

The Islamic State And Bengali Society In The Fifteenth And Early Sixteenth Centuries Bengal- The Emergence Of A 'New Bengali People'-Reflections On Literatures

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Abstract

My paper tries to analyze the response of the Bengali Hindu society to Muslim rule in the light of the socio-political changes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Bengal and to find out whether there was an emergence of a 'new Bengali people' as Sukumar Sen writes in his History of Bengali Language and Literature and also the relationship between the ruling class and the Bengali society which determined the course of social history of the said period. My present study aims to become significant in the sense that it might open up new avenues to the study of literatures of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Bengal and how far society became an integral part of those literatures.

Keywords- Bengali Hindu Society, Muslim State, 'new Bengali people',

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I. Introduction

The relations between the Bengali Hindu society and the Muslim state in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries were not always congenial. A large number of temples were destroyed by the Bengal sultans. Moreover through the Qazi the Muslim state intercepted in many of the religious activities of the Bengali Hindus. Hence the process of assimilation between the Hindu society and the Muslim state was a long drawn one and the two ends could hardly meet. On the brighter part the 'new Bengali people' saw the emergence of a Muslim speaking Bengali who were mostly forced or willing converts, 'neglected or despised by the Brahmins'.¹ⁱ On the other hand the Hindu society, specifically the upper classes exercised strict exclusiveness. They even put ban on remarriage of widows, even among the lower ranks of the Hindu society, and made 'conversion or reconversion into Hinduism impossible'.²ⁱⁱ

The Turkish Sultans although ruthless towards the Hindu society in general, from the latter half of the fifteenth century 'emerged as patrons of Hindu literature in Bengali and of Hindu learning'. This was also the period of Chaitanya and Vaishnavism, when although conflicts did not end, gradual assimilation initiated. Chaitanya showed more apprehension towards rigidities of casteism and Bramhanical society than towards Islam.^{3 iii} From the initial part of the Hussein Shahi rule- the higher caste Hindus-Brahmins, Baidyas, Kayasthas wielded considerable influence in the nawab's court as well as the indigenous society. Benoy Ghosh argues that with the development of a new economical and social influences many of them adopted Vaisnavism and became patrons.

A number of local gods came into being like Chandī, Manasa etc who were the inspirations behind the Mangalkavyas of the period. However these gods had no place in the upper strata of the Hindu society. Perhaps as R.C. Majumder argues that when a bulk of low-caste Hindus were undertaking Islam for salvation, these

¹ Suniti Kumar Chatterji- *Languages and Literatures of Modern India*, with a foreword by Dr. C.P. Ramaswamy Aiyar, Bengal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. Cal 12, Apr.1963,p-161

² Ibid.

³ Benoy Ghosh-*Paschimbanger Samakriti*, Vol I, Prakash Bhavan , Kol, Jan,1976,p163

gods and goddesses were looked upon as a medium to salvage the religion as well as prevention of mass scale conversion.^{4iv}

Ramesh Chandra Majumder comes up with another argument that the coming of the Muslims into Bengal and the mixing of both the societies and religion could not leave an indelible impact on the population especially the Hindus who did not bother to borrow the ideologies of equality and fraternity from the Islamic society. Although codes of Hindu laws underwent changes in course of time they did not reflect influences of Islamic laws. Another interesting proposition brought up by R.C. Majumder is that although Bengali Hindu society could withstand Muslim influence, the Muslims however could not. It was because of the fact of large scale conversion of Hindus into the Muslim fold. These converts could not leave their previous social and religious influences and in their turn influenced the Muslim society to a certain extent. But there is no reason to believe according to R.C. Majumder that any fundamental change occurred within the Muslim society. Large scale vernacular literatures that came up with the initiation of Muslim rule were a natural phenomenon throughout the country even in places with no Muslim rule.

My paper is concerned with the effort to establish what Quentin Skinner has called 'authorial intention' of various thinkers associated with the concept of emergence of a 'new Bengali people' in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.⁵ Skinner observes that any literature or text would be the 'product of its times' and would be in some way be related with the 'prevailing genres and styles of the period'.^{6vi} It would even employ certain local meanings, usages of the time. Again while trying to analyse hermeneutically the meaning of the text Skinner finds out three types of texts. Firstly there are those works in which the author aims to 'affirm' the prevailing values and attitudes. Secondly there are works in which the author tries to 'submit the ideas or the events of the age to discussion and debate'.⁷ ^{vii}This might mean challenging, or questioning or even criticizing certain prevailing beliefs. Finally there are works in which the author aims to reject certain 'cherished value or assumption of the age'. While trying to build up my argument I have paid attention to what Skinner argues to 'submit the ideas or the events of the age to discussion and debate'. In another work *Visions of Politics: Regarding the Method* Vol. I, Skinner wrote in the preface, 'if we are able to write this history of ideas in a properly historical style, we need to situate the texts we study within such intellectual context and frameworks of discourse as enable us to recognize what their authors were doing in writing them...it is simply to use the ordinary techniques of historical enquiry to grasp their concepts, to follow their distinctions, to recover their beliefs and so far as possible, to see things their way'.^{8viii}

