

## Islam in Bengal: Formative period

The questions relating to the initial identity of the Bengal Muslims in the formative period during the tenure of the Turk-Afghan and the Mughal rulers have stimulated renewed interest among the historians over the last two decades. The research work of Rafiuddin Ahmed on the Bengal Muslims was a pathfinder.<sup>1</sup> This was followed by Richard Eaton, who provided a refreshing economic background for understanding how the peasants were increasingly attracted to Islam in eastern and south-eastern Bengal, particularly during the Mughal rule.<sup>2</sup> Eaton's pioneering work, however, did not deal with the philosophic domain of religious discourse which was taking shape in Bengal between the *Sahajiya* syncretistic tradition and Sufism of Islam during the period from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. For this dimension, we have to go back to the well-known philosophical works of Kshitimohan Sen and Sashibhusan Dasgupta, both of whom were profoundly influenced by Rabindranath Tagore.<sup>3</sup> These earlier works of eminent philosophers as well as the recent historical research of Rafiuddin Ahmed and Richard Eaton would provide us an optimum range of source materials on the shaping of the identity of Bengal Muslims across the period from the 13<sup>th</sup> century to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This was the formative phase for the spread of Islam in Bengal under the Turk-Afghan and the Mughal rule. This paper will envisage to delineate the salient features of the initial identity of the Bengal Muslims in the formative phase.

We will begin with the philosophic domain of *Sahajiya* religious tradition of Bengal in order to understand the process of its subsequent interaction with Sufism of Islam. The *Sahajiya sadhana* or religious tradition was brought into focus through philosophical formulation of the Buddhist *Sahajiyas* at the popular level under the Pala rule in Bengal during the period from the 8th century to the 11th century. The *Charyapadas* and the *Dohas* were the literary expression of the popular *Sahajiya* philosophy which sought to uphold a heretic counterpoint to the Brahmanic Hindu orthodoxy. The basic tenet of *Sahajiya* tradition was embedded in *ujan-sadhan* or the philosophy of the 'reverse path' or 'sailing against the current'. The *Sahajiyas* would proceed in a direction opposite to what was advocated by sectarian scholastic scriptures. They would avoid all forms of institutional

religion in which the natural piety of the soul was overshadowed by the useless paraphernalia of ritualism and pedantry. The ultimate object of the 'reverse' journey of the *Sahajiyas* was to return to one's own self which was *sahaja* or inborn in nature. This approximation to one's real self was fundamentally based on the method of self-realisation. The return journey for self-realisation was *sahaja* not because the path was easy to travel but because it was the most natural path for the attainment of what the *Sahajiyas* would call the 'ultimate reality'. The first systematized form of the *Sahajiya* movement, which could be found in the school of the Buddhist *Sahajiyas*, was followed by that of the Vaisnava or '*saguna*' *Sahajiyas*. The Bauls emerged from this earlier *Sahajiya* background and enriched the movement with their own '*nirguna*' characteristics, which would subsequently provide a crucial element for discourse with the incoming Sufis of Islam<sup>4</sup>.

The Pala rulers, who had traditional roots in Bengal, were Buddhist, but they did not seek to impose Buddhist religion on the people of the delta. The tolerant ethos of the Pala rule, which lasted for about 400 years, provided the humanist philosophy of the *Sahajiyas* with a social space for striking a deep anchorage in Bengal. This anchorage, however, began to face a crisis when the new Brahmin rulers of the Sena dynasty, who came from Karnataka and who dislodged the Palas towards the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, unleashed an organized attempt to erode the widespread *Sahajiya* social base in Bengal. This they did by imposing, for the first time in the society of Bengal, the caste-ridden Hindu orthodox hierarchy of northern India, with the help of codification of *Brahmavaivarta Purana* and *Brihatdharma Purana*, the first *Smriti* texts in Bengali. In a sustained opposition to this imported orthodox trend, the popular *Sahajiya* tradition of Bengal reasserted itself during the Turk-Afghan and the Mughal rule, stretching over 500 years from the early decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century till the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. During this period the *Sahajiya* tradition, as indicated earlier, manifested itself in two interconnected streams: the '*saguna*' Bhakti movement of the Vaisnavas led by Chaitanyadeva and the '*nirguna*' *Sahajiya* movement of the Bauls.

