certain excitement and sense of religious purpose in the conviction that one's current human birth is a wonderful, though fleeting, opportunity to change the course of one's destiny, to put an end to mundane rebirths and redeaths. One does so by discovering, through divine mercy, who one really is, namely a loving servant of God Krishna, and by transforming one's self-image and behavior accordingly, again with the gracious help of Krishna or his advanced devotees.

Along with the discovery that one's real identity is to be a servant of God Krishna comes the insight that whatever else one may be, or seem to be, biologically, psychologically, socially, is but a pretense (*abhimana*), the playing out of roles. Sometimes certain roles are helpful ones, if they enable a person to cultivate one's devotion to Krishna, but often they are not. In the experience of deliverance, or rescue, the Vaishnava devotee is expected to see that his or her position in the profane or secular world, whatever may be its prestige or shame, is in an ultimate sense unimportant. This includes not only occupational roles, like making-money, doing research or for that matter pulling a rickshaw or scavenging through rubbish, but such traditionally respected socio-cultural roles as being a learned Brahmin (O'Connell, 1981).

This does not mean, however, that as a consequence of realizing one's true nature as a devoted servant of Krishna a Chaitanya Vaishnava simply gives up his or her other roles or flaunts in public a newly found freedom to violate standard social norms. Chaitanya was not a Henry Derozio (1808-31) nor his disciples as outrageous as the boys of Young Bengal. Rather it means that at a basic level of one's personality there should collapse, or at least begin to dissolve, both the pretentious ambitions and the frustrating inhibitions that stem from externally imposed standards, such as the conventional privileges and restrictions of ascribed caste, Brahman, Shudra or whatever.

It should be evident that such a devaluation of inherited or even achieved external status in favor of an internal identity as loving devotee of God (and recipient of God's love and mercy) would be attractive to persons of low socio-cultural status. It should mean for them enhanced self-respect as well as enhanced respect from fellow devotees, including those of higher socio-cultural standing. Indeed much has been made of this raising of respect for the disrespected and disenfranchised through popular *bhakti* movements. To what extent such enhanced respect on devotional grounds translated into mundane social, economic and political liberation of the downtrodden is another matter that merits closer scrutiny. I do not want to inter into that here though I have done so elsewhere (e.g., O'Connell, 1993). But what may not be so obvious, but still significant in social historical terms, is that the Vaishnava devaluation of external roles or pretences would seem to have been attractive as well to those Brahmans and other Hindus of high caste who may have wished to participate at high levels in economic, administrative and other areas of public life in the company of non-Hindus under Sultanate rule in Bengal.

Sultanate rule, of course, did not conform to the ideal Brahmanical pattern of political-military rule by Kshatriya kings guided by learned and pious Brahmans. Moreover, looked at from an orthodox Brahmanical perspective, participation at close quarters with those of allegedly polluting character



and habits (e.g., slaughtering cows, consuming meat and alcohol, disrespecting Brahmans and in times of conflict desecrating sacred images and temples) could result in ritual pollution that might result in loss of status or expulsion from one's caste (*jati*). For those for whom such norms still were believed to have divine sanction there might also be a debilitating sense of sin and guilt. There were many Hindus, Vaishnavas and others, especially those of higher caste, who had the ability and opportunity to advance within a sultanate regime or cooperate with it. But this could result in ritual contamination due to contact with the allegedly dangerous and potentially polluting sultans and their Muslim staffs. For such Hindus it could be a liberating experience to discover by the grace of Krishna that one's true identity, the only identity that really counts, is to be Krishna's loving servant, whatever might be the risks to one's social status.

Since both one's worldly enterprises and one's deference to Brahmanical norms of ritual purity and legitimate occupation could be seen as mere roles—to be assumed or disregarded as circumstances and the cultivation of *bhakti* require—tensions between the two should begin to lose significance. Likewise, any grounds for guilt and shame should begin to dissolve. A person's genuine task in life, according to Chaitanya Vaishnava teachings, is the cultivation of devout service to Krishna whatever may be the historical, occupational or other mundane situations in which the devotee finds or places him- or herself. And indeed we do find a large number of Chaitanya's contemporary associates significantly involved in or closely associated with Husain Shah's administration (Chakrabarty, 1985).

### **Chaitanya Vaishnava Ethos and Ethics**

When a person is instructed about what it means to be a servant of God Krishna, the instructions are not confined to teaching about Krishna himself and the rituals for his worship. There are also instructions about the virtues that shape the character of a devotee (i.e., a devoted servant of Krishna). And there is guidance regarding the sort of attitudes and sentiments that should be cultivated to make one's service more devout and more pleasing to Krishna. Ideally these are to be nurtured and deepened throughout one's life, especially through the mutual good influences that come of associating with other devoted servants of Krishna. Taken together these virtues, attitudes and sentiments constitute a distinctive Vaishnava ethos and ethics that characterize the way Vaishnava devotees should relate to other persons, in the first instance to fellow devotees, but more generally to human beings at large.

Among the ethical virtues most stressed in the formation of Vaishnava devotional character are humility, non-violence, and control of sensual appetites. Other virtues and attitudes may be seen as reinforcing and giving refinement to these. Typical examples of Chaitanya Vaishnava

conversion from heedless sinfulness to realization of one's relationship as servant of Krishna depict the transformation of an unreformed sinner, one who is arrogant, violent and addicted to meat, alcohol and unrestrained sex, into a fledgling devotee who eschews all of this. In practice, Vaishnavas in the tradition of Chaitanya have in fact for the most part been vegetarians and have abstained from alcohol if ethnographic reports and general public opinion can be believed. Among merely nominal Vaishnavas, of course, especially in recent times, these abstentions may not be observed so strictly, but traditionally the abstentions seem to have been adhered to fairly strictly, especially by Vaishnavas in middle to elite classes of society.

The importance of sexual and other sensual restraint among mainline Chaitanya Vaishnava devotees, unfortunately, has been obscured somewhat by confusion of their restrained discipline with the transgressive ritual practices of Tantric Sahajiya Vaishnavas (Dimock 1966/1989), by the ambiguities and different types among the 'casteless' Jati Vaishnavas (Das 1986, 1993; O'Connell 1982) and by misconstruing the meaning of amorous symbolism in the Radha-Krishna motifs that are so central to Chaitanya Vaishnava conceptions of loving devotion (*prema-bhakti*). The consistent message of mainline Chaitanya Vaishnavas' devotional theology (as stated in Sanskrit and in Bangla texts), as well as their socially informative sacred biographies and hagiographies, is that strict norms of sexual conduct, proper respectively to married and celibate devotees, along with overall sensual restraint, are endorsed and expected to be observed in practice.

The modesty or humility of Vaishnavas in Bengal has been proverbial, to the extent of their being satirized in Bangla literature and theatre for *boishnab-binay*. This self-effacing humility springs from the realization that one is essentially a servant, a *dasa* or *dasi*—strictly speaking a servant of God Krishna, but a servant just the same. This sense of service and the humility that goes with it find their immediate expression or exercise in relations with fellow Vaishnavas, giving respect and even devotion to whom is said to be more pleasing to Krishna than respect and devotion directed directly to Krishna himself. Since Vaishnavas believe that Krishna is within every living being's soul as its inner ruler and enjoyer, there is good reason to treat with humble respect even the most unimpressive (in mundane terms) of fellow humans, whether Vaishnava devotees or not. A classic expression of their positive valuation of humility, forbearance and service is a verse in Sanskrit attributed to Chaitanya himself and endlessly repeated by and about Vaishnavas:

**"Hari [God, understood as Krishna] is ever to be praised by one who is as humble as the grass, as forbearing as a tree, who though deserving of praise gives praise to others."  
(Rupa Goswami, *Padyavali* 32)**

The readiness of Chaitanya Vaishnavas to show respect and their complementary willingness to overlook insult and arrogance by others tend to deflect or defuse incidents and situations that might otherwise be demoralizing or become occasions for conflict. This would include situations where disparity of caste status or communal affiliation might otherwise be the occasion of conflict and alienation. To the extent that a habitual attitude of tolerant humility and readiness to be of service can be internalized by those who must interact with one another in potentially antagonistic situations, it should facilitate positive social inter-action in all sorts of problematic situations. If law may be deemed a 'blunt instrument' to effect integration among disparate sectors of a society, tolerant humility and readiness to be of service may be deemed 'subtle instruments' of such integration. We should not, of course, assume that all or most of those who declare themselves to be devotees have deeply internalized these and other virtues ideally typical of Chaitanya Vaishnavas. It would be hard enough to attempt an empirical quantitative survey of such internalization and its outcome in changed relationships with others even by studying Vaishnava devotees now living. It is impossible to do so for the past. Yet it is reasonable to chart the direction in which such virtues would tend to shape the character of persons and thereby affect their inter-personal relations to the extent they are or were internalized.

### **Non-violence, inoffensiveness**

The relative non-violence or inoffensiveness that is characteristic of Chaitanya Vaishnavas illustrates in practice their doctrinal affirmation that the proper religious duty, *dharma*, of the present age is loving devotion, *prema-bhakti*. In the much cited episode of the conversion of the drunken brothers, Jagai and Madhai, it is reported that Chaitanya (as divine) was on the verge of destroying the pair for having injured the saintly Nityananda, when the latter and others interceded. They pointed out that since loving devotion is the purpose of Krishna's descent in the form of Chaitanya—and not the killing of demons or chastising the unrighteous—harsh punishment is not called for. The sinner would better be won over to devotion by means of loving devotion, and so it turned out, we are told (O'Connell 1970, Stewart 1995).

The theological-cum-spiritual ideas and symbolism of the Chaitanya Vaishnavas give the highest priority to Krishna's amorous sports, *lilas*, with Radha and the cowherd girls, the *gopis*, in the idyllic transcendental realm called Goloka.<sup>4</sup> There the mood of 'sweetness', *madhurya*, predominates over the mood of dominance, *aisvarya*. Throughout the infancy and childhood sports of Krishna and amid his adolescent amorous pastimes in Goloka (and, it is said, when he

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<sup>4</sup> There are many primary and secondary sources that present the theological symbolism of the Chaitanya Vaishnavas. The most widely acknowledged primary source is Krishnadasa Kaviraja's *Caitanya Caritamṛta*, best translated by Dimock and edited by Stewart 1999. Reliable secondary sources include: De 1942/1961; Nath 1958-59; Kapoor 1978; A.K. Majumdar 1978; Wulff 1984; Haberman 1988.

briefly manifests himself on earth in the Vraj region around Mathura and Vrindavan), Krishna for the most part (though not always) manifests his sweet and gentle aspects and hides his awesome divine power, the display of which would intimidate his transcendental friends and sweethearts as well as those human devotees who read, hear and meditate upon these *lilas*. For those devotees who dwell in meditation upon such *lilas*, their quality of sweetness and gentleness, i.e., *madhurya*, may be expected to permeate their values and personality intimately. But even for the more casual Chaitanya Vaishnava and indeed the general populace of pre-colonial Bengal, the songs, dramatizations and visual artistic expressions of these *madhurya*-saturated themes must have had some degree of impact in refining their aesthetic-emotional sensibilities and making less harsh their inter-personal relationships. It may be noted that there were many Bengali poets bearing Muslim names who chose to compose and sing songs of the Krishna-Radha theme (Bhattacharya 1962).

The ethos and ethics implicit in Chaitanya Vaishnava devotion and the literature, music and visual arts that evoke and express it were (and still are) such as to endorse and enhance mutual tolerance, sensitivity and non-violence. Appropriately, Vaisnavas typically are vegetarian and shy away from occupations and activities that of their nature breed or depend upon violence. Conversely, there is very little in Chaitanya Vaishnava devotional writings that would encourage assertiveness, confrontation or outright violence. There is, of course, the theme that Krishna may become angry when his devotee is mistreated and may come to the defense of that devotee, as in the story told in Purana texts wherein Vishnu appeared in the form of a hybrid man-lion and killed the demonic father of a devout boy (but none the less a demon by birth), Prahlada. But that was long ago in a different yuga or age, not in this present Kali Yuga.