Contributions of Sanskrit Contemporary Texts like Smritisastras, Navyanyaya, Puranas- Medieval Sanskrit literatures in Bengal can be divided under following heads- Smritisashtra, Navyanyaya and other branches of philosophy as Tantra, Kavya, Natyasahitya, Puranas, Gouriya Vaishnav philosophy-Dharmatattwa and Bhaktitattwa etc. Raghunandan was the most famous Smritisashtra writer of Bengal, well known as Smarta Bhattacharya. Freedom of thought and delicate analyses are found in Raghunandan's Ashtabingshati Tattwa. There are three issues discussed in the Smritis-Achar(custom), Prayashchitta (Repentance) and bebohar (usage).

Even before Raghunandan as Dr. Surehchandra Bandyopadhyay writes that in the fourteenth century there was 'Shahuriyan' Shulapani who was as famous Smriti writer as Raghunandan. His books include *Prayashchitta Bibek* and *Sradhabibek*.⁹ Raghunandan mentions the name of another Smritisastrakara named Vrihaspati who received the title of 'Raymukut'. He was present in the fifteenth century and his books include *Smritiratnahara* and *Raymukutpadhhati*.

Raghunandan's teacher was Srinath Acharya Churamani. Among his authored writings there are *Krittattatarnab* and *Durgotshavbibek*. Raghunandan's time period falls between 1500-1600 C.E. He authored *Tirthatattwa*, *Jatratattwa* *Gayasradhdhpadhhati*, *Rasjatrapaddhati* and several other books. Govindananda Kankanacharya was probably contemporary of Raghunandan or a little earlier. His books include

⁴ R.C. Majumder-Article 'Dharma O Samaj', in *Bangla Desher Itihas, Madhya Yug*, ed. Ramesh Chandra Majumder, General Printers and Publishers Pvt. Ltd, Cal, Phalgun 1373 B.E.

⁵ Quentin Skinner-'Hermeneutics and the Role of History', *New Literary History*, Vol 7, No.1, Critical Challenges: The Bellagio Symposium, Autumn, 1975, pp209-232, Pub by John Hopkins University Press, Stable URL:<http://www.jstor.org/org/stable/468286>, Acc 5.6.14,12.50 ,p220

⁶ Ibid p221

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Quentin Skinner-*Visions of Politics: Regarding the Method* Vol-I, Pub.The Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, U K 2002, http://www.amazon.com/visions-politics-RegardingMethod-1/dp..._acc8.30_am_31.12.12, General Preface

⁹ Article 'Sanskrita Sahitya by Dr. Surehchandra Bandyopadhyay, in *Bangla Desher Itihas* ed. Ramesh Chandra Majumder, pub- General Printers and Publishers Pvt Ltd, First ed.B.E.1373 pp351-352

DankriyaKaumudi, Suddhikaumadi, SraddhakriyaKaumadi, Barshkriyakaumadi, Kriya kaumadi etc. However, as S. Bandyopadhyay opines after Raghunandan and Govindananda Smritisashtra faced decline. Articles or books of this period show lack of creativeness.

One important field of Indian philosophy Navyanyaya had received much enthusiasm in Bengal. While 'Prachin Nyaya' talked about Padartha sastra or physics, Navyanyaya or new justice is Pramansastra or proven texts. It placed emphasis on the proof, impossibility etc. Analysis of proof consisted the crux of Navyanyaya. Raghunth Shiromani of Nabadwip was a stalwart of Navyanyaya. Keeping him in the centre, Navyanyaya can be divided under three periods- pre-Shiromani era, Shiromani era and post Shiromani era.

Basudev Sarbobhaumo was the foremost Sastrakara of the pre-Shiromani era. He was present in the third decade of the fifteenth century and was the court poet of the king of north Bengal Purushottamdev and Prataprudrdeva. His important work includes *Anumanmani Pariksha*. Jaleswar Bahinipati Mahapatra Bhattacharya, son of Basudev Sarbobhoumo was born in the last part of the fifteenth century and his book includes Shobdokoddata. Other authors of Navyanyaya who belonged to this period were Kashinath Bidyanibas, Srinath Bhattacharya Chakraborti, Bisnudas Bidyabachaspti, Pundarikakha Vidyasagar etc.