The Sena dynasty was mostly ousted in the first decade of the 13<sup>th</sup> century by the Turk-Afghan chieftains whose religion was Islam. The important Muslim groups, who accompanied the Turkish chieftains, consisted of long-distance traders, administrators, leaders of imperial corps, orthodox *mullahs* and *maulavis*, and literati. These immigrants from beyond the Khyber, who sought to adopt Perso-Islamic life style and cultivate Arabic and Persian literature, were denoted as *ashraf* or Muslim aristocratic classes.<sup>5</sup> Though they were minority in the midst of the vast majority of non-Muslim population in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, the *ashraf* classes began to hold crucial political and administrative positions in the new ruling hierarchy. They settled down in

cities like Gaur, Pandua, Satgaon, Sonargaon and Chittagong. They were urban dwellers and hardly showed inclination to mix with the rural inhabitants of Bengal. Their major goal was to consolidate their own political power under the Sultan or the provincial ruler in a territory which was almost entirely non-Muslim. The orthodox *mullahs* and *maulavis*, belonging to the *ashraf* classes, tried to prevail on the Sultans to build up a religious infrastructure which could expedite the process of political consolidation.

Husain Shah, who was the most important Sultan in the Turk-Afghan period, had, however, other priorities. He, like Iliyas Shah and other major Sultans, was, no doubt, keenly aware of the need to consolidate the political foundation of the Sultanate in an alien province like Bengal. However, his main concern was to strengthen the land revenue administration with the cooperation of the local zamindars who were overwhelmingly Hindu by religion. A contradiction was emerging between the imperial authorities in Delhi and the provincial Sultans of Bengal in respect of sharing of the land revenue surplus from Bengal which was considered to be one of the prosperous provinces of the country. Husain Shah was deeply concerned to have the steady cooperation of the zamindars of Bengal in his thrust to sustain a kind of autonomous position in matters of land revenue administration of Bengal, which would not be subservient to the increasing demands of the imperial authorities in Delhi. In this crucial context, Husain Shah was not at all inclined to hurt the religious sensibilities of the Hindu zamindars of the province. It should be noted that he cordially inducted Rupa and Sanatana Goswami, the two eminent Vaisnava scholars, to take charge of the highly responsible positions in land revenue administration of Bengal. It was also true that Husain Shah responded to the requests of the orthodox *ashraf* clerics to some extent. Thus, he extended his cooperation to build mosques and *madrassas*, patronized Islamic scholars, gave support to Islamic religious endowments, and appointed *qazis* or Islamic judicial officers.<sup>6</sup> However, it should be simultaneously pointed out that the reign of Husain Shah witnessed an efflorescence in the two major streams of medieval Bengali literature: *Vaisnava-kavya* and *Mangala-kavya*. Towards the end of the Turk-Afghan period, immigration of *ashraf* Muslims from beyond the Khyber and northern India began to wane.<sup>7</sup>

The spread of Islam in Bengal could not, thus, be explained by the presence of the Turk-Afghan rulers who did not, as a state policy, advocated conversion. The Turk-Afghan period provided a general backdrop for the formative phase of Islam which began to take concrete shape in the subsequent period under the Mughal rule. The process of economic growth in Bengal, which was initiated during the reign of Sultan Husain Shah, assumed wider dimension during the Mughal period due to two major reasons. One

was geographic in nature, laden with economic consequences. In the ancient and early medieval times, the Ganges flowed down the Bengal delta's western corridor through the Bhagirathi-Hooghly channel, emptying into the Bay of Bengal near Kolkata. This left eastern Bengal disconnected from the Ganges system. Due to continual sedimentation, however, the Ganges gradually began to spill out its former river-bed and find new channels to the east<sup>9</sup> — the Bhairav, the Mathabhanga, the Garai-Madhumati, and the Arial Khan — until finally, in the late 16th century, it linked up with the Padma, enabling its principal course to flow directly into the heart of East Bengal. <sup>9</sup> European maps dated 1548, 1615, 1660, and 1779 clearly showed this riverine movement.<sup>10</sup> The implications of the eastward movement of the Ganges were far-reaching. It linked the economy of eastern Bengal with wider markets, since it opened up a heavily forested and formerly isolated region to direct commercial contact with upper India.