By contrast, in cases in the present Kali Yuga—the Kazi who harassed Vaishnavas in Nadia, Jagai and Madhai who injured Nityananda, ‘Jaban’ Haridas, who, having been born and/or raised as a Muslim, was beaten at the Qazi’s insistence for reciting Vaishnava names of God rather than Muslim ones—the effective response to violence against Vaishnavas was reconciliation. (Vrindavanadasa, 1961; Krsnadasa 1999). There is no single incident that I know of recorded in their literature of a Chaitanya Vaishnava devotee in Bengal having died a martyr’s death. The exemplary saints and heroes in the Chaitanya Vaishnava tradition are not warriors and martyrs, but saintly devotees, men and women of inoffensive mood and behavior.

### **Selective accommodation to Brahmanic socio-cultural and social norms**

Despite their theoretical withdrawal of sacral legitimation from anything not contributory to *bhakti* to Krishna, Chaitanya Vaishnavas (at least as reflected in their sixteenth-seventeenth century

texts) were circumspect and accommodating when relating to Brahmans and Brahmanic socio-ritual norms (O'Connell, 1993). Their copious literature records relatively little evidence of hostility of Vaishnavas toward Brahmans generally. What we do find, however, is considerable criticism by Vaishnavas of the practice of animal slaughter by a class of ritual priests of Shakta cults. And the latter stand accused of retaliating by ritually defiling the house of a Vaishnava. Scattered throughout the sacred biographies of Chaitanya we also find some harsh words about '*pasandis*' (hypocrites), who often are Brahmans. But these are usually isolated remarks about particular individuals, not criticisms of Brahmans or Brahmanical norms generally. There are also reports in the same texts of hostility towards the Vaishnavas by certain unnamed Brahmans in Navadvip. These are said to have falsely reported (to no avail) to the royal court at Gaur that the Vaishnavas were planning to raise up Chaitanya as a Brahman claimant to the throne (Jayananda 1905, 11; Vrndavanadasa 1961, 1.3.11 & 2.23.415). They allegedly advised that he be killed and they are accused of themselves having tried to murder the close associate of Chaitanya in whose residence the Vaishnavas used to gather for *kirtan* recital and dramatic reenactments of Krishna's *lilas*. The motive attributed to these Brahmans was fear lest boisterous demonstrations of Krishna-*bhakti* by the Vaishnavas would rouse the ire of the Muslim authorities resulting in reprisal against Brahmans in the town (Vrndavanadasa, 1961).

Outside Navadvip town, however, there seem to have prevailed reasonably good relations between the Chaitanya Vaishnavas and Brahmans at large. One reason for this would likely have been that, with certain exceptions, Brahmans stood to gain, or at least not lose, professional patronage as the Vaishnavas' influence spread. The latter, most of whose eminent leaders were themselves Brahmans, regularly invited Brahmans to grace festivals and expected them to continue to perform the various rites of passage and other domestic rituals for Vaishnava client families, provided these were done in forms compatible with Vaishnava norms. Vaishnava gurus generally confined themselves to the roles of initiating gurus, preachers, spiritual advisors and officiants at specifically devotional functions. As more and more groups and individuals at the periphery of the Brahmanic Hindu religio-cultural and social system modified their indigenous ways in a manner more congenial to both Vaishnava and Brahmanic norms of purity and respectability (like giving up meat and alcohol and reforming sexual/marriage customs) due to Vaishnavas' propagation of Krishna-*bhakti*, these same 'reforming converts' would become more suitable as clients for the Brahmans in ritual contexts beyond the strictly devotional.

Where the Vaishnavas drew a line against accepting Brahmanic ritual services was where doing so would implicitly or explicitly violate a fundamental Vaishnava principle. One such type of Brahmanic ritual that they opposed is the purificatory penitential rite of *prayascitta* (Rupa Goswami 1961, v. 1.2.64). According to Vaishnava faith, only Krishna can overcome bad karma,

not a Brahmanical rite of purification. Accordingly, in place of *prayascitta*, Vaishnavas would organize a ceremony of their own to mark Krishna's removal of a penitent's bad karma, the ceremony usually involving singing divine names in *kirtan* fashion and feeding Vaishnavas, Brahmans and others in festival called *mahotsava / mahotshab*. Another banned practice or category of practices is animal sacrifice.

### **Final Comment on the Chaitanya Vaishnava perspective on participating in secular affairs**

To the extent that Chaitanya Vaishnavas are committed devotees (*bhaktas*) they are not as such bound to any particular paradigm for mundane social and political affairs. Their fundamental religious commitment, their faith or trust (*shraddhā*) is concentrated in *bhakti* to Krishna, an interior commitment of the heart in the form of loving devotion to God. They are not, however, by and large, anarchists or antinomians. Most do acknowledge the domestic and wider social responsibilities of lay ('householder') Vaishnavas to help maintain order in mundane social, economic and political affairs. They call this *loka-samgraha*, 'holding the world together'. But they maintain an independent position from which to judge the merits of any particular social, economic or political system (whether or not it claims Brahmanic, Islamic or any other sacral legitimation),... to influence it in what they deem constructive ways,... to participate in it or not—as their Vaishnava-formed conscience and practical judgment dictate. This is in fact a religious justification for participating in public mundane affairs on 'secular' terms, or in other words a Vaishnava Hindu religious warrant for public secularity in Muslim-dominated Sultanate Bengal. But their theological justification for critical responsible participation in secular affairs is not limited to the particularities of Sultanate Bengal. It would apply at any time and in any place, though the terms of participation would vary depending on the circumstances of the particular time and place.

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## **Between Puritan Islamic and Syncretistic Muslim Traditions in Bengal: An Ecological Perspective on the Faraizi Movement**

**Iftekhar Iqbal\***

**Abstract.** In this paper I propose that the phenomenon of the Faraizi movement in nineteenth-century Bengal can be explained from the perspective of the ecological environment as well as in terms of its relation to reformist Islamic influence, to colonial historical processes in general and to Bengali syncretism in particular. In other words, in this paper I highlight the interesting fact that the Faraizi movement, which is the antithesis of syncretism, flourished in ecological conditions comparable to those in which some historians observe that religio-cultural syncretism emerged. Thus the central question explored in this paper is: how can we explain the emergence of an Islamic reformist-puritan movement under environmental conditions hitherto considered conducive to syncretism?

### **Historiographic considerations**

There are two broad reasons why environment matters in the discourse of modern history of Bengal. The first issue relates to the overall absence of environmental perspective in the historiography of modern eastern Bengal. This contrasts, surprisingly perhaps, to historiography of Bengal in earlier periods. For instance, Abdul Momin Chowdhury has discussed the role of ecology in the shaping of different ancient dynastic traditions in the region. For medieval Bengal, H. Blochman and Richard Eaton have underlined the links between deltaic environment and political and cultural development in the region. Interestingly, however, not much remarkable work has been published on the environmental context of colonial history of Bengal, although there is ample evidence that environment continued to play as significant a role in modern time as in ancient and medieval periods.<sup>1</sup> The second issue relates to the way in which environment has been linked to syncretism. Historians like Eaton have tended to link religio-cultural syncretism to the fluid, forested ecology of Bengal. In other words, such syncretistic practice as reliance on imagined or real pirs during reclamation of fluid *char* (newly emergent alluvial) lands or collection of honey in the Sundarbans (tidal mangrove forests) has been regarded as a product of interaction among peasantry of different religious and cultural backgrounds who must live and work together in a given environmental condition.

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<sup>1</sup> For an environmental perspective on post-1947 Pakistan history, see Kamal 2005.



### The Faraizi movement: an overview

The Faraizi movement was initiated by Haji Shariatullah, who was born in the deltaic district of Faridpur in 1781. At the age of eighteen, Shariatullah left Bengal to study Arabic literature, Islamic jurisprudence and Sufism in Mecca and al-Azhar University in Cairo. After returning home in 1820, he started a campaign to eliminate from the Bengali Muslim society various traditional practices (*riwaj*) which he considered contradicted the teaching of the Qu'ran.<sup>2</sup> Such *riwaj* included the worshipping of the shrines of *pirs* or saints, participation in the *rathayatra* or Purana-inspired religious processions of the Hindu community, the planting of a banana tree around the residence on the occasion of the first menstruation of a girl, and so forth.<sup>3</sup> These practices, often described as *shirk* (idolatry) and *bid'a* (unlawful innovation), were the objects of Shariatullah's condemnation. But his attempt to cleanse the Muslim community from 'syncretistic indulgences' of rural Bengal was not possible unless Islam was made relevant to the agrarian society. Shariatullah and then his son, Dudu Mian, were able to do this amidst a complex series of developments that were taking place in nineteenth century Bengal.

Shariatullah's efforts towards religious reform came at a time when agrarian economy in Bengal was undergoing a remarkable transition. By 1830, the impact of the industrial revolution on textile production in Britain was being fully felt in Bengal. This resulted in imported cotton products quickly taking over from local ones, which became uncompetitive even in the domestic market. This, in turn, caused widespread unemployment or reduction in the earning of the weavers that fell 'below starvation wages'. About the same time, the impact of the worldwide depression reached Bengal, thanks to an emerging linkage between the capitalist centre and its dependent periphery. In the early 1830s, major agency houses or financiers collapsed in Calcutta resulting in the reduction of the flow of credit and a drastic fall in prices. Many peasants were coerced to grow an 'unremunerative cash crop in return for paltry advances from indigo factories at a time when rental demands continued to be stringent' (Bose 1993).<sup>4</sup> In these highly volatile circumstances, Shariatullah's call for resistance to undue taxes imposed by the zamindars was enthusiastically greeted by both poor peasants and weavers. Shariatullah reportedly had command over about 12,000 weavers who met the threat of unemployment in the traditional textile industry by engaging in agriculture. Within a short period, therefore, Shariatullah not only appeared to be a

<sup>2</sup> For a life-sketch and activities of Haji Shariatullah, see Khan 1965, 1-22.

<sup>3</sup> For an account of the syncretistic practices surrounding childbirth, death, marriage and circumcision in then contemporary Bengali Muslim society and the Faraizi efforts to eliminate them, see Taylor 1840, p. 240 and Khan 1965, pp. lxxxvii-lxxxviii.

<sup>4</sup> To some extent, the condition might be compared to the condition of 'agricultural involution' in colonial Indonesia as described by Geertz 1963.

spiritual saviour, but also someone who, in 1837, was accused by some zamindars of setting up a kingdom like Titu Mir.<sup>5</sup> It was the beginning of a wave of peasantization.

It was Muhsin al-Din Ahmad, alias Dudu Miyan, however, who consolidated the budding Faraizi movement. Dudu Miyan, a son of Haji Shariatullah, returned from Mecca in 1837 after completing his education and took charge of the movement in 1840.<sup>6</sup> When Dudu Miyan took over, agrarian circumstances were not entirely similar to what they had been in the 1820s or 1830s. By 1840, the impact of the depression was beginning to subside, the price of commodities was rising and the government's favourable attitude to primary producers of agricultural commodities was becoming apparent, while land reclamation continued extensively beyond the permanently settled areas. Dudu Miyan's world, therefore, was larger than his father's and he found far more followers around him, which encouraged him to radicalize the idea of peasants' rights as well as to take up a policy of aggressive resistance instead of passive mobilization. He proclaimed that '*Langolzar, zami tar*' ('land belongs to him who owns the plough').<sup>7</sup> He brought forward before the peasantry the idea of God's sovereignty on earth by proclaiming that the earth belonged to God, and that no one other than the lawful government had the right to lord over or impose taxes on it.<sup>8</sup> With Dudu Miyan, thus, the Faraizi creed was transformed into a full-fledged agrarian movement.