Raghunath Shiromani era possibly started in the last part of the fifteenth century. His texts include *Prottokhominididhiti, Anumandidhiti, Shobdomonididhiti, Akhhtabad, Padarthakhandan, Gunakiranabalididhiti, Atmatattwabibekdidhiti, Bajpeyabad* etc. One remarkable author of the Shiromani period was Janakinath who existed in the fifteenth century. His texts include *Nyayasidhhanta manjari, Annikhikitattwabiboron* etc.

However post Shiromni era does not encounter talented authors of the Shiromni period. Moreover creative basic writings are absent too. Nevertheless some remarkable names include Haridas Nyalankar Bhattacharya, Krishnadas Sarbobhaumo, Rambhadro Sarbobhoumo, Sri Tarkalankar, Gadadhar Bhattachary to name a few of them.

It is assumed that some of the Puranas and their subparts were written in Bengal. *Brihaddharmapurana* written in circa fifteenth century C.E. consists of Puranic tales, Varnashramdharma, Stridharma or tasks of women, birth and life of Krishna, mixed caste (sankarjati) etc. Mentions of worship of goddess Kali as practised in Bengal, river Padma, influence of Geet Govinda etc. shows that this text was written in Bengal.

Eighth century is assumed to be the period of writing of *Brahmabaibartapurana* which received revisions from tenth to sixteenth centuries. The *Purana* has four divisions- *Brahmakhanda, Prakritikhanda, Ganapatikhanda* and *Krishnajanmakhanda*. The theme of the *Purana* is to discuss the glory of Lord Krishna. *Brahmabaibartapurana* could deal a great impact on Vaishnavism and its philosophy. One Purana and Smriti text was *Purana Sarbashya* written in 1474-75 by one Kuldhar of Gour court. The book contains slokas pertaining to history, geography, way of administration, way of worship derived from various other *Puranas*.

It is significant to note that Bengali religion and society in the medieval period were guided by the smriti literatures along with their revisions. In the religious arena worship of shakti or Devi or Goddess is mentioned vividly in *Devipurana*. Mention of durgapuja is found in *Nandikeshwarapurana* and *Kalikapurana*. Smritis make mention of the importance of marriage.

In the Bangiya Smriti literatures there are mentions of Brahmanical supremacy. Even here the sudras and the women are looked down upon. Besides the four principal varnas, by the turn of the fourteenth century there were about thirty six mixed varnas as mentioned in the *Brihaddharmapurana*. Bengali Smriti literatures have not recognized the rights of women not even their independent existences.

Bengali Society as Reflected in the Texts written in Bengali Language- Mangal Kavyas, Sahajiya Literatures

It is interesting to note that the number of local gods (folk cults) came into being like Dharma, Candi, Manasa etc. who became the inspiration behind the writings of the Mangal Kavyas of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries Bengal. However these gods did not find any respectable places in the upper crust of the Hindu society. Jawhar Sircar in his article 'The Bengalis: A Thousand Years' argues that Dharma, Manasa and Naths are linked with a 'common cosmogony', centred on one hand Lord Dharma. The god is portrayed as being superior to the Bramha, Vishnu, Maheswar whom he created- thereby revealing a 'strong anti-Sanskritic bias, quite akin to the Buddhist religion takes of superiority over Bramhin religion.^{10x} Another argument put forward by Sircar is that these gods and goddesses of so far marginals were now 'part of Hindu pantheon' and that the 'Bramhans could now worship them legitimately as their relationship with Hindu gods had been invented/constructed with so much effort.'^{11xi} Ramesh Chandra Majumdar argues that when there was a mass

¹⁰ Article-'The Bengalis: A Thousand Years' by Jawhar Sircar, pp10-11 <http://jawharsircar.org/pdf/bengaliespdf>, accessed 12.5.2015

¹¹ Ibid

conversion of low caste Hindus to Islam, these gods were looked upon as a medium to prevent mass scale conversion and save the religion.