Closely connected with this geographic change, the second factor was more important. The eastward movement of the Ganges carried with it the epicentre of Bengali civilization, since its annual flooding deposited the immense load of silt that made possible the better cultivation of wet rice in eastern Bengal, which, in turn, could sustain larger concentrations of population in the eastern part of the delta.<sup>11</sup> Changes in the Mughal revenue demand between 1595 and 1695 reflected the changes in the relative fertility of different parts of the delta, since such figures were based on the capacity of the land to produce grain. Over the course of these 64 years, revenue demand jumped by 117 per cent in the delta's most ecologically active south-eastern region, and by 97 per cent in the north-east. On the other hand, it increased by only 54 per cent in the less active south-west, whereas in the ecologically moribund north-west it actually declined by 13 per cent.<sup>12</sup>

The merger of the Ganges with the Padma took place at a time when the whole of Bengal was being absorbed into the Mughal empire under Akbar. Unlike the Turk-Afghan rulers of Bengal, who situated their capitals in the north-western delta (i.e., Gaur, and Pandua), the Mughals in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century planted their provincial capital at Dhaka in the heart of the eastern delta. This meant that for the first time ever, eastern Bengal, formerly an underdeveloped, inaccessible, and heavily forested hinterland, became the focus of concerted and rapid political and economic development. Indeed, by the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Bengal was producing so much surplus grain that rice emerged as an important export crop, which had never happened before. From two principal sea-ports, Chittagong in the east and Satgaon in the west, rice was exported throughout the Indian ocean to points as far west as Goa and as far east as the Moluccas in South-East Asia.<sup>13</sup> Although the eastward export of rice declined after 1670, in lower Bengal it remained cheap and

abundant throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> century and well into the 18<sup>th</sup>. In this respect, rice now joined cotton textiles, the delta's principal export commodity.<sup>14</sup>

In the ecologically active portions of East Bengal, the forest pioneer turned out to be the pivotal figure, who would be tied economically to the land and politically to the expanding Mughal state. Concerned with the need for bringing stability to their turbulent<sup>15</sup> and underdeveloped eastern frontier, the Mughals did more than plant their provincial capital at Dhaka in the heart of the eastern delta. They also granted favourable or even tax-free tenures of land to industrious individuals who were expected to clear and bring into cultivation undeveloped forest tracts.<sup>16</sup> The policy was intended to promote the emergence of local communities that would be both economically productive and politically loyal. Every recipient of such grants, Hindu or Muslim, was required to support his dependent clients and to pray for the long life of the Mughal state.<sup>17</sup> Hundreds of Mughal records, dating from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century down to the advent of British power in 1757, would testify to the steady push of the forest pioneers into unexplored jungle and their recruitment of local people to clear the forest and bring the land into rice cultivation.<sup>18</sup> As they themselves mobilized local labour for these purposes, the forest pioneers played decisive roles in the socio-economic development of the eastern delta. Through their agency, much of these region witnessed either the introduction or an intensification of wet rice cultivation, while local communities formerly engaged primarily in hunting, fishing, or shifting agriculture began to devote more time to full-time wet-rice peasant agriculture.

These pioneers also played decisive roles in the religious development of the region, as one of the conditions for obtaining a grant was to build on the land a mosque or temple, to be supported in perpetuity out of the wealth produced on site. Grants made out to Hindu institutions (i.e., *brahmottar*, *devottar*, *sibottar*) tended to integrate local communities into a Hindu-oriented cultural universe, whereas grants authorizing the establishment of mosques or shrines (like, *piran*) tended to integrate such communities into an Islamic-ordered cultural universe.<sup>19</sup> As majority of the pioneers were Muslims, mosques or shrines constituted the major component of the newly constructed religious establishments in the villages, with the result that the dominant mode of piety that evolved on East Bengal's economic frontier was Islamic. These rural mosques were not architecturally comparable with the great stone or brick religious monuments which the Mughal rulers themselves built in the cities. These were, rather, humble structures built on thatching and bamboo. Nonetheless such simple structures exercised considerable influence among the indigenous people living in the villages of eastern Bengal. Communities of Muslim cultivators were first reported in the Dhaka