Bengal Police estimated that Dudu Miyan had about 80,000 followers<sup>9</sup>, while Alexander Forbes, editor of the *Bengal Hurkaru*, calculated it at 300,000.<sup>10</sup> On one occasion, when Dudu Miyan was being tried in a Court in Faridpur for his alleged involvement in attempting to kill an indigo planter, about 3,000 boats filled with his followers stood ready at a river nearby just to protect Dudu Miyan, in case of a negative verdict. Similarly, a witness to the Indigo Commission noted that so great was the apprehension of danger that an entire regiment in Dhaka was ordered to stand ready to tackle any incidents. It was also commonly believed that Dudu Miyan's acquittal in the above case was the 'result of fear on the part of the Government'. During the Sepoy insurrection of 1857, Dudu Miyan was arrested and kept in jail as a pre-emptive measure. The story went that he would have been released if he had not boasted that he could summon 50,000 people at any time to march in whatever direction he so desired. Gastrell, during his survey of three districts of

<sup>5</sup> Titu Mir was a heroic peasant leader who enlisted the support of numerous peasants to wage *jihad* (struggle) against the landlords and the Raj. After initial success, he died resisting a colonial army in 1831. For a detailed discussion of Titu Mir's life and his influence on subsequent peasant movements, including the Faraizis, see Khan 1977 and 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Gastrell 1868, p. 36 reported that on Shariatullah's death his followers assembled, and by 'common consent' named Dudu Miyan as the head of the Faraizis.

<sup>7</sup> Muhibuddin Ahmad, pp.14-15.

<sup>8</sup> According to Khan 1965, p. 114, following the Quranic verse 'whatever is in the heavens and in the earth belongs to God' (Quran, 4:131), Dudu Miyan declared that the land was the bounty of God, and man being His most favoured creature had equal right to exploit this 'divine gift'. Land, therefore, according to the Faraizis, belonged to those who had exploited it. This interpretation not only helped the peasantry to perceive the zamindari exploitation in terms of illegal taxes as gross injustice; it also legitimized their settlement in the reclaimed and newly formed lands in the delta. See also Wise 1883, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> University of Cambridge Library, Add. MS. 7490/39/4: 'Correspondences relating to the Wahabi movement'.

<sup>10</sup> Minutes of Evidence (henceforth MoE), Indigo Commission Report, 1861, answer no. 3979.

eastern Bengal between 1856 and 1862, noted that the number of the Faraizis was 'annually and steadily increasing' (Gastrell 1868).

The number of followers of the Faraizi movement seemed to continue to grow during Dudu Mian's son Noa Miyan's time. In an essay on the subject of revival of Islam, published in *The Times* in 1873, the writer remarked that year after year Islam was converting 'hundreds of thousand of the Indians, especially the natives of Bengal, to the faith of Koran'.<sup>11</sup> In response, Isaac Allen wrote in the *Calcutta Review* the following year that he did not believe that conversion was taking place on such a scale. But Allen thought that a 'possible explanation of the above errors might be found in the rapid conversion of Sunnis and Shiahis into Feraizis or Wahabis, which had taken place during the last 20 or 30 years.' This picture of the numerical strength of the Faraizis is matched by the fact, as claimed by their contemporary adversaries, that each of the three Faraizi leaders mentioned above acted as a sovereign or established a 'parallel government'. Some latter day historians also have supported this assertion.<sup>12</sup>

Thus we can attribute the success of the Faraizi movement to the Bengal environment in different ways. Firstly, the Faraizis had found a place in the *chars* and forests to earn their livelihood in a flexible way unlike the regimentation in the older places under the landlords. Secondly, in terms of political strategy, they had developed the slogan '*langol zar, zami tar*', which signified their fundamental anchorage to land. Thirdly, the Faraizis used waterways of the region in their favour to establish communication, mobilize supporters and facilitate marketing. But the question remains: how could that happen at a time when the British Raj was basking in its political supremacy throughout India?

It seems that the Faraizis had built up a horizontal coalition among the peasants of different religious and social backgrounds against any threat to their interests posed by the landed elite or other 'outsiders'. This broader social basis of resistance put them on solid ground for bargaining with the government to secure and defend their interests.<sup>13</sup> Alexander Forbes testified to the Indigo Commission that religion had nothing to do with the influence of Dudu Miyan and that this could be understood from the fact that one of the Faraizi factions was then led by a Hindu.<sup>14</sup> The relative stability in relations between different communities was reflected in the non-interference of the Faraizis in the affairs of other religious communities. At the same time, the movement seemed to have been consolidated by a strong antipathy against all categories of landed elite of

<sup>11</sup> *The Times*, 29 August 1873, p.7.

<sup>12</sup> About the Faraizi quest for autonomy and 'independent statehood', see Choudhury 2001, pp. 56-61 and Bose 1993, p.151.

<sup>13</sup> For a Marxist approach to the Faraizi movement, see Kaviraj 1982.

<sup>14</sup> MoE, answer no. 3979.

Bengal.<sup>15</sup> But how do we relate this populist political stand of the Faraizis with environmental elements of the delta? We can examine this issue by a case study of indigo plantations.

### Forging Islam in local agro-ecology: the Faraizis and the indigo planters

The best indigo lands, according to several witnesses to the Indigo Commission, were those which were subject to inundation during the rainy season and which remained submerged for two to three months. The cultivation of indigo was, therefore, more confined to the low-lying *char* lands, which the planter constantly looked for. The planters invariably selected these lands for the cultivation of indigo. On the other hand, the rising price of the country produce, e.g., rice, induced the *raiyyat* (peasant) to settle in and cultivate *char* lands.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, coinciding with the timing of indigo cultivation, *aman* rice in the Delta was sown at the beginning of the rainy season and was reaped in the winter, between November and January. Another type, *aus*, was sown after the first shower of spring and was harvested in July or August. Consequently in most places indigo and rice became rival products contending for land.<sup>17</sup> It was also a general practice of the planters to compel the *raiyyats* to sow indigo after the first shower. Then they were compelled to weed the indigo fields and, again, when the rivers began to rise, they were forcefully employed in cutting indigo plants.<sup>18</sup> This coercion put the *raiyyats* in a very awkward situation as they not only lost their best lands in this way, but also missed the chance to utilize the right season to cultivate traditional crops on whatever lands were left over for them.<sup>19</sup>

New *chars* were overgrown with *doob* (tender grass) providing plenty of food for the cattle. As these lands were appropriated by the planters, the tenants and the *goalas* (herders) could not avail themselves of this grass for their cattle. This meant a great frustration for the Bengal peasants and *goalas*, who not only held their cattle as a means of livelihood, but also looked on them as members of their families.<sup>20</sup> The practice of the cultivation of indigo prevented the *raiyyat* from availing himself of the three main ecological endowments that provided subsistence in deltaic Bengal: the best land, the right season and the productive power of the land. The Faraizis responded to these challenges with well-developed strategies, ranging from the formation of unions to outright violence. In this context, the Faraizis responded decisively in their own interests

<sup>15</sup>For notes on the antagonistic relations between the Faraizis and the Muslim landlords, see Choudhury 2001, pp. 70-71.

<sup>16</sup>MoE, answer no.139. For a description of competition for *chars* between *raiyyats* and planters, see MoE answer nos. 14, 97, 741. When the Indigo Commission asked an indigo planter whether he had ever found the *raiyyats* disinclined to settle on the *chars*, he replied in the negative. In addition, he had found the *raiyyats*, when settled, 'disposed to dispossess him [the planter] always of the best lands'; see MoE answer no. 14.

<sup>17</sup>Minutes of Richard Temple, RIC, p. XIVII, (381); MOE, answer no. 139.

<sup>18</sup>Comm. of the Chittagong Div., to Under Secy to GoB, no. 33, 13 Jan 1855, RIC, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup>Petition from the inhabitants of Zillah Nuddea to the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, 16 February 1860, in RIC, p.186; see also Offg Magistrate of Nuddea to the Under Secy to the GoB, no. 31, 12 Jan 1855, in RIC, p. 45; see also answers nos. 482-3, 1121, 1212, 1255,1382, 1392, 2360-61, 2513.

<sup>20</sup>A classic example of humane relations between man and his cattle is captured in the Bangla short story 'Mahesh' by Sharat Chandra Chatterjee 2002.

when there was any challenge to their settling on the *khas mahal* (personal, non-rental) lands, particularly *chars*.

Given the widespread discontent among the *goalas*, who were mostly Hindus, the Faraizis sought alliances with them, although they were Hindu.<sup>21</sup> Within their own Muslim community, the Faraizis resorted to Islamic signs and symbols to build up a collective strategy for resistance. A planter reported that he knew an old Muslim *raiya*t who had stopped indigo cultivation. On being asked why he did so, he replied that this was because there was a league formed against the factory, and that he and his fellow villagers had kissed the Quran, and that one village could not settle without the other.<sup>22</sup> During the widespread resistance against indigo cultivation in the late 1850s, the Faraizis widely used the weapon of *hookah-pani-bandh* (social boycott) to make their solidarity invincible.<sup>23</sup> Blair B. Kling has remarked that the Faraizi peasants who participated in the indigo disturbances were a 'tightly organized puritanical sect' and were skilled in 'military organization and the use of arms.'<sup>24</sup> The Faraizis along with other cultivators of indigo were able to cause a stir against the indigo interests<sup>25</sup> and the government was forced to scale down the power of the indigo cultivators and the cultivation of the plant in Bengal.

### The decline of the Faraizi movement

After the death of Noa Miyan in 1884, the Faraizi movement seems to have gradually abandoned its original peasant-oriented agenda and therefore lost its political influence.<sup>26</sup> In the broadest sense, the degeneration of the Faraizi movement could be linked to the decline of the ecological regime of eastern Bengal. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the waterways of the region seem to have been deteriorating for a number of man-made and natural reasons and the process of deterioration continued throughout the twentieth century.<sup>27</sup> The decline in the water regime had far-reaching implications for the Faraizi movement. Firstly, it probably meant a lower rate of creation of new *char* lands, minimizing the scope for expanding their spatial extent. Secondly, the deterioration of the water regime as reflected in water-logging or abnormal flooding also resulted in the decline of an autonomous peasant production pattern upon which the agrarian economy and the Faraizi mobility depended. Thirdly, the Faraizi communication and mobilization network

<sup>21</sup> Nobo Biswas, *tehsildar* (revenue-collector) of an indigo concern, testified against some prisoners, in Nobo Biswas vs. Alum Biswas, Gopal Ghose et al., RIC, p. 267.

<sup>22</sup> MoE, answers nos. 2962, 3072; see also Dampier's report on the leagues or combinations as formed by the Faraizis 'Report on the state of the Police in Lower Provinces, for the first six months of 1842' in the *Calcutta Review*, 1 (May-Aug, 1844), 216.

<sup>23</sup> Ramesh Chandra Dutt, *The Peasantry of Bengal*, ed., Narahari Kaviraj (1<sup>st</sup> published 1874, reprint Calcutta, 1980).

<sup>24</sup> Kling 1966, p. 61.

<sup>25</sup> For Hindu-Muslim cooperation in the indigo movement, see Dina Bandhu Mitra's drama, *Nila Darpana Nataka* 1861.

<sup>26</sup> The remnant of the Faraizi resistance in the countryside was curiously non-agrarian. For instance, the Faraizis were reported to be exceptionally hostile to the program of vaccination against small pox. See *East Bengal and Assam Era*, 20 Jan 1906, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> A detailed discussion of the decline of the water regime is provided in Iqbal 2005.

was entirely built up along the waterways of eastern Bengal. The headquarters of the movement were so connected with different rivers that it was quite easy for the Faraizis to move across the entire Eastern Bengal.<sup>28</sup> The death or fluvial weakness of the river system caused problems of navigation which might have resulted in the displacement of the indigenous network of information gathering and political mobilization. Fourthly, by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the government itself, by dint of superior methods of collecting information of interior landscapes and properties, seems to have obtained a relatively clearer knowledge of the fluid and peripheral ecological regime in which the Faraizis flourished. Since the state could now more confidently ensure its presence in the interior of the delta, the benefit of peripheral wilderness, in which the Faraizis had flourished, ceased to be available.<sup>29</sup>

### Conclusions

In summary, I have argued that while colonial conditions were conducive to many purist-reformist religious movements in India, nineteenth-century eastern Bengal, in particular the Faraizi movement, developed not merely as political resistance to colonial rule, but as a sustained system of mediation and solidarity among the peasantry and that this was due in large part to local agro-ecological variables which it exploited effectively. It was because of this that the Faraizis remained a very popular forum for the peasants although it was not at all syncretistic in religion.