Prakrit Magadhi had considerable influence on the spoken Bengali language before the Sena era. From the Sena period, Sanskrit was given importance. Dinesh Chandra Sen classifies the Prakrit influenced Bengali language from the fourteenth to the eighteenth centuries into certain areas- firstly application of dictionary Sanskrit words not used by the rural population of the time; increased use of similies which were generally used in Sanskrit; repetitive type of the literary parts; veneration towards Bramhin caste; asking for divine help in almost every aspect and unfettered faith towards god.^{12xi}

All these characteristics are to be found in certain types of Dharmkavyas belonging to pre-Sanskritic literatures. Among these the most important were the Mangalkavyas. Goddesses mentioned in these literatures are non Aryan in origin arising mostly from the folk and rural cultures of Bengal. The importance of these goddesses in these texts arises mostly from the fear of the unforeseen dangers Even before the appearance of the Mangalkavyas these goddesses were mentioned in the folklores. In the fifteenth and the sixteenth centuries two most important Mangalkavyas were the Manasa Mangal and Candimangal.

Richard Eaton observes that these were popular cults which were 'celebrated in a literary genre called mangala – kavya'. Moreover, these cults thrived among groups which were 'least touched by Indo-Aryan culture' and least integrated into the hierarchic scheme of social organisation as promoted by the Brahmanas'.¹³ However Eaton argues that the folk goddesses shared 'varying degrees of accommodation with Brahmanical orthodoxy, ranging from a rather complete incorporation into the Hindu pantheon, with full benefits of Brahmanical patronage, to a more marginal place within that pantheon, with only hesitant acceptance by Brahmanas'.¹⁴ Eaton continues that the cult of snake goddess Manasa although extended from 500-1000 C.E. failed to achieve full acceptance in brahmanic literatures. Although like other folk deities she had a 'kin tie' with Siva, yet she could not compete with deities identified as Siva's wife namely the goddess Candi. The cult although gained a considerable following among 'low ranking communities' like fishermen and cowherds, she could not at first reach the upper crust of the social stratum. That was only possible through gaining of submission of an upper caste merchant, Chand 'Saudagar'(businessman). Chand initially despised Manasa although after incidents in which Manasa is said to be the prime mover, he reluctantly submitted to the cult. As Eaton argues that this shows the cult's widening of social basis.

One of the famous poets of Manasa Mangal Kavyas was Bijoy Gupta who authored his Padmapuran in 1484-85. Jalaluddin Fateh Shah was then the ruler of Bengal. Although Bijoy Gupta maintains about fair rule of Fateh Shah in places of his text there are descriptions of Muslim ill treatment towards the Hindu population. There was this discontentment among the Hindu population. Vivid description of ill treatment towards the Hindu population has come up through his writings-All Hindus are afraid of one Dula who claims to be son in law of Hussein. On seeing the Brahmins with much sarcasm and enthusiasm he cuts the sacred thread and even spits on their faces.^{15xv}

The cult of goddesses Chandi perhaps enjoyed far more support of the Brahmins as Eaton writes. Chandi like Manasa was also a forest goddess. However her identification as the wife of Siva rendered her more popularity than Manasa. In every *Chandimngal Kavya* there are two stories-one is the 'Akhheti Khanda' or hunter Kalketu's story and another is the 'Banik Khanda' consisting of the story of merchant Dhanapati. In both the stories there are attempts to introduce the worship of Chandi among the mass. Sixteenth century saw Manikdutta, Kabikankan, Mukundaram and Madhav Acharya as poets of Candimangal Kavya.

In the sixteenth century with the appearance of Sri Chaitanya Bengal witnessed the rise of a sect known as Vaishnavas. Vaishnavas believe that unconditional love towards god is the only means of attaining salvation. Chaitanya's ideology was based on improving the social conditions of women and untouchables. Although short lived, it helped in the breaking down of the strict caste rules of the Hindu society thereby enabling a large number of people who led the life of the untouchables to be included in the Vaishnava fold. It put a check to some extent on the conversion of Islam. This mass scale inclusion proved to be what Ramesh Chandra Majumdar wants to say a 'revolution' in the Hindu societal fold.^{16xvi}

Earliest biography of Sri Chaitanya was Murari Gupta's *SriSrikrishnaChaitanyacharitamritam*. *Gourganaddeshdipika* written by Kabikarnapur is a valuable contribution in terms of Bengali Vaishnava

¹² *Brihat Banga-Suprachin kal hoite palashir judhha porjonto*, Volume II, Dinesh Chandra Sen, Dey's Publishing, 1935, p.963

¹³ Richard Eaton op.cit p.104

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Banglar Itihaser Dusho Bochhor- Swadhin sultander Amol-* Sukhomoy Mukhopadhyay, Bharati Book Stall, KOL, First Pub 1962, pp232-33

¹⁶ Article-Dharma O Samaj-Ramesh Chandra Mjumdar in *Bangla Desher Itihash-Madhya Yug*, Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, edited, Phalgun 1373, General Printers and Publishers Pvt. Ltd. Kolkata, p.277

society. Among the works written in Bengali are Brindavan Das's *Srichaitanya Bhagabat*, Krishnadas Kabiraj's *Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita*, Lochan Das's *Chaitanya Mangal*, Govind Das's *Korcha* and *Gouranga Bijoy* by Churamani Das. Lochan Das's *Chaitanya Mangal* written in the middle half of the sixteenth century was written to cater primarily to the uneducated section of the Bengali society. It was written mainly in the form of musical verses. Historical importance of this book has been questioned although.