region in 1599, in the Noakhali area in the 1630s, and in the Rangpur region in 1660s.<sup>20</sup> Long after the founding pioneers of the local mosques died, the same establishments they had built would continue to diffuse Islamic religious ideals among local communities, since Quran readers, callers to prayer, and preachers were also supported in perpetuity according to terms specified in the foundational grants. In consequence, many pioneers, who had obtained the land grants, mobilized labour, and founded these rural mosques, passed into subsequent memory of the local communities as powerful saints or *pirs*.<sup>21</sup> The 16<sup>th</sup> century texts of *Chandi-Mangala* (composed by Mukundaram) and *Sekhsubhodaya* (composed by Halayudha Misra) would also bear literary evidence of these major socio-economic and religious transformations of medieval Bengal.<sup>22</sup>

A contradiction tended to emerge in the context of the spread of Islam in rural Bengal. The *ashraf* or Muslim aristocratic classes, under the Turk-Afghan as well as the Mughal rule, had consistently refused to engage themselves in agricultural operations and showed a disinclination to convert Bengali cultivators to Islam. The chief Mughal administrators like Islam Khan had even opposed Islamization of local people of Bengal and, on one occasion, punished one of his officers for allowing it to happen.<sup>23</sup> Although the Mughal government did not intend to Islamize the East Bengal countryside, such an outcome nonetheless resulted from its land policies. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, owing principally to phenomenal levels of agrarian and demographic expansion in East Bengal, the dominant carriers of Islamic civilization in the delta were no longer the urban *ashraf* but the forest pioneers and peasant cultivators of the eastern frontier, who had assimilated Islam into their agrarian worldview.

The economic factors, however, could not alone have motivated the peasant cultivators to absorb this process of assimilation. In order to fathom the depth of this extraordinary process, we should delve into the nuances of the philosophic discourse which was taking shape in the countryside between the pre-Muslim '*nirguna*' *Sahajiya* tradition of Bengal and Sufism of Islam at the popular level. The '*nirguna*' *Sahajiyas* led by the Bauls of Bengal, on the one hand, and the Sufis and *sant* mystics, on the other hand, played a crucial role in this historic process of syncretism.<sup>24</sup> The great majority of Bengal Muslims lived in the countryside (only 3 or 4 per cent of them lived in urban areas) and they were more a part of the larger Bengali community consisting of Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and tribals than any specific Islamic community.<sup>25</sup> The Islamic faith which the Bengal Muslims had assimilated was basically influenced by Sufism and not by the orthodox Islamic scriptures advocated by *mullahs* and *maulavis*. Sufism in Bengal, in turn, was also conditioned by its proximity to humanist *Sahajiya* tradition of the delta, in

general, and to syncretism of 'nirguna' Baul *Sahajiyas*, in particular.

The Sufis came close to the *Sahajiyas* because both of them opposed the imposition of caste structure of Brahmanic Hinduism in Bengal. Both of them also stood against religious intolerance which permeated the orthodox trends discernible among both the Hindu priests and the Muslim clerics. More positively, the Bauls or 'nirguna' *Sahajiyas* opened up avenues of discourse with the Sufis through their innovative philosophy of 'Man of My Heart'. Rabindranath Tagore, in his work 'Religion of Man', had exquisitely captured the essence of the Baul philosophy of '*Man of My Heart*' (or '*maner manush*'): "One day I chanced to hear a song from a beggar belonging to the Baul sect of Bengal... What struck me in this simple song was a religious expression that was neither grossly concrete nor metaphysical in its rarified transcendentalism. At the same time it was alive with an emotional sincerity. It spoke of an intense yearning of the heart for the divine which is in Man and not in the temple, or scriptures, in images and symbols. The worshipper addresses his songs to Man the ideal, and says:

*'Temples and mosques obstruct thy path,  
and I fail to hear thy call or to move,  
when the clerics and priests angrily crowd round me'*.