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<sup>28</sup>For further discussion of the development and flourishing of the Faraizi communication and organizational network along various rivers, see Khan 1965, pp.118-20.

<sup>29</sup>Some *diara* surveys were carried out in the 1870s. But the cadastral survey that started by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century truly 'opened up' the countryside. For an analysis of the relationship between the state's strength and scientific knowledge of the landscape, see Scott 1998. For a detail discussion of the early colonial drive for exploring the physical landscape of India, see Edney 1997.

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## Historical Sketch of the Christian Tradition in Bengal

Md. ShaikhFarid\*

**Abstract.** The history of the Christian tradition in Bengal extends for about five hundred years. Though the total number of Christians in the region is not large, theirs is a complex and interesting history. There seems to be no single volume that satisfactorily reconstructs that whole complex history of Christians in Bengal. There are a number of books and other sources that focus on one particular denomination or missionary project or historical event or period. Several that are available in Dhaka are listed at the end of this brief sketch. The sketch itself begins with the founding of a Catholic community by Jesuit, Augustinian, Franciscan and Dominican missionaries in southern and southeastern Bengal in the wake of Portuguese traders in the sixteenth century and later. After some two centuries Protestant missionaries from diverse denominations and European nations began ministering in Bengal, among the most notable being William Carey and his fellow Baptists based at Serampore. With the revision of the charter of the British East India Company early in the nineteenth century, Protestants, Anglicans and Unitarians could more aggressively proselytize, but they gained minimal converts. Subsequently they adopted more respectful attitudes toward Hindu and Muslim religion and found greater acceptance thanks to their educational and medical services. Eventually native-born Christians came to take leadership in most of the Christian churches and denominations in Indian West Bengal and independent Bangladesh.

Indian Christians claim that the Christian religious tradition reached the Indian subcontinent in the first century A.D. Legend has it that St. Thomas the Apostle introduced Christian faith to India in 52 A.D. and converted a group of people of the Malabar coast of Kerala in South India by 58 A.D. Thereafter, various missionaries—Syrian, Roman Catholic (especially the Jesuits) and Protestant—labored in Kerala at different times.

Bengal's contact with Christians started with the coming of the Portuguese in the sixteenth century A.D. For two centuries missionary work was carried on mainly by Roman Catholics. The Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama discovered the sea-route to India and landed at Calicut in 1498. From that time, Portuguese traders settled down in Cranganore, Cochin and Goa. Following the footsteps of Portuguese traders, Franciscan, Dominican, Augustinian and Jesuit missionaries came to those places. The Portuguese traders tried to establish their businesses in Bengal but failed at first. Only in 1537 were they allowed to settle and open customs houses at Hugli and Chittagong. Mughal Emperor Akbar permitted the Portuguese to build permanent settlements and churches in Bengal. In 1598-99 the Jesuits established a school and hospital at Hugli with the permission of Akbar. Augustinians established a monastery at Hugli in 1599, from where they reached out to other centers including Dhaka. By about 1630 there were some 7,000 Christians at Hugli consisting of Portuguese, their wives, their Eurasian descendants and converts. The Portuguese sometimes used force to convert other people to profess Christian faith. The monastery at was destroyed in 1632 when Shah Jahan's forces attacked Hugli and the priests were driven away from there.

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The Portuguese also settled at Chittagong in the sixteenth century under the auspices of the king of Arakan. The Augustinians established themselves there in 1621 and baptized thousands who had been captured in piratical raids. Later in the seventeenth century, Nagari became an important centre, following the conversion of about 20,000 mainly low-caste Hindus by Antonio de Rozario, son of the raja of Bhushna (Jessore), who had himself converted. R.C. Majumdar (1966) discusses a dispute between the two orders of priests, Jesuits and Augustinians, over the supervision of converts and reports that later the converts came back to their previous religion.

The first church in Bangladesh was built in 1599 at Chandecon (also called Iswaripur or old Jessore) near Kaliganj of Satkhira District. Jesuit Father Francisco Fernandez built the Church with the permission of king Pratapaditya. The church was called "Holy Name of Jesus". The second church was also established by the same person in 1600 in Chittagong with the help of Arakan's king. When Dhaka was made the capital of Bengal in 1608, the missionaries started to come there. In 1612, the Portuguese Augustinian missionaries introduced Christian religion in Dhaka. In 1628, they established the church of the Assumption in Narinda. The second church in Dhaka was built in 1677 at Tejgaon. In 1764, Portuguese missionaries built a church at Padrishibpur in Barisal.

The Protestant missionaries started to come into Bengal only about two hundred years after the Roman Catholics. Even before the coming of William Carey in 1793, there were individuals in the service of the East India Company who wished to propagate the Gospel in India, but the Company discouraged it. One such individual was Dr. John Thomas, the Company's surgeon in India. But regular Protestant activity can be dated from 1793, when William Carey of the Baptist Missionary Society arrived. In 1800 Carey settled in Serampore together with Joshua Marshman and William Ward. Although the East India Company had officially banned missionary activities, in 1814 the ban was lifted. Carey laboured in India for seven years without making a single convert. But in the year 1800 the first conversion took place. The convert was Krishna Chandra Pal, a carpenter by profession.

The Serampore pioneers translated the Bible into thirty-six languages, including Bangla, Hindi, Marathi, Sanskrit, Gujarati etc. The Serampore missionaries were the pioneers in the field of education in India. The missionaries concluded that most of the social evils of the country were the result of ignorance or improper education. That is why they devoted themselves to the dissemination of knowledge in general and Christian knowledge in particular. When the ban on missionary activities was removed in 1814, the activities of the Serampore mission spread to wider fields. They established vernacular schools providing elementary education and Christian religious teaching. They prepared textbooks in Bangla for their schools. In 1829 the famous Serampore College was established to provide higher education in arts, science, history, philosophy, medicine and theology for Christian and non-Christian students. The Serampore missionaries made other contributions to the development of Bangla language. These include *A Dictionary of the Bengali Language*, and the periodicals *Digdarshan* and *SamacharDarpan*.

The other missionary groups who came to Bengal after the Baptist Missionary Society included the Church Missionary Society (British) in 1805, Council for World Mission (British Presbyterian) in 1862, Australian Baptist Mission in 1882, the Church of Scotland, New Zealand Baptist Mission in 1886. Oxford Mission in 1895, Churches of God (American) in 1905. After the 1971 war for Bangladeshi independence, there was an influx of yet more Protestant missionaries into Bangladesh, some of whom did relief and development service as well as evangelizing or preaching.

In 1830 a Scottish missionary named Alexander Duff came to Calcutta and founded the Scottish Church College. Carey had been a protagonist of instruction in Indian language. But Duff introduced English as the medium of instruction and this brought a revolutionary change in the educational system. The missionary schools were considered centres for preaching Christian doctrine. Though they provided education for people in general, their main concern was conversion. They tried to convince people that their salvation lay in Christ alone. In this venture their achievement was not so significant. By 1838, the Baptists had converted 3,000 people in Bengal. Most converts were from lower castes. There were some elite *bhadralok* converts, like Protestant Krishna Mohan Banerjee (1813-1885) and Catholic Brahmandhab Upadhyay (1861-1907). Mass conversions were unusual. The Baptists achieved some success in Barisal among Namasudras.

The attitude of missionaries towards Islam and Hinduism was negative. Ram Mohan Roy mentioned that for ten years missionaries had tried to convert Hindus and Muslims in various ways. They distributed books among general people expressing criticism of both religions. They preached the superiority of their religion and the inferiority of other religions in front of the houses of general people. They tried to convince the lower castes and poor people by giving money, education and jobs. Hinduism was considered a false religion and its adherents were condemned for worshipping various gods and goddesses. But by the end of the nineteenth century, missionaries were beginning to show a deeper and more sympathetic understanding of Hindu and Islamic religion.

In spite of these efforts, the influence of Christianity on upper and middle class Hindu religion was not significant. Those who embraced Christianity were mostly from lower castes and tribal peoples. The reason is clear. The lower caste Hindus, who were suppressed and oppressed in Hindu society, could lift their social status by becoming Christian. They were sometimes even provided food, education and medicine without any cost. Though conversion among upper class Hindus was very rare, educated Bengalis were influenced by Christian principles and ethics. English-educated people accepted much of Western culture. The missionary challenge also stimulated reform movements among Hindus such as the Brahmo Samaj. Rammohan Roy and Keshub Chandra Sen were highly influenced by Unitarian ideas. Even girls' education and the abolition of sati and polygamy were in part the result of Christian influence.

When conversion was not taking place at what they considered a satisfactory level, Christian missionaries realized that Christian faith would most effectively be spread in India by Indians. So there was a serious move towards Indianization. Thus more Indian clergy were trained and ordained. In 1930 the Anglican Church in India became independent of the Church of England. In 1935 the Baptist Missionary Society transferred to Indians the responsibility for its activity in India. After partition and independence, India and Pakistan saw a historic movement towards union between the Anglican Church and several Protestant denominations. Dhaka became the seat of a Roman Catholic archbishop and an Anglican bishop. The Baptist Missionary Society in Bangladesh is now called Bangladesh Baptist Songha.

The number of Christians in Bangladesh in 2001 was only around 500,000, about 0.5% of the country's population. The largest single denomination is the Roman Catholic with about 200,000 to 250,000 members. There are more than thirty Protestant denominations in Bangladesh. Nowadays the Catholic Church in Bangladesh is hardly involved in seeking conversions. It gives more importance to social work. Some Protestant denominations, especially Evangelical ones, are more involved in gaining converts particularly among indigenous Adivasi people.

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## Christian Mission and Evangelization in Bangladesh

Dr. Father Tapan De Rozario\*

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**Abstract.** “Go out to the whole world and proclaim the Good News to all creation” (Mk. 16:15), is the last commandment of Jesus Christ to his disciples. Therefore, the Christian Church is a missionary church and her special concern and mission is to preach the Gospel, the Good News, to all the nations. Bangladesh is a South Asian country in which Christian history had its beginning in the early sixteenth century through the efforts of Portuguese missionaries. This essay discusses the evolving sense of Christian mission in Bengal and sketches the major Christian churches and denominations, Protestant as well as Catholic, and their activities in Bangladesh. It also indicates some of the enviroing political, demographic and social factors that impinge upon Christian religious, educational and social endeavors.

### Religio-cultural and socio-political context for mission in Bangladesh

Throughout its long history, the Bengal region has been characterized by a unique coming together of many races, languages and religious traditions. There are represented in Bangladesh Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and other religious traditions and also different groups within each major religious tradition. In terms of language and culture the vast majority of Bangladeshis are Bengalis, but there are various small tribal groups and twentieth-century Hindi-speaking Bihari immigrants and their offspring. As a minority, Christians always try to dialogue with those of other traditions of religious faith. It is important to do so in order to build up mutual fellowship. For example, Catholic institutions, such as schools, colleges and hospitals, serving not only Catholics, are living witnesses of Christian faith. The Episcopal Commission for Christian Unity and Inter-Religious Dialogue in particular is very active arranging various kinds of programs with other religious communities to share Christian values.

While the Christian churches enjoy freedom of worship, the government tends to be wary of their activities. Bangladesh was founded in 1971 as a secular democracy, but in 1975 ‘secularism’ was removed from the Constitution as a ‘pillar’ of the state. Then in March

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1988, Islam was declared the state religion. The government has been moving the country toward the Islamic bloc internationally and Bangladesh is an active member of the Organization of Islamic Conference. This is heightening tension between Muslims and followers of other religious traditions and there is a vociferous minority of Muslim fundamentalists. The government is torn between its identification with the Islamic world and Bangladesh's ethnic affinity with the people of India. This has resulted in some uncertainties regarding the presence of Christian missionaries from registered foreign mission societies. Policy in this regard could change at any time.