Likewise Jayananda's *Chaitanya Mangal* was written putting an eye to the ordinary population. That is why in many places there are reflections of non Vaishnava ideas. One of the finest works on Sri Chaitanya is Krishnadas Kabiraj's *Sri Krishna Charitamrita*. It is written primarily to bring out the significance of Chaitanya's life and the basic tenets of Gauriya Vaishnavism along with Bhakti sastra.

While most of the Mangalkavyas speaks of the glory of goddesses, *Dharmamangal* on the other hand deals with the male god which is significant. Worshipping of Dharma is followed in western and southern Bengal where people from all social strata are involved. Mahamahopadhyay Haraprasad Sastri found several texts on 'Dharmamangal' ,*Dharmathakurer Chhora*(Dharmathakur's poem), *Sunya Purana* etc. in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Haraprasad Sastri showed that Dharmapuja is more popular among the Dom(untouchables) and other lower castes within the Hindu society. According to Sastri perhaps Dharmathakur is a form of sublime Buddhism. No such image worship is practised, only stone image is worshipped in many cases. In *Dharma Puja Bidhan* (Dharma Puja Rule Book) this image is mentioned as Sunya murti (Zero image). In many places it is mentioned as 'Buddha-Bouddha'. His name is Dharma Niranjan. Although influence of Buddhism has been imposed on Dharmathakur some researchers have attributed to the worship of Dharmathakur to the Vedic age and even searches show resemblances with Vedic god Narayan. Dharmapuja saw the assemblage of Brahmanic and non Brahmanic rituals. Even today Dharma Puja is practised in western Bengal among the Dom (untouchables). Besides he is worshipped by other sub-castes like Jele(fisherman), Napit(barbar), Bagdi(farmers and labourers),Sadgope(landholding community),Moyra(traditional confectioner) and other sub-castes.

The earliest writer of *Dharmamangal* was Mayurbhatta who was present in the twelfth century. Besides, there are Manik Ganguly, Rupram Chakraborty, Ramdas Adak, Jadunath all of whom belonged to the seventeenth century. Dr. Sashibhusan Das Gupta in his *Obscure Religious cult, as Background of Bengali Literature* remarked,

'In the Hindu Tantras, we have seen, all men and women have been held to be nothing but the incarnations of Siv and Sakti manifested in the physical form- and in the Buddhist philosophy they have been spoken of as the embodiment of Upya and Prajna respectively and this philosophy has most probably influenced the Vaisnava Sahajiyas in their belief of men and women being Krsna an Radha in this Svarupa'.^{17xvii}

Sahajiyas have several branches- Aul,Baul, Shai, Darbesh, Nera, Sahajiya. These groups follow different social customs and religious principles. However all groups come closer to the idea of physical union of male and female which is uninhibited and devoid of any social mores. Sahajiya festivals envisage large scale participation of women. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar argues that just as Kabir, Nanak and other leaders of the Bhakti movement tried to tear way the ancient Hindu laws and customs with a view to liberate the society similarly, in Bengal the Sahajiyas reflected such ideologies where there is unconditional love or Bhakti between God and his devotee. However this ideology grew out of Buddhist Sahajiya principles embodied in books written in the middle ages. One such example is Sarahapada's *Dohakosh*. Here Sarahapada vehemently criticised the practising caste system. He even stated that Chandala or the untouchable should be educated so that he can become a Brahmin. If reading of Vedic scriptures help become a Brahmin then let that be so for the Chandalas.^{18 xviii}

Contribution of Muslim writers in Bengali language and literature-

Richard Eaton remarks, 'In reality, in Bengal, as in South Asian history generally, the process of Islamisation as a social phenomenon proceeded so gradually as to be nearly imperceptible'.^{19 xix}This process of Islamisation has been defined by Eaton under three heads-inclusion which means the process by which 'Islamic superhuman agencies became accepted in local Bengali cosmologies alongside local divinities already embedded therein'; identification means 'the process by which Islamic superhuman agencies ceased merely to ...coexist alongside Bengali agencies, but actually merged with them, when the Arabic name Allah was used interchangeably with the Sanskrit Niranjan; and displacement meaning 'the process by which the names of Islamic superhuman agencies replaced those of other divinities in local cosmologies'. It has been further suggested by Eaton that when 'Islamic' techniques entered into the fold of the existing Hindu system of things