He does not follow any tradition of ceremony, but only believes in love.

He goes on to say:

*'For the sake of this love  
heaven longs to become earth  
and gods to become man'*.<sup>26</sup>

As regards the Sufistic conception of divinity and the ideal of love, the overview could be located in Aliraja's Sufi text entitled the *Jnana-Sagar*. There it was said that God in his absolute aloneness could not realize His love and a second or a dual was required as the beloved. The Absolute, therefore, created a dual out of its own self. The *Jnana-Sagar* upheld that the universe had its origin in love and the chaos was systematized into the cosmos through the bond of love. Man was the microcosm in which all attributes of the Absolute were united. Man thus synthesized within his nature two aspects of existence: these were called in Sufism the *nasut*, which was his human personality and the *lahut*, which was his Divine personality.<sup>27</sup> This conception of the Divine and the human combined in man might well be affiliated with the Upanishadic conception of the *Paramatman* and the *Jivatman*. But while the Upanishads spoke of the love between the Divine personality and the human personality more or less metaphorically, the whole emphasis of the Sufis was on love. On this basic issue the Sufis came closest to the Bauls. In the Baul conception of '*Man of My Heart*' we could, therefore, find a happy blending of the *sahaja* of the *Sahajiyas* and the Sufistic conception of the Beloved.

Both the Bauls and the Sufis, in their ecstatic wonder at the expression of the Infinite manifested through the human finite form, compared it with the movement of an 'unknown bird'. This brought in the concept of *Achin Pakhi* (meaning 'the unknown bird') which was perceived to be playing the eternal game of self-manifestation and of returning once more to itself. The 'unknown bird' or *Achin Pakhi* lived in the cage of the human body for a while, but it soon went out and floated in the boundless sky. The Baul sought to capture this mysterious movement in his song:

*'I wonder how this unknown bird  
comes into the cage  
and, then, flies out far away'.<sup>28</sup>*

It could be comparable with the Sufi song:

*'The bird of my heart is a holy bird  
the ninth heaven is its dwelling'.<sup>29</sup>*

As regards the concept of '*Guru-vada*', the Bauls and other *Sahajiyas* also came near to the Sufis and the *sant* mystics. In the orthodox Hindu tradition one *guru* was presupposed for transmission of religious teaching. But, in the *Sahajiya* overview, such limitation to the number of *gurus* might result in narrowness in respect of realization of the 'ultimate reality'. Dadu, the north Indian *sant* mystic and a true follower of Kabir, vindicated the *Sahajiya* stand in a verse of salutation:

*'He salutes his guru as divine,  
And then he transcends the bounds of salutation,  
by offering reverence to all devotees'.<sup>30</sup>*

The Bauls introduced additional dimensions. According to them, initiation was a life-long process, to be gained step by step, from all kinds of *gurus*. So they asked:

*'Wouldst thou make obeisance to thy guru, my heart ?  
He is there at every step,  
on each side of thy path;  
for numberless are thy gurus'.*

The Bauls, therefore, concluded that the *guru* resided within the heart of the worshipper. Almost in tune with the formulation of the Bauls, Kabir, the great *sant* mystic of northern India, would compose:

*'The Supreme Self, the guru, abideth near thee,  
Awake, awake, O my heart'.<sup>31</sup>*

Another area where the creative interrelationship between the *Sahajiyas* and the Sufis could be witnessed was in the Baul tradition of out-pouring of the heart through their melodious songs. In this we find, on the one hand, the influence of Chaitanyadeva's Vaisnavism, which had attached much importance to the *kirtan* form of music as the medium of ecstatic



communion, and on the other, the influence of the Sufistic method of *sama* which combined song and dance as a mode of syncretistic religious communication with the common people.<sup>32</sup> The effect of such music, the Sufis held, would help both the performing mystics and the listeners in passing into *fana*—a stage of religious ecstasy. During the 13<sup>th</sup> and the 14<sup>th</sup> centuries the orthodox Islamic clerics tried to prevail on the Turk-Afghan imperial government to ban the syncretistic practice of *sama*. But the orthodox strategy could not make much headway in the face of rising popularity of the Sufis. At *sama* gatherings, Persian poetry began to be relegated to the background as Hindawi poetry, with its Vaisnavite and other Bhakti imagery, came to the fore.<sup>33</sup>