The major ethnic group in Bangladesh is the Bengali, which comprises nearly 98% of the population. The Biharis, an immigrant group from India, number between 200,000 and 300,000 and live in crowded refugee camps. Because they supported the former Pakistani government in the war of independence, they are generally unwanted and oppressed. Their number is decreasing due to emigration and absorption of some of their offspring into the Bengali population. Although Bangladesh officially does not recognize the caste system, its effects still linger among the Hindu people. There are some twenty-five major Scheduled Castes (a category designating endogamous groups of low status) in Bangladesh of which the Namasudra caste is the largest. Though Islam does not perpetuate a caste system as such, the Bengali Muslims can be divided into three status categories: Ashraf (better class), Ajlaf (lower class) and Arzal (lowest class). Each of these can be further sub-divided into many sub-groups. The remaining 2% of the population are divided among thirty or more Adibasi or tribal groups, each having its own distinct language.

Bengali is the official and almost universal language of Bangladesh. Over 98% of the people speak it. Urdu and tribal languages make up the remaining 2%. English, however, is widely used in government and business and by the educated elite. Altogether there are forty or so languages in use in Bangladesh. The literacy rate of the population at large is low (ca. 45%) and has not risen dramatically since independence.

In terms of religio-social community, Muslims (almost entirely Sunnis) constitute nearly 90% of the Bangladeshi population, Hindus close to 10%, Buddhists and Christians about 0.5% each with just a scattering of Bahais and others.

### **Christian missions in Bangladesh: overview of responsive and unresponsive groups**

Christian missions have carried on work in Bangladesh for over 400 years. The famous legendary local preacher, Dom Antonio, had tremendous success in preaching the 'Good News' in the Dhaka-Bhawal locality known as Nagori. Some of the finest missionaries, including the famous nineteenth century Baptist, William Carey, labored in Bengal. Moreover, millions of dollars for relief and development have been sent to help this afflicted nation. Yet, after all these efforts, the number of Christians in Bangladesh is less than half of one percent and increasing only slightly above the general population growth rate. After becoming Christians, many people are isolated from their culture, particularly the Muslim and Hindu converts. They become dependent on the mission station for their support.

Among Hindus all the higher castes are virtually unreached. Of the lower castes, many have shown some response to the Gospel (over 2% have become Christian), but from other castes, there are hardly any converts. The Bengali Muslim majority has hardly been touched by the Gospel, since most evangelism is being directed to the religious minorities. The Bihari immigrants from India are also Muslims and they too have been resistant to evangelization. The disturbed political situation in the tribal hill area restricts evangelical work and witness there. Amongst the animist Mru and the Buddhist Chakma, Magh and Khyang, so far only a tiny minority have become Christian.

Churches and missions that concentrate on a single tribe or caste and adapt their strategies accordingly, however, have realized greater growth. This is graphically seen in the amazing receptivity in some tribal areas. Christian groups have been noted for their help in the area of relief and development work. They have enabled the homeless, the hungry and the destitute to start over after the disasters of war, famine and cyclone. Although Bangladesh is officially an Islamic nation, the Church has won many supporters. Because of the Christian response to natural disasters and food shortages, the people and the government view most Christian agencies favorably. Unfortunately, much of the missionary manpower is concentrated in the urban Dhaka region, which has the worst evangelistic record of all the districts. There is only one missionary for every 313,000 people in Bangladesh and thus potentially responsive but unreached peoples are often neglected, notably the tribal groups and Hindus of Namasudra caste. The Baptist, Anglican and Catholic churches have received requests from whole Namasudra villages stating that their members wished to become Christian. But there are simply not enough missionaries to go to them. Another responsive Hindu caste is the Paliya or Rajbansi caste. In 1972-73 a Baptist preacher received requests from 102 Paliya villages to become Christians! Both the Baptist and Lutheran missions are experiencing growth

among the Paliyas of Dinajpur District. Among the responsive tribal groups there are two native churches, the Garo Baptist Union and the Evangelical Christian Church. There are also other mission groups working with these peoples. The Santals are being evangelized by the Bangladesh Lutheran Mission and that Christian community is growing. More than half of the members of the Khai tribe have responded to evangelistic efforts of the (Presbyterian) Kristo Dharmasava. In the Chittagong Hill Tracts various Baptist groups are evangelizing the tribes.

Ministering to the less responsive Hindu and Muslim Bengalis are several Bible correspondence schools located in Dhaka. The Voice of Prophecy School, operated by the Seventh-day Adventists, was the original correspondence school ministry in the country. In 1960 the International Christian Fellowship established an interdenominational and cooperative outreach known as the Bangladesh Bible Correspondence School. The British Brethren Group in 1963 translated the well-known Emmaus courses and formed the Emmaus Bible Studies Correspondence School. Recently, the Assemblies of God mission have launched the ministry of the International Correspondence Institute.

### **The Christian community and its denominations in Bangladesh**

Though the Christian community is very small, there are numerous denominations. The Christian denominations are living side by side. However, there is some competition among them. There are significant numbers of marriages across denominational lines, a practice necessitated by the small size of the various communities. In some areas, joint prayer meetings are very popular.

#### *Roman Catholic*

Christianity came to Bangladesh in the middle of the sixteenth century when the Portuguese set up trading centers. Catholic missionaries—Augustinian, Dominican, Franciscan and Jesuit—soon arrived and began ministering to the Europeans and their Bengali wives and children. Around 1670, a young Bengali was converted and, known as Dom Antonio, returned to his people. By his own efforts, about 20,000 people professed to be Christians. The descendants of this movement of people form the bulk of the Catholic communities of Dhaka and Pabna districts today. By 1673 there were over 30,000 Catholics in the region. Portuguese influence upon the Church ended in 1934 when Pope Gregory XVI set up the Vicariate Apostolic of Bengal. Catholics have had

greatest evangelical success by concentrating on responsive groups of people. For instance, by concentrating on tribal peoples Catholic missionaries succeeded in Christianizing many of them. Likewise, Christians coming from certain caste groups, such as Haris, Muchi or Hrishi, are predominantly Catholic. Many of the Namasudra Christians are also Catholic.

The Roman Catholics account for about one half of Bangladeshi Christians. In 1950, Dhaka became an archdiocese with Chittagong, Dinajpur and Khulna as dioceses. The first Bengali bishop was appointed in 1968 and by 1970 all four dioceses had Bengali bishops. Now there are altogether nine local bishops administering the congregations under their jurisdictions. But even though Bangladesh now has its own Bengali bishops, many of its priests, brothers and sisters still are foreigners.

Catholics in Bangladesh can be divided into five groups by origin: (1) descendants of the Portuguese and their early converts (ca. 30%), (2) converts from lower-caste Hindu groups (ca. 20%), (3) converts from tribal groups (ca. 45%), (4) anglicized Christians (ca. 2%) and (5) converts from Islam (ca. 3%). There are now six dioceses (Dhaka, Chittagong, Dinajpur, Khulna, Mymensingh, Rajshahi).

### *Protestant*

The oldest Protestant missionary work in Bengal is that of the British Baptist Missionary Society, which began its ministry in this area in 1793. This society was followed by the Church Missionary Society and the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in 1805. After the British dropped their policy of non-interference in religion in 1813, missionaries were allowed to enter British Bengal more freely. Nine mission organizations had entered Bengal by the time the British left India in 1947. Since that time, others have begun work here and four British-derived groups have consolidated to form the Church of Bangladesh. By 1980 there were twenty-one mission groups (apart from the Catholics) with nearly three hundred missionaries, more than a third of whom are Baptists.

Currently the largest Protestant missionary denomination is the Association of Baptists for World Evangelization. Among other relatively large missionary groups are: Baptist Missionary Society, Australian Baptist Mission, New Zealand Baptist Mission, Bangladesh Mission of the Southern Baptists, International Christian Fellowship and the Bangladesh Lutheran Mission. Other denominations (with starting dates of their missions in Bengal) include: Anglican Church (1838), which in Bangladesh is known as the



Church of Bangladesh; the Baptist Missionary Society (British,1793); The Bangladesh Northern Evangelical Lutheran Church (1957);the Bangladesh Lutheran Church (1979); the Evangelical Lutheran Church (1957); the Garo Baptist Convention (1890); the Church Missionary Society (1805); the Bangladesh Baptist Fellowship (1919); the Bangladesh Baptist Shongho (1922); the Association of Baptists for World Evangelism (1958); the Churches of God (1905); the Australian Baptist Mission (1882); the New Zealand Baptist Mission (1886); the Seventh Day Adventists (1919);Assemblies of God (1954); the Oxford Mission (1895). In addition are another score or so Protestant denominations active in Bangladesh.

### *Cooperative Agencies*

The Bangladesh Christian Council (BCC) is acting to coordinate church and relief ministries throughout the country.The BCC represents the majority of the Christian missions and national bodies in the country.Efforts have been made to draw together people of similar theological persuasion for unified action in a land where there is only one missionary for every 313,000 people. Areas of cooperation include correspondence schools, relief, theological education, literature production and the Bangladesh Bible Society.Other cooperative enterprises include a language school in Barisal to serve most of the missions. A cooperative evangelistic campaign known as “New Life in Christ” was held in 1970, with a broad base of cooperation. In 1970 a Spiritual Life Convention for missionaries was held in Dhaka with 105missionaries in attendance. The convention continues to be an annual event.

### **Challenges and opportunities**

Several reasons may be adduced for the very slow growth of Christianity in the area that is now Bangladesh. The first is the resistance to the Gospel by the two dominant religious traditions in the region. Islamic and Hindu traditions are deeply rooted in the history and soil of Bangladesh and together claim at least nominal loyalty of 99% of the people. While it is not impossible to communicate the Gospel to the followers of these faiths, they have historically been among the least responsive, especially when they have identified Christianity with Western ideologies or cultural imperialism. Secondly, the very resistance and apparent indifference of Muslims and Hindus (especially of middle and upper castes) to the Christian message led early missionaries in India to concentrate on education at the expense of evangelism. In time education frequently became a substitute for evangelism. The degree to which education was emphasized by early

missionaries in Bengal is indicated by the report that 80 percent of the Christians in Bangladesh are literate, compared to the national average of less than 50 percent. But, however desirable the benefits of education may be, education as an evangelistic tool has not proved particularly effective here. Absent in Bangladesh has been the emergence of any "people's movement" to Christianity of the size and scope found in parts of India and Pakistan. Where such movements have begun they have been primarily among the tribal peoples, leaving the Bengali majority largely unaffected. There was only a small Christian movement among Bengalis in the nineteenth century.

A third factor impeding the growth of Christianity in what is now Bangladesh has been neglect. The problems of resistance and unresponsiveness, coupled with an enervating and debilitating climate, have discouraged many missionaries from continuing—or even beginning—persistent efforts for evangelization of the Bengali people. When Pakistan was formed in 1947, several hundred additional missionaries began to serve in that new Muslim country, but the eastern wing (now Bangladesh), with more than half the country's population, received only about one-third as many missionaries as the western province. The ratio of Protestant missionaries to the population is the lowest in any major country open to Christian missions.

### **Missionary approach: strategy and activities**

#### *Evangelism*

The religion of Islam traditionally has been resistant to any presentation of Christianity. Nowhere are Muslims accepting the Christian faith in any significant numbers. Most of the vital outreach among the Muslims has been spearheaded through the ministry of the correspondence schools, which are uniformly regarded as the prime evangelistic ministry in Bangladesh. However, among Hindu Bengalis there is a growing openness, particularly among the Namasudra caste. The Baptist Union of Bangladesh, for instance, invited the Liebenzell Mission to evangelize this responsive people. As discussed above, when evangelical efforts of a denomination or missionary organization are concentrated, not on individuals, but on a particular tribe or caste as a whole--and when their strategies are adapted accordingly--greater growth is realized. This is graphically seen in the amazing receptivity in some tribal areas.

### *Distribution of literature*

As traditionally missions have put their emphasis on education as a means of evangelism, Christians are now the most educated of the population with an 80% literacy rate. However, except in the case of the Garos, Christian education has not been effective in evangelizing large numbers of people. Even so, distribution of Christian literature continues to play an important role in evangelistic efforts. Many churches and missions sell or give away huge amounts of literature. The Christian Literature Center produced over one million copies of tracts in 1973. The Every Home Contact organization has its people involved in the largest free distribution of tracts in Bangladesh. They follow up their contacts with a simple Bible correspondence course. Literature distribution is an especially useful tool in establishing contact with individuals. The Holy Bible has been translated into various vernacular languages.