¹⁷ S.B. Dasgupta- *Obscure religious Cult, as Background of Bengali Literature*, 1946, C.U., p.149, from Mughal Juger Bangla Sahitya- Sanat Kumar Naskar pp58-59

¹⁸ Article-'Dharma O Samaj', R.C. Majumdar, op.cit p.285

¹⁹ Richard Eaton op.cit. p-269

there was no challenge or rejection what so ever. Along with this inclusion there came up the process of identification of superhuman beings with one another. The Bengali literatures of the sixteenth century i.e. epics, narratives, devotional poems etc. bear such resemblances. Sixteenth century poet Haji Muhammad identified Arabic Allah with Gosai in his text *Nur Jamal*.

Likewise Saiyid Murtaza in his text 'Yoga Qalandar' identified Prophet's daughter Fatima with Jagat Janani i.e 'Mother of the World'. Saiyid Sultan in his *Nabi Bamsa* identified 'the God of Adam, Abraham and Moses with Prabhu' i.e. Lord or more 'frequently with niranjan' i.e. without qualities. In short there was a tendency among these poets 'to adapt the whole range of Perso-Islamic civilization to the Bengali cultural universe'. Thus the Nile River was identified with the Ganges. As Eaton writes that in these stories the countryside abounds in mango and banana trees, peacocks and parrots. Here people eat fish, ghee and even chew betel.

Poet Sufi Saiyid Sultan of the sixteenth century Chittagong region endowed Eve with the attribute of a Bengali beauty. The Bengali Muslims according to Eaton, 'consciously presented Islamic imagery and ideas in terms readily familiar to a rural population of nominal Muslims saturated with folk Bengali and Hindu religious ideas. Here it was significant that although they were 'certain that Arabic was the appropriate literary vehicle for the transmission of Islamic ideas, they could not use a language with which their Bengali audience was unfamiliar'.^{20 .xx}

Saiyid Sultan's memorable work is *Nabi Bamsa*. As Eaton remarks that this work has been characterized as a 'national religious epic' for Bengali Muslims. The work treats the Hindu deities like Brahma, Vishnu, Siva, Rama, and Krishna 'as successive prophets of God , followed in turn by Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. By extensively commenting on the Vedic, Vaisnava and saiva divinities along with biblical figures Nabi-Bamsa tries to claim that Islam was the heir to the 'religions of pre-Muslim Bengal'. In order to associate Islam with the earlier traditions Saiyid Sultan identified the 'god of Adam with the Sanskrit names Prabhu and Niranjan' and identified 'the Islamic notion of a prophet (nabi), or a messenger sent down by god with the Indian notion of an avatar, or an incarnation of a deity'.^{21 .xxi} According to Saiyid Sultan the four Vedas are successful revelations sent down by God or 'Niranjana' and that each Veda given to a different 'great person' or 'Mahajan'. Thus Brahmanas were created to teach about Niranjana. The epic tried to connect Islam with Bengal's existing socio-religious milieu rather than repudiating Bengal's 'older religious and social worlds'. As Eaton states that the author's overall effort is to situate Muhammad within a wider 'family' of Bengali deities and Hebrew prophets.

Other works by Saiyid Sultan are *Gyan Choutisha* and *Gyan Pradip*. There are mentions of Yamraj (God of death), Dharmaraj (God of Justice), Padmasana (Lotuspose) all of which bring out his Hindu and Buddhist influences.

How do new researches reflect on such narratives and texts and contribute towards constructing new Bengali mind

Jawhar Sircar in his recent article, 'The Bengalis- A Thousand Years' argues that the literatures of Gaudiya Vaishnav chroniclers like Govinda Das, Brindaban Das, Jayananda, Krishnadas Kaviraj, Chandidas were written in and around sixteenth century. Thus he enquires that do this indicate that 'Bengali literature is only a more than five centuries old?'