This interplay of syncretistic concepts and practices brought the Sufis nearer to the pre-Muslim *Sahajiya* religious tradition of Bengal which had secured, before the Turk-Afghan period, wide acceptability among the vast majority of the villagers in the delta. Such interplay prepared the ground for the forest pioneers and peasant cultivators to assimilate Islam in tune with their agrarian worldview. Another factor was no less important. It was noted earlier that the mosques, which were established in the villages of eastern Bengal by the forest pioneers, turned out to be religious centres for dissemination of Islamic ideals among the cultivating peasants of the locality. This could not have happened unless the Sufi preachers had taken up the hard task of social work which began to be organized from the village mosques and shrines. Such social work included the supply of food for the hungry, the shelter for the flood victims, and the medical treatment for the poor peasants. It was not the world of make-belief of the peasants which elevated the Sufi forest pioneers to the supernatural level of the saints or *pirs*. It was, rather, the relentless social work of the Sufi preachers which had earned for them the rank of *pir* in the objective perception of the villagers in eastern Bengal. Thus, the peasant cultivators of Bengal, who had assimilated Islam, did not perceive it as a totally alien religious system. This was not imposed on them forcefully by the Turk-Afghan and the Mughal rulers. This was mediated through the social work of the syncretistic Sufi preachers, some of whom were forest pioneers. The villagers of Bengal who accepted Islam did not make any dramatic break with the past. There was no specific moment of ‘conversion’ and it would seem inappropriate to speak of the ‘conversion’ of Hindus to Islam. The villagers, even after accepting Islam, maintained their *Sahajiya* roots deeply anchored in the countryside. Islam in Bengal absorbed so much pre-Muslim *Sahajiya* tradition and became so profoundly identified with the delta’s long-term process of agrarian expansion that the local cultivating classes never seem to have regarded it as totally ‘foreign’ — even though some orthodox Muslim and Hindu literati and foreign observers did, and still do so.<sup>34</sup>

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Though the assimilation of Islam by the peasant cultivators of eastern Bengal was a long process of resilience and absorption, three dominant patterns of tensions could be identified in Bengal Muslim society since the medieval period. First, the social and cultural barriers tended to emerge sharply between a predominantly urban immigrant *ashraf* culture, represented mostly by the clerics and those who traced their descents from the early immigrants from beyond the Khyber, and the rural *atrap* culture of the Muslim peasants and artisans with their roots in the Bengal countryside. Secondly, a deep tension prevailed between the religious values and ideals of those who professed to represent Islamic orthodoxy in Bengal, such as the *mullahs*, the *maulavis* and the segments of immigrant Muslims, and the syncretic-panteistic beliefs and practices of the majority of rural Muslims as well as the heterodox Sufi sects. Thirdly, stress and strains were aggravated due to the negative attitude of the *ashraf* classes towards Bengali cultural symbols, especially the language. This negative attitude towards Bengali language and culture affected the psyche of even the non-literate rural Muslims, and eventually came to be linked to the question of their social origins.<sup>35</sup> This major contradiction could be partly resolved in the wake of emergence of the state of Bangladesh in 1971 through long struggle and much bloodshed.

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14. Richard Eaton: 'Who are the Bengal Muslims?' *op.cit.* p.34.
15. Abul Fazl: H. Beveridge, tr., *The Akbarnama of Abul Fazl*, 3 vols, 2<sup>nd</sup> rept (Delhi: 1977) 3: 427; text: 3:290. Abul Fazl wrote in 1579, shortly after Akbar's army had seized the province from its Afghan rulers: "The country of Bengal is a land where, owing to the climate's favouring the base, the dust of dissension is always rising".
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