### *Education: theological and lay Christian*

A number of missions have sought to involve themselves in theological education over the past 175 years or more of Christian ministry in Bangladesh. The Garo Baptist Union has a small Bible school in Birisiri. A short-term Bible school for Santal believers is sponsored by the Bangladesh Northern Evangelical Church. The Association of Baptists for World Evangelism has conducted short-term Bible schools since 1963. Tipperahs, Moghs, Murungs and Bawns from the Chittagong Hill Tracts attend these schools annually. In 1968, ten mission bodies pooled their resources to establish an extension theological study program. The effectiveness of this College of Christian Theology of Bangladesh has been limited due to lack of textbooks and operating funds.

### *Social Concern*

Christian relief and development work has done much to show Christ's love for the people of Bangladesh. Christian relief after the war of independence in 1971 and after cyclones and famines has opened many people to accept the Gospel. Every mission has been involved in social concern in some way. There are several general hospitals, a leprosy hospital, numerous dispensaries and a family planning organization run by Protestant denominations. Protestant agencies are also involved in home and school construction, childcare, agricultural development and job training. The Catholic Church in Bangladesh likewise has been very active in disaster and famine relief, medical services and a variety of development initiatives especially through its umbrella organization,

Caritas (formerly Catholic Organization for Relief and Rehabilitation, i.e., CORR).

### **Current missionary aspirations: a Roman Catholic example**

A very important part of Christian service is interior spiritual conversion while in conversation and cooperation with peoples of other traditions of religious faith, especially with Muslims, who are the most numerous. Forgetting past conflicts and in a spirit of humility and love, Christians wish to recognize and appreciate better the spiritual gifts of others, moving ahead in mutual harmony, peace and prosperity. We feel one in spirit with so many of our people, who toil so hard, yet joyfully, for their living; we feel one with the poor and those suffering, with the sick, with those who are ethnically or otherwise marginalized. We remember the people in various professions, the young people, and their children. We earnestly desire for the proper education and formation of the vast number of the young, and for the rightful and proper social integration of our women. We keep all the people of Bangladesh in our prayers.

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## Bahai Religious Faith and Tradition in Bangladesh

Muhammad Jahangir Alam\*

*Abstract:* In just over 150 years, the adherents to Bahai faith have grown from an obscure movement in the Middle East to a widespread independent world religious tradition. The global scope of Bahai faith is mirrored in the composition of its membership. Representing a cross-section of humanity, Bahais come from virtually every nation, ethnic group, culture, profession, and social and economic background. About six million followers of the faith reside in more than 100,000 localities around the world and represent more than 2,100 different ethnic groups. This essay reviews the history of how Bahai faith came to be accepted in eastern Bengal and provides a sketch of current distribution, organization and activities of Bahais in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, a large number of people of different communities and indigenous groups, being inspired with that same spirit have become Bahais. Let me here acknowledge the main sources from which I have drawn the information on Bahais in Bangladesh. I conducted interviews and consulted written documents provided by individuals whom I met and consulted in their Bahai Centre located at Shantinagar, Dhaka, and where I made my own observations. I am especially indebted to those who have helped me with some rare and important unpublished written documents and other valuable information. I may specially acknowledge Mahmudul Haq, Abdullah Brooks (an American scientist with the ICDDR, who has been living in Bangladesh for over twelve years), Rahim Sarwar, Mr. M<sup>1</sup>ilon and Mr. Rashidunnabi. All of them are knowledgeable Bahais.

### **Bahai tradition in Bangladesh: early contacts:**

Bahai contacts with the Indian subcontinent may be dated from the very inception of the propagation of this new religious movement. This contact was predominantly commercial. Some early disciples, including relatives of the Bab (forerunner of the Bahauallah, founder of Bahai faith) had business offices in Bombay, India. The first converts in India were from the Parsee community in Bombay. More organized efforts to propagate the faith in India started at the time of Bahauallah, when in 1872 he sent a learned Persian, Sulaiman

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Khan Tunukabani, better known as Jamal Effendi, to India. This Jamal Effendi was an influential figure in the cultural life of the Indian subcontinent. He visited almost all the major cities of India and arrived in Kolkata in 1878. In the course of his travels in India he met a young man, Siyyid Mustafa Rumi, in Madras. Impressed by the great spiritual personality of Effendi, Rumi accepted the new religious faith and accompanied him on his journey to Bengal and Burma. Jamal Effendi was an influential preacher and had a large following of learned Bahai missionaries. They sought out great Muslim religious and other notables and discussed with them the advent of a new message from God. By their religious fervor, missionary zeal, exemplary character and humanitarian activities, they could greatly influence the minds of the masses and attract them to Bahai faith. On their way to Burma Jamal Effendi and Rumi stopped in Dhaka and Chittagong for a few days and met notables of both cities. There is no doubt that under the guidance of Effendi Mustafa Rumi played a vital role in introduction of Bahai faith in Bangladesh.

In the late eighteen-nineties and early thirties Bahais from the West had a large share in the spread of Bahai Faith among the great scholars and leaders. These Persian and Western Bahais had detailed discussions with Indian Intelligentsia that included poet Sir Mohammad Iqbal, Sarojiono Naidu, Annie Besant, Rabindranath Tagore and rulers of the Indian native states and their prime ministers. Miss Martha Root, an American Bahai, who met Tagore on Feb. 13 & 14, 1938, remarks in her published memories he talked about his deep love and appreciation of Abdul Baha. There was an excellent collection of Bahai books in the library of Santiniketan. Tagore expressed hope that there would be a Bahai chair at Santiniketan. Those Bahais created a good impression on their listeners with their vast knowledge, modesty and tolerance of and respect for the views of others.

First conversion to the new religion among the masses by Jamal Effendi's and Mustafa Rumi's efforts occurred in Burma. Missionary zeal and ideal life of Jamal Effendi's companion Mustafa Rumi gained a large number of converts particularly from the villages. He served the cause of Bahai Faith in many ways and due to his good efforts in Barma drew the attention of a sizeable Bengali community there. One Sultan Gazi is considered to be the first person to accept the new religion from among the Bengalis. By the mid-1930s there was a small Bahai group in Chittagong. Small Bahai group belonging to Satkania, Panchlaish and Putia of Chittagong were brought into the faith by Mustafa Rumi, Sultan Gazi and some other Burmese Bahais. At the time of the partition of India in 1947 there were about nine Bahais in what became East Pakistan, all of them living in Chittagong.

In December 1948, Amjad Ali of Bihar, India settled down in Dhaka with the aim of developing the Bahai community in East Pakistan. He was followed by his relatives and some other Bahais from West Bengal. Taking advantage of the peaceful atmosphere he was able to establish a local governing body (local spiritual assembly) in Dhaka in 1952. It was the first local council to be elected in the eastern part of Pakistan. Later on with gradual increase in the number of Bahais another local assembly was elected in Chittagong in 1955 and a third one in Mymensingha in 1961.

Hundreds of Bahai preachers subsequently came to then East Pakistan in different times from Iran, India, the USA, and other countries to help locally settled Bahais in promoting the Bahai Faith. Some of those pioneers even settled down in Bangladesh for the sake of their religion (a person who settles in a foreign country for the sake of promoting religion is called by the Bahais a 'pioneer'). In 1965 a great initiative was taken to spread the message of Baha Faith among the rural people. By 1971 there were about ten local assemblies in the province. To make the efforts more dynamic a Bahai centre was established at Shanti Nagar in Dhaka.

With emergence of independent Bangladesh, Bahais also formed their own National Spiritual Assembly, which was elected in April 1972. This assembly and thirteen local assemblies were incorporated on June 2, 1972. Soon after the independence of Bangladesh, a delegation of Bahai representatives which included a Bahai dignitary from India (Shirin Boman, Counselor) met the then Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. The Prime Minister assured the delegation that all religious minorities were free to practice their religions in the independent, sovereign and secular Bangladesh. Bahais have continued this practice of meeting with President, Prime Minister, Ministers, Police Chiefs, Justices and other relevant authorities. At the end of the first decade of independence there were Bahais in 465 localities and 83 local assemblies. Bahai religion was also taken to minority ethnic groups particularly in Chittagong and Rajshahi.

### **Ethnic and Religious Background:**

Bahai Faith came with the Iranian Indian and Western Bahais. The missionary works of pioneers and preachers and the acceptance of Bahai faith by the Muslims, Hindus, and different ethnic groups—who were attracted by its religious simplicity and social equality and justice—resulted in the growth of the Bahai population and development of the Bahai Society of Bangladesh. I talked to some learned and lay converted Bahais in their Centre in Shanti Nagar, Dhaka and asked them why and how you have been attracted to



a new faith? All of them gave a more or less uniform answer: "Bahai vision of unity." Let me share with you a view of a learned Bahai on this point.

During the late seventies, I was serving in a Bank in Karachi, Pakistan. I came of a Muslim family but had lost my faith due to prejudices among Muslims. One day I found a book about the Bahai faith entitled *Bahullah and New Era* and I immediately picked it up. I read the book and was immediately attracted to the Bahai vision of Unity. When I learned about the Bahai concept of the unity of mankind, I was much excited. I was inspired by the Bahai teachings, because they were free of prejudice.

In 1989, after becoming a Bahai, he migrated (as a pioneer) to Bangladesh, to help with Bahai projects in and outside Dhaka and to promote development among Bahai community in Bangladesh. Finally he settled down in Dhaka.

Bahai people of Bangladesh come from different religious communities and ethnic groups. The immigrant Bahais belong mainly to the stock of the Persians, Indian and Western countries. Till now no accurate statistical surveys, sociological studies or population projection have been made to determine the number of followers. But a conservative estimate by the early 1990s says that there are around 60,000 Bahais in Bangladesh. Bangladeshi Bahais are serving in various important elected and appointed positions of the country. Bahais are thinly spread all over the country. Socially it is difficult to categorize Bangladeshi Bahais, but the majority of them lives in villages and generally belong to the lower middle class. Bahais of both urban and village areas are engaged apart from agriculture, in small business, government and private employment and technical jobs. Bangladeshi Bahais have achieved about 95 percent literacy rate in contrast to a national literacy rate of less than 50%.

### **Bahai literature in Bengali:**

The first Bahai book to be translated into Bengali was *Bahullah and the New Era*, written by Dr. J.E. Esslemont, an English Bahai. It was translated by Amirul Islam, a dedicated Bengali Bahai. This translation was published in 1936 in Kolkata. This book is considered to be the authoritative introduction to the Bahai faith. This book is very important because it is followed by translations of Bahai holy scriptures like the *Hidden Words* and the *Kitab-i-Iqan* (Book of Certitude). These two books were translated by Safdar Ahmed, a Bahai from Chittagong. Presently there are about 60 titles in Bengali language, ranging in subjects from the writings of the central figures of the religion to its history, administrative system, introduction to religion and textbooks for Bahai students. It should be mentioned that all of these books have been translated from English versions. There are also many Bahai booklets and pamphlets in Bengali. These too are translations of English versions. Some periodicals are also published, though not very regularly. One such periodical

is *Nobo Dibosh*, which is being published since July 1987. The most sacred and important scripture of Bahais is the *Kitab-i-Aqdas (Most Holy Book)*. Revealed during the dark days of Bahauallah's imprisonment in Acre, it is the chief repository of the laws and institutions which Bahauallah designed for the world order he conceived. It was written in Arabic and is characterized by a wide range of styles. The *Most Holy Book* was translated into Bengali from its authorized English version for publication in 1998. Bahais keep their library opened to all. Therefore anyone can visit their library and collect pamphlets and periodicals.