Regarding the *Mangal Kavyas* Sircar writes that three direct messages were conveyed. The first was to 'worship the folk deity and prosper, or ignore and suffer'. The second message was that these gods and goddesses of the antyajas and vratyas or the marginal were now part of the Hindu Pantheon. The third message was that the Brahmins could worship these deities ' legitimately since their relationship with the Hindu Gods had been invented/constructed with so much effort. The process of "adjustment" that the imported flag- bearers of proud Sanskrit culture had begun in Bengal in the twelfth century with thw Brahmavaivarta and Brihaddharma Puranas now culminated in their "parianization".^{22xxii} According to Sircar, the immediate benefit for the Hindus was that this development attracted the lowest strata of the Hindus and 'stemmed the tide of conversion to Islam in western Bengal'. That the Mangal Kavyas give hints of a hunting-gathering or pastoral stage like that of Kalketu's early life or the story of Manasa and the cowherds is also argued by Sircar. His argument follows with the conclusion that the 'inclusive strategies of Vaishnavism, Mangal Kavyas and... "Shivayanisation"/ peasantization worked in tandem'.^{23xxiii}

There is no doubt that the Turkish rule posed a challenge to the rulers as well as the subject population, since as Richard Eaton observes that in the 'cases of "conquered dynasties" as in Bengal, where the conquering

²⁰ R. Eaton –Ibid p.278.

²¹ Ibid- p.288.

²² The Bengalis: A Thousand Years- Jawhar Sircar, <http://jawharsircar.org/pdf/bengalies.pdf>. pp10-11

²³ Ibid p11

class was of a culture fundamentally different from that of the subject population'. Renowned Bengali linguist Suniti Kumar Chatterjee observes that ever since Iktiyaruddin bin Bakhtiyar Khaljee occupied Nabadwip in c1204, Bengal was subjected to 'all imaginable terrors and torments- wholesale massacres, pillages, abduction and enslavement of men and women'.^{24 xxiv} Ronald B. Inden argues that the presence of these powerful Muslim rulers was characterized as 'thieves' (dasyu) and 'foreigners' (yavana). They were initially thought to be responsible for bringing in misconduct and disorder and the 'Brahmans and Sudras, motivated by greed, availed themselves to opportunities offered by the Muslim conquerors and ruined their coded substance by mixing with them'.^{25xxv} Although there was severe opposition on the part of the Sufis of the Firdausi orders to include Hindus into the Muslim ruling fold as Eaton observed still the cooperation of the Hindu landholding elite was 'essential' for the administration of the kingdom of the Muslim rulers.^{26 xxvi} The opposition of the Sufis of the Chisti and the Firdausi orders could not be maintained however since the Bengali nobles exercised a considerable influence on the lands of Bengal. Geographically Bengal was isolated from 'Upper India or the Middle East' and politically isolated from North India which again presented a situation where the Bengali landholding class enjoyed considerable authority. The situation reached its climax with the rise of Raja Ganesh who as Eaton says, 'seems to have wielded effective control over the rich lands running along the Ganges between modern Rajshahi and Pabna'. The period of Raja Ganesh was significant since it proved that the Bengali Hindus would be included into the administration despite the objection of the Muslim elite. Hussein Shah's reign (1493-1519) saw Bengali Hindus participating in government to a considerable degree. It was during this period of fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries that Bengali language and literature received considerable patronages. Chinese traveller Ma Huan observed in early fifteenth century that 'Bengali was the language in universal use'. It was during the rule of Rukh-al-din Barbak (1459-74) that Maladhar Basu's *Srikrishna Vijaya* was patronized. And in the later period *Manasa Vijay* by Vipra Das, *Padma Purana* by Vijay Gupta, *Krishna Mangala* by Yasoraj Khan and translations of *Mahabharata* from Sanskrit by Vijay Pandita and Kabindra Parameswara.

What Eaton tries to argue is that, 'apart from the Persianized political ritual that survived within the court itself, from the early fifteenth century on, the sultanate articulated its authority through Bengali media'.^{27xxvii} Perhaps this was as Eaton says due to the 'upheavals of the Raja Ganesh period' along from 'the sustained isolation from North India' which was compelling from the rulers to seek local support. But it seems that royal patronage was 'selective in nature since the court patronized folk architecture against Indian classical styles, popular Bengali literatures as opposed to Sanskrit texts and Vaishnava Bengali officials instead of Sakta Brahmanas. It is significant to note that Islamic symbolism was relegated to the background while projecting state authority. In the 1540s Brindavan Das in his Chaitanya Bhagavat mentions the rulers as raja not as 'sultan' or 'shah'.