### **Social Work:**

Let me start this section with a quotation, "Let your vision be world embracing, rather than confined to your own self." Therefore around the globe, Bahais are united by a common outlook that holds to high moral standards, a modern worldview, and a commitment to serving the wider community. As a result Bahais consider spreading the message of religious tolerance, cooperation, unity, consultation and village-based decision-making as laying the foundation of a new society which will solve social ills more comprehensively and more effectively. Bahais believe that the purpose of earthly life is to acquire spiritual qualities, such as love, faith, and self-service. They seek to fulfill this purpose through a variety of personal, family, and community actions. They undertake public projects as an important means for the training of the soul. In the same way with growing numbers plus increasing resources and experience, Bahais in Bangladesh are taking up more and more projects of social work like medical camps, vocational training and the like. In 1983 the National Bahai Development Institute was established to train teachers for village tutorial schools, as well as for running clinics for poor women and children. Since 1994 annual courses are held to train rural health workers. Conscious efforts are made to involve women in all community affairs. Women are serving in important Bahai administrative posts. They have served as secretary of National Spiritual Assembly in Bangladesh.

### **Propagation of the faith:**

Giving the message of Bahai religion to others is called 'teaching the Cause' by the Bahais. In the absence of a clergy this is an obligation of every individual Bahai. In Bangladesh the method usually adopted is that Bahais go to a village where there is already a Bahai or a sympathizer who helps in meeting people interested to hear about the Bahai religion. They keep many pamphlets, booklets, newsletters; periodicals etc.

on the shelves of their centers' libraries by which interested non-Bahais can easily know about the faith.

**Concluding comment: Bahai impact on society:**

The total number of Bahais in Bangladesh is too small for them to have any major direct impact on society at large. But by bringing together people from different religious, cultural and social backgrounds, especially at the village level, and by their systematic efforts to overcome religious sectarianism, promote education of children and better concepts about women they can attract the attention of others and through them expect to have positive influence upon the wider society. Till now they have been able to maintain a peaceful co-existence with others and live a happy life in Bangladesh.

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## Religious Aspects of Adibasi Life in Bangladesh

Eva Sadia Saad\*

**Abstract.** This essay gives a brief introduction to the religious life more or less typical of thirty or more small ethnic groups, preferably called 'Adibasi' rather than tribal, living mostly in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of southeastern Bangladesh but also in the northern and northwestern edge of the country. The strong influence of group solidarity and economic life on the character of Adibasi religion and culture is stressed and also the tendency of Adibasis to retain much of the religio-cultural features of their traditional way of life even when converted to Christian or Buddhist traditions of religious faith. The disinclination of Hindus and Muslims to seek conversion of Adibasis is noted. During colonial British rule traditional Adibasi way of life was little disturbed, but with the coming of Pakistani independence in 1947 political and economic pressures and intrusion of non-Adibasis into their traditional forested localities have upset much of traditional Adibasi life, including religion based on *jhum* ('slash and burn') cultivation.

The Bengali term 'Adibasi' is a respectable term to denote the communities which were known as tribes or *upajatis* in our country, Bangladesh. 'Adibasi' literally means the original or ancient inhabitants rather than ethnic minorities or groups (although some Adibasi groups entered the Bengal region only a few centuries ago). This term is used as to avoid degradation of these communities, who in reality are depressed or deprived as compared with the vast majority of the Bengali people. But at the same time it must be noted that some of these Adibasis, particularly the Garos and Chakmas, are in many respects better off than some non-Adibasi Bangladeshis.<sup>1</sup> For example, literacy among these two groups is much higher than the national average! So it is, difficult to define Adibasi in a straightforward manner. It denotes primarily any small ethnic group usually living in a specific area (although nomadic ethnic groups are not uncommon in Bangladesh), having strong cultural identity which its members seek to preserve as their precious heritage. The members of these ethnic groups are marked by endogamy (marriage within the community) but more importantly they typically share a common economic life with very little social differentiation or inequality.

Regarding religious beliefs and practices, sociologists and anthropologists place most of their emphases on Adibasis' cultural identities. These are mostly marked by animistic

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<sup>1</sup> One Chakma émigré, Dr. Amit Chakma, recently became president of the University of Western Ontario (Canada).

beliefs and practices. However, a closer scrutiny of these traditions reveals that each Adibasi group has its own customs and traditions which defy any typical classificatory system.<sup>2</sup> According to the Bangladesh census report of 1991, the total number of Adibasis in Bangladesh was ca. 1,200,000, but in reality it is possibly twice that number. The ethnic composition of the Adibasis, unlike that of the population of the mainland Bengalis, is not mixed. Rather they have their origin in two main racial groups, Mongoloid and Australoid. Very little Aryan blood is traceable among the Adibasis. In terms of language and dialects they may be classified as Sino-Tibetan and Austro-Asiatic.

According to Abdus Satter in his book *Aranya Janapadey* (1966) there are twenty-nine ethnic groups traceable in Bangladesh, while Sagata Chakma lists more than thirty and the Bangladesh Adibasis Forum lists more than forty-five Adibasi groups. The habitat of most of the Adibasis is in the south-eastern part of the country, particularly in the hilly areas of Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). About sixteen to twenty such tribes may be identified there. In northern and northwestern parts of Bangladesh also there are quite a large number of Adibasi ethnic groups. In Sylhet and in the northeast also are found some very old settlements of Adibasis. Some of these Adibasis are living in Bangladesh from time immemorial. Their settlements are sometimes mentioned in recorded history and sometimes in oral tradition. The historical circumstances through which these settlements took place are significant for analyzing and interpreting the religious beliefs and practices of the Adibasis.

The Adibasis have their own religious beliefs and practices, which are very colorful and interesting in the sense that they enter into elaborate collective observance of rites and rituals which are different from the religious practices of the Hindus and Muslims in the Bangladesh mainland. The main influence that pervades their religious practices is their economic life. Every ritual that they perform is directly or indirectly related to their main occupation. Thus *jhum* cultivation ('slash and burn'), which still is the traditional economic activity of the Chittagong Hill Tracts people, dominates their religious practices and rituals. Similarly, the hunting groups also perform rituals which are very much related to their occupation. It is significant to note that, in the cases of those who have converted, their Buddhist, Hindu or Christian faith need not conflict with their pre-existing ritualistic practices. On the contrary, in Christian-dominated areas there is a happy blending of their erstwhile practices with their newly accepted religious faith and practices. The Hindu and Buddhist cultures have been so subtly enmeshed in their life-styles that these

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<sup>2</sup> Eva-Sadia Saad, "Upajati Dharma: Akti Tatik Samikha," *Dhaka Bishyabiddalay Patrika*, No. 79 (June 2004), 147.

are hardly distinguishable as different identities. This may not, perhaps, be characterized as syncretism as Asim Roy has defined the term (which may have a pejorative connotation), but certainly it is akin to Bengali folk or popular religion.

In Bangladesh almost all Adibasi groups follow their own customs and traditions relating to birth, marriage and death. Though there are some common practices among these groups, by and large they tend to develop their own customs, which have been practiced from time immemorial. To enumerate some of these rites and rituals would take more space than we have here. But, for the purpose of research in the religious history of Bangladesh, it will be necessary to investigate these practices in detail and to compare them with the practices among the Bengali population as a whole. It may be worthwhile to mention here that Garos, who have been largely converted to Christianity of different denominations, are today still following practices akin to animism. The supernatural according to their beliefs is known as '*mite*.' *Mite* denotes both gods and goddesses as well as spirits. Garos believe that *Mite* can be kind, helpful and friendly, but that bad *mite* can be cruel and harmful to humans. With the Garos we also find strong belief in their own myths and mythologies, which have been handed down to them from generation to generation. This veneration of ancient myths has been so easily assimilated by them that their rituals of church-going and animistic practices go hand in hand. Similar practices are also found among all other Adibasi groups without any qualms, so much so that it may appear as one single system of religious belief and practice. Interestingly, another group, the Chakmas, one of the most advanced enlightened groups, like many other indigenous peoples of the Chittagong Hill Tracts, profess Buddhism. But in reality many of them worship gods and goddesses such as Ganga and Lakshmi. Their life, it appears, is full of festivals; singing and dancing are highly valued parts of their religious customs and rituals.

Like Adibasi groups the world over, Bangladeshi Adibasis also have subgroups and clans. Their subgroups and clans have influence on their religious life. For example, Chakmas are divided into three groups. In every group there are several clans. These are called '*guthis*' in Chakma terminology; the *guthi* gets prominence in matters of birth, marriage and death. Interestingly, different *guthis* follow different taboos in their religious practices. Religious practices are also closely related to the patterns of family structure. Some of the Adibasi groups follow patriarchy while matriarchy is not uncommon among others. Interestingly, in some of the clans of Tripuras in the Chittagong Hill Tracts bilineal heritage is still prevailing.

An aspect of Adibasi Manipuris' culture that is worth noting is its curious combination of popular Vaishnavism and orthodox Hinduism. Despite this, it is still possible to see glimpses of ancient cult and tradition that prevailed in pre-Hindu Manipuri society. It is interesting to note that nowadays some followers of Muslim religion are found among the Manipuris, though their number is insignificant. In spite of the fact that in Bangladesh by far the majority of people are Muslims, very few Muslims are found among the Adibasis. While Christian missionaries have been successful in converting large numbers of different Adibasi groups, Muslims did not make much headway in this regard.

Most ethnic Adibasi groups of Bangladesh do not have any written scripts. But those groups that are influenced by Hindu, Buddhist and Christian religion are deferential towards the books of their respective religious traditions, namely, the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Veda*, *Puranas*, *Tripitaka* and *Bible*. But the Chakmas are found to possess, besides the *Tripitaka*, a few religious scriptures of their own in which they have strong faith: the *Agar Tara*, *Sigalmogal Tara* etc.

Changes in the lifestyle of the Adibasis in Bangladesh are comparatively recent. Changes in dialect, language and literature have been taking place since the inception of British rule. But the process was extremely slow as the colonial powers did not try to disturb their lifestyle except in a peripheral manner through the missionaries. By and large the British did not disturb the prevailing traditions of religious faith, such as Hindu or Muslim, throughout the subcontinent. The colonial rulers also did not try to interfere with the economic life of the Adibasis, as a result of which the religious and cultural activities of these people remained unadulterated. But, beginning with independence in 1947, sporadic settlements of non-Adibasi Bengalis in different parts of the Chittagong Hill Tracts and other Adibasi areas have brought major transformations of the economic and cultural life of these people with consequent change in their religious rites and rituals.

In conclusion we may observe that the religious beliefs and practices of the Adibasis typically are much more pervasive and penetrating in the lives of the persons concerned than are those of the non-Adibasi Bengalis. Several reasons for this may be pointed out. First, the religious customs that they follow are based on their community life, which is very much marked by cohesiveness and group solidarity. Second, the rituals are mostly connected with their economic life and hence they become part and parcel of their daily life. Finally the bond of clans and subgroups is fostered by strong allegiance to their rulers or headmen, who combine in themselves both political and religious authority.

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## Proposed Bibliography on Religion in the Bengal Region

FazlulAlam\*

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**Abstract.** We are proposing to produce a bibliography of published scholarship on the subject 'Religion in the Bengal Region' and to offer alongside it a guide to research facilities available nationally and internationally that might be tapped to support further research in this area.

There is no single way to prepare a bibliography. Researchers, while writing a dissertation or essay, are expected to write about the studies already made on their subjects. This is called 'literature search'. The correct way to write this is to find literature relevant to the particular research / dissertation / essay and then to be able to assess their relevance to the paper to be written. Librarians, on the other hand, do not proceed in that way. They usually develop a sort of 'How to find out about . . . ' and then go on systematically to search the relevant sources of information including published as well as unpublished materials. The librarians have one advantage over the researchers in that the former would not necessarily take the trouble of reading the titles they find, but the latter must.

In our proposed project of producing a bibliography, we are not simply talking about a bibliography or list of references that usually follows a text between two covers, or a particular book or article. We are thinking of producing a 'stand alone' bibliography that would have some universal value albeit within certain limitations, such as time-space and determination of what constitutes our range of subject. We have to bear in mind that such bibliographies can never encompass everything, though there have been many attempts to do so. There was, for instance, an attempt to produce an up-to-date bibliography of all published books from 1475 to 1700, the *Short-Title Catalogue of English Books* (by Pollard / Redgrave and later Wing). But, considering that the inclusion of full 'bibliographical details' would be an awesome task, it was decided to make it

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short in details and thus it was named *Short Title Catalogue*, better known as STC. This was an attempt for an enumerative and comprehensive bibliography. But as the number of publications increased, upkeep or updating this became impossible. Much later, in 1950, *British National Bibliography* (BNB) was launched with weekly listing of books published with British imprint (i.e., the ones submitted as copyright deposits) with indexes cumulated monthly and quarterly, with full accumulation in a yearly volume. There are also published five-year cumulations. The beauty of this BNB is that though it does not annotate about the contents, nor offer any analytical entries, the entries are fully classified by Dewey (now also with Library of Congress) class numbers and indexed with added entries and subject details. Thus it is a great help for researchers. In the United States the Library of Congress (LC) produces similar bibliographies, but they are not restricted to the US copyright deposits or US imprints only, but cover whatever is added to the LC.