It is as Eaton observes from the fifteenth century a concern was discerned among the Muslim ruling class to gain confidence of the Bengali nobility who in their turn showed a crisis of confidence in lending political support to the ruler. However a comprehensive political ideology appealing to all Bengalis appeared with the restoration of the Illyas Shahi dynasty where the 'state systematically patronized the culture of the subject population...'^{28xxviii}

II. Conclusion

While trying to solve the raised problematic my study has come across several significant developments both politically and socially. In the two centuries involving my study saw the rule of Ghiasuddin Azam Shah of Illyas Shahi dynasty whose reign initiated in the last decade of the fourteenth century. Soon Illyas Shahi dynasty was taken over by Raja Ganesh and his successors in about 1417. The rule of Raja Ganesh is significant in the sense that from thirteenth to eighteenth centuries in the long Islamic rule, Raja Ganesh was the sole example of rule by a Hindu ruler. Although short lived, the rulers of Ganesh's dynasty were the sons of the soil. Two books written in Bengali and one in Sanskrit show the mention of Raja Ganesh. Bengali books include *Advaitaprakash* (1565) and *Prembilash* (1600), and the Sanskrit one is called *Ballalilasutra* (1487). Raja Ganesh's dynasty was followed by Mamoodshahi dynasty, Habsi dynasty and the Hussein Shahi dynasty. Alauddin Hussein Shah of the Hussein Shahi dynasty was one of the greatest rulers of Bengal. The political

²⁴ *Languages and Literatures of Modern India*- Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, Bengal Publishers Pvt. Ltd. Cal Apr. 1963, p.160

²⁵ *A History of Caste and Clan in Middle Period Bengal*- Ronald B. Inden, University of California Press Ltd., London, England, 1976, p.73

²⁶ Richard Eaton- *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier 1204-1760*, University of California Press, California, 1993, p. 50

²⁷ Eaton- op.cit. p. 67

²⁸ *Ibid* p.69

boundaries under his rule exceeded the boundaries of the previous Bengal rulers. Again this was the time of the emergence of Sri Chaitanya in the religious arena. However Sukhomoy Mukhopadhyay argues that the emergence of Chaitanya does not prove that Alauddin Hussein Shah followed a reign of religious tolerance. However Hussein Shah's personal attitude towards Sri Chaitanya proves otherwise.

While this was the political scenario on the social front my study came across significant developments of tumult whereby there was not only large scale conversion to Islamic fold but also an effort to salvage Hinduism and to put a brake on the large scale conversion through the worship of local gods as Chandi or Manasa. If this was one side of the picture the other side was equally interesting. It saw the efflorescence in the field of Sanskrit literatures like the Puranas and Smritisastras. These texts encoded the customs and norms to be ideally followed by the Hindu society of the fifteenth and sixteenth century Bengal untainted by the existing Muslim rule.

On the other hand there was the emergence of Bengali language and literature in the form of Mangal Kavyas, including those written during the period of Sri Chaitanya and the Sahajiya literatures. What is interesting to note is that the gods like Dharma, Manasa, Chandi although did not find any respectable places in the upper crust of the Hindu society they started addressing the marginals. More significant is that large scale conversion of the low caste Hindus to Islam was put to a halt with the emergence of such religious activities which found its voices in literatures like *Chandimangal*, *Manasamangal*, *Dharmamangal* and the *Sahajiya* literatures.

While Hindu society saw dramatic changes within its fold with all its abilities for inclusiveness there remained yet another side of the picture. That was a process of assimilation of Hinduism and Islam. Surprisingly when Islam entered Bengal there was no 'challenge or rejection' of any sort. Moreover there was the initiation of the process of identification of superhuman beings with one another. What is more significant is that such identifications found its mode of expression in Bengali. Finally, I found out that, researches initially tried to show that initially there was a period of non cooperation since the 'conquered dynasties' as in Bengal the conquering class was fundamentally different from the subject population. The rulers however needed the assistance rendered by the Hindu landholding elite although severe oppositions from the Sufis of the Firdausi orders could be found. On the other hand the Hindu society was faced with a dilemma since the old Hindu ruling classes were absent. It was something like a crisis of identity in the face of large scale conversion and the in congeniality between the Bengali Hindu society and the Muslim state. However by the fifteenth century although the court maintained the Persianized political ritual, the Sultanate articulated its authority through the Bengali media. New researches like that of Eaton's shows that in the fifteenth century a concern could be discerned among the Muslim ruling class to gain the confidence of the Hindu Bengali nobility.

Suniti Kumar Chatterjee writes that the 'fifteenth century was a great century for Bengal in its religion, its greatest culture and its literature. The country was ruled by sultans of Turki and Pathan (Afgan) origin, but they had become sufficiently Bengalized to support Hindu Bengali literature and to employ Hindus in responsible posts'.^{29xxix} Perhaps here we can come closer to Sukumar Sen's perception of the origin of 'new Bengali people'.

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