However, leaving aside these historical discussions, for which we may reserve another date, let me just mention here another development in recent years in the availability of academic library holdings. The dream of librarians to make a Union Catalogue of their catalogues could not be materialized successfully until the advent of electronic data processing through microprocessors (in short Computerized Catalogue). In the UK, COPAC (and some other systems) has successfully produced such a Union Catalogue of some major university libraries. This is an excellent tool to search for publications that are added to a number of academic university libraries irrespective of the place of publication.

Let us now talk about my idea of (A) what to include, (B) how to proceed to make the desired bibliography of 'Religion in the Bengal Region' and (C) what would be its format.

A – What to include:

- Primary materials (i.e., religious scriptural texts, writings by religious figures, documents of religious institutions etc.)
- Secondary materials (i.e., scholarly and reportorial material, even some fictional material of repute, if selected with extreme care)

- Guide to repositories of resources (i.e., libraries, museums, private institutions, internet resources etc.)

- Advice on accessing materials mentioned above.

(All pertinent materials are to be listed irrespective of their ready availability in Bangladesh, India or elsewhere. Even for items that are available, the bibliography need not give their location, though it should refer the scholar to libraries, websites or other means whereby they could be located and accessed.)

#### B – How to proceed:

- Because we do not have available much in the way of bibliographies on the subject area as such, we may consult the resources cited in dependable books and articles and from these extract materials to add to our lists. In this exercise a number of relevant journals would be searched for what they can contribute to our project. Internet websites may be utilized but should be screened with extreme care.

- Time factor. I believe that, once the project is agreed upon by sufficient participants and actually begun, a basic list can be prepared in three months (depending on availability of volunteers and their guides). After an additional three to six months of scrutiny, evaluation and formatting, an initial version could be ready for publication (in printed and digital forms) in nine months.)

#### C – What sort of format?

- *Main entry* will comprise serial number and full entry, including: (if book) author/editor, date of publication, title, publisher and place of publication; (if article in journal) author, date, article title, journal title, vol., no., pages; (if a paper / chapter in an edited volume) author, date, paper title, editor's name, volume title, publisher and place of publication, pages. There would be special styles for MSS, theses, Internet sources etc.

- *Subject note* should specify the subject(s) of the book / article etc. For this help may be taken from the CIP (Catalogue in Publication) found on the reverse of the title page of many books, also from a series title, if any, and one's own judgment. Usually it would be useful to have a number of subject names.

- *Title section* should comprise the title as given on the title page of a book, with full name and initials of any author(s) other than the main author already referred to in the author field. In some cases a book may be edited by a person other than

the author(s) of an(y) article(s) in the book. It would be necessary to include all such details in the note area.

- *Standardized form* will be provided in printed and digital format on which the information stipulated above may be entered for each source item.

- *Subject index, author/editor name index* and *title index* will be compiled by editor of the bibliography.

## APPENDIX

### Seminars and Consultation in the Department of World Religions and Culture, University of Dhaka

#### ***Seminar on Academic Study of Religion – 2003***

- S[ession]1 'Introduction to academic study of religion: history, characteristics, issues, training'  
Joseph T. O'Connell (University of Toronto [UT]), seminar coordinator
- S2 'What is meant by "religion"? Pertinence of the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith'  
J.T. O'Connell (UT)
- S3 'Relationship between academic study of religion and personal faith, values and aptitudes of the scholar'  
KaziNurul Islam (World Religions& Culture [WRC], University of Dhaka [DU]); GervasRozario (WRC, DU; Major Seminary, Dhaka); J.T. O'Connell (UT)
- S4 'Historical discipline and methods in the study of religion'  
AshfaqueHossain (History [Hist], DU); Fazrin Huda (WRC, DU); J.T. O'Connell (UT)
- S5 'Art history discipline and methods in the study of religion'  
Najma Khan Majlis (Islamic History and Culture [IHC], DU)
- S6 'Study of religion through literature'  
AminurRahman (Bangla [Bang], DU)
- S7 'Religious instruction in primary and secondary education in Bangladesh'  
Masuduzzaman (Institute of Education and Research [IER], DU); Miriam Begum (IER, DU)
- S8 'Modernization, Secularism and Islam'  
Syed Anwar Husain (Hist, DU)

#### ***Seminar on History of Religion in Bengal – 2007***

- S1 'Orientation and objectives of the seminar'  
J.T. O'Connell (UT)
- S2 'Iconographic and archaeological evidence for pre-Aryan religion in Bengal: Chandraketurgarh'  
EnamulHaque (International Centre for Study of Bengal Art [ICSBA], Dhaka)
- S3 'Sociological approaches to religious history in Bengal'  
K.A.M. Saaduddin (Sociology [Soc], DU)
- S4 'Religious traditions in Bengal up through the Sena period'  
Paresh Chandra Mandal' (Sanskrit [Sk], DU)
- S4 'Issues affecting the Buddhist tradition in Bengal'  
Niru Kumar Chakma (Philosophy [Phil], DU)
- S5 'Religious history of Bengal: the advent of Islam'  
Md. Abu Sayem (WRC, DU)
- S5 'The Islamic tradition in Bengal: its characteristics as reflected in art and architecture'  
Najma Khan Majlis (IHC, DU)
- S6 'Christianity in Bengal: origins and developments'

- Md. ShaikhFarid (WRC, DU)
- S6 'History of Christianity in Bengal: evangelization and mission in Bangladesh'  
TapanRozario (WRC, DU)
- S6 'Religious aspects of Adibashi life in Bangladesh'  
Eva SadiaSaad (WRC, DU)
- S7 'ChaitanyaVaishnavabhakti as integrating disparate socio-cultural interests in Sultanate Bengal'  
J.T. O'Connell (UT)
- S7 'Bengali devotional music and song: *padaboli-kirtan*'  
KarunamayaGoswami (Vice-Chancellor of Cambrian College, Dhaka)
- S8 'Further reflections on the origins of the Muslims in Bengal'  
Abdul MominChowdhury (Hist, DU)
- S8 'Anthropological perspectives on the *mazar* cult at Mirpur'  
H.K.S. Arefeen (Anthropology [Anth], DU)
- S8 'Ecological perspectives on the Faraizi Movement'  
Iftekharylqbal (Hist, DU)
- S9 & S10 'History of religion in Bengal: Significant Scholarship, Current Situation, Future Prospects'  
Roundtable discussions (two sessions) of priorities, chaired by K.A.M. Saaduddin (Soc, DU)
- S11 'Buddhirmuktiandolan o Dhaka Muslim SahityaSabha' (Freedom of intellect movement andthe Dhaka Muslim SahityaSabha) [in Bangla]  
AbulKasemFazlulHaque (Bang, DU)

**Seminar on Academic Research on Religion in Bengal – 2008**

- S1 'Report on recent research on religion in Bengal'  
J.T. O'Connell (UT)
- S2 'What do we mean by "religion" as a subject for academic research?'  
Roundtable discussion on paper by J.T. O'Connell (UT)
- S3 'Researching on the religious implications of migrant Bengali women's experience'  
ThérèseBlanchet (Director ofDrishti, Dhaka)
- S4 'Views of religion by some late 19th-century Bengali Muslim Writers'  
Anisuzzaman (Bang, DU)
- S4 'Kayektisampratik Bangladeshi Musulmantariqasamparkesamalocana' (Critique of somecontemporary Bangladeshi Muslim organizations) [in Bangla]  
Abdullah al Mahmud (WRC, DU)
- S5 'Bahais in Bangladesh: a brief report'  
Md. Jahangir Alam (WRC, DU)
- S5 'Sociological approach to research on religion: Bangladesh perspectives'  
K.A.M. Saaduddin (Soc, DU);  
Responses by KaziNurul Islam (WRC, DU) and J.T. O'Connell (UT)

**Consultation on Prospects for Dialogue and Religious Studies in South Asian Universities — 14, 15, 16 March, 2010**

Day 1 – 14 March, 2010

Morning inaugural session: 10:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m. – Presiding: KaziNurul Islam (WRC,DU)

Convener: Eva SadiaSaad (WRC, DU)  
Chief Guest: Vice-Chancellor A.A.M.S. ArefeenSiddique (DU)  
Special Guest: Pro-Vice-Chancellor Harun-or-Rashid (DU)  
Keynote speaker: Joseph T. O'Connell (UT)

Afternoon working session: 4:00 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. – Presiding: Syed Anwar Husain (Hist, DU)

1. The meaning of 'religion' in South Asian contexts – Consulting: Asha Mukherjee (Visva-Bharati [V-Bh], India), Bijoy Mukherjee (V-Bh, India), K.A.M. Saaduddin (Soc, DU)
2. 'Dialogue' in relation to 'religious study' : How to teach about another's religion – Consulting: KaziNurul Islam (WRC, DU), Gisela Webb (Seton Hall University [SHU], USA), Fr. Emmanuel Rozario (WRC, DU), ShaikhFarid (WRC, DU)

Day 2 – 15 March, 2010

Morning working session: 10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. – Presiding: Asha Mukherjee (V-Bh, India)

1. Addressing women's issues in the study of religion – Consulting: VijayaRamaswamy (Jawaharlal Nehru University [JNU], India), Eva SadiaSaad (WRC, DU), Thérèse Blanchet (Drishti)
2. Understanding religious mentalities through literature and language - Consulting: Monsur Musa (Institute of Modern Languages, DU) , Paresh Chandra Mandal (Sk, DU)

Afternoon working session: 4:00 p.m. – 6:30 p.m. – Presiding: Gisela Webb (SHU)

1. Progress reports on recent / current research on religion – Reporting: SusmitaChatterjee (JNU), Md. Abu Sayem (WRC, DU)
2. Studying religious sentiments expressed through the arts – Consulting: Michael Webb (Drexel University, USA), Pierre-Alain Baud (Music researcher, France), KarunamayaGoswamy (Cambrian College, Dhaka)

Evening video program of Sufi music and rituals: 7:30 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. – Presenting: Pierre-Alain Baud

Day 3, 16 March 2010

Morning working session: 10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. – Presiding: Aminul Islam (Phil, DU)

1. Students' session: their objectives, concerns and suggestions – Consulting: Students of WRC, DU
2. Survey of existing university programs in religious studies in South Asia and Indonesia; practical proposals for developing religious studies in South Asian universities - Consulting: scholars with experience in their respective universities: Eva SadiaSaad (DU), Nurul Husain Choudhury (University of Rajshahi [RU]), Md. Aminul Islam (Islamic University, Kushtia), Asha Mukherjee (V-Bh, India), VijayaRamaswamy&SusmitaChatterjee (JNU, India), Gisela Webb (SHU & GajaMada University, Jogjakarta, Indonesia), VellakudyAlagaratnam (Eastern University of Sri Lanka)

Afternoon working session: 4:00 – 6-30 p.m. – Presiding: K.A.M. Saaduddin (Soc, DU)

1. Social scientific methods and resources for religious studies in South Asia – Consulting: A. Aminul Islam (Soc, DU), Bijoy Mukherjee (V-Bh, India), RaziaAkterBanu (Political Science, DU), H.K.S. Arefeen (Anth, DU), RehanMasoom (Soc, DU)
2. Historical methods and resources for religious studies in South Asia – Consulting: A. MominChoudhury (Hist, DU), EnamulHaque (ICSBA), Nurul Husain Choudhury (RU), J.T. O'Connell (UT)
3. Formal conclusion and expressions of thanks – KaziNurul Islam (WRC, DU)

Evening program of Bengali song: 7:30 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.