

IDENTITY AND COMPOSITE CULTURE : THE BENGAL CASE

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The main thrust of the paper is to examine the evolution of a composite culture in Bengal, and to explain its nature and character, especially from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century which is the period when it evolved and flourished in the region. This exercise is significant even today as the legacy from the past is still vibrant in many parts of the country, Bangladesh or West Bengal. For instance, there was a news report in *The Statesman* of January 10, 2006 that at a place in rural Bengal, called Maynagar in Tamruk, about 90 kilometers west of Kolkata, a *pir's dargah* is looked after by a Hindu trustee and a fair organized by the authorities of a Radhagobinda temple include a Muslim as part of centuries-old tradition.¹ Such instances abound in many parts of Bengal even now and there is little doubt that this tradition comes down from several centuries earlier.

While talking about the evolution of a composite culture, it is pertinent to see how it was intertwined with the question of identity of Bengali Muslims. The Islamic revitalizing and purificatory movements in Bengal in the nineteenth century laid bare the roots of cleavage and dualism between Bengali Muslim's cultural position, caught between the opposite pulls of Bengal localism and Islamic extra-territoriality. The said new movements, combined with the changed social and political circumstances of Bengal under the British domination, sharpened the focus, as never before, on the "Islamic" identity of the Bengali believers, with the result that a massive and organized assault on the syncretistic tradition and on the cultural values and norms, necessary to sustain it, followed to which we shall turn later.

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1 *The Statesman*, 11 January 2006 (Calcutta edition).

But a question that crops up is how do we define ‘culture’? How do we distinguish it from ‘religion’? In fact it is very difficult to distinguish the two as they more often than not mingle together making it impossible to separate the one from the other. It is not just a theory but I learnt it from my personal experience. About five decades back I was travelling in the then Santal Parganas (now Jharkand), when I saw a group of Santals, who were Christians, sacrificing cocks at the altar of their popular/tribal god. When I asked them how could they do this when they are Christians, they answered back, “*aamra kestan hote pari, ta bole to nijer dhamma (dharma) bhulte parina*” (we may be Christians but how can we be oblivious of our ‘religion’?). This is rather quite instructive. Here ‘religion’ is nothing but a way of life as much as culture is, and the two mingle at some point – one cannot be separated from the other completely. It is in this perspective that I shall interpret religion and culture in the course of this discourse.

In his recent book, *Identity and Violence*, Amartya Sen defines identity as: ‘When interpersonal relations are seen in singular inter-group terms as amity or dialogue among civilizations or religious ethnicities, paying no attention to other group to which the same persons also belong (involving economic, social, political or other cultural connections), then much of importance in human life is altogether lost and individuals are put into little boxes.’ He holds that the divisions of human sapiens into religious or civilizational groups are artificial. These divisions are chimeras created by ruling elites or traders of death. They mess up our identities and dehumanize us. He means by identity “loyalty to various social, cultural, political, literary or similar groups formed on the basis” of what he calls ‘choice and reason’.

In this respect the question of the identity and culture of the Bengali Muslims, especially in the pre-modern time, becomes more pertinent. Islam spread in Bengal on a massive scale between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. But what was exceptional, however, was that among India’s interior provinces, it was only in Bengal that a majority of the indigenous population was converted to Islam. How and why did this happen needs to be explained from a historical perspective. The conventional theories regarding Islamization in India in general – that Islam was a ‘Religion of the Sword’ which stresses the role of military power in the diffusion of Islam in India; that it was a religion of ‘patronage’ which emphasizes that the conversion was due to the lure of

rewards from the Muslim rulers in various forms; that it was 'religion of social liberation' which postulates that Islam with its liberating message of social equality attracted the low caste and downtrodden Hindus who got converted to Islam en mass – are hardly tenable.

In fact, the rise of Islamic communities in Bengal was not corollary to, or simply a function of the expansion of, the Turkish arms. It was actually brought about by the twin processes of agrarian growth and 'colonization' in the eastern region of Bengal following the riverine movement in the delta. The emergence of Islam as a mass religion in East Bengal occurred in the context of other historical forces, among them the most important being the shift of the epicentre of agrarian civilization from the western delta to the eastern hinterland. In fact, a decisive moment was reached in the late sixteenth century when the river Ganges linked up with the *Padma*, as a consequence of which the Ganges's main discharge flowed directly into the heart of the eastern delta which now became very fertile and thus large forests grew in the lower regions of the eastern delta. . And thus, many of the poor peasants from other parts flocked to these areas which were being afforested and cultivated by a motley crowd of Islamic preachers like *pirs*, *gazis*, *sufis*, etc. - termed 'cultural mediators' in recent parlance. In the process they were ultimately, and almost unwittingly, converted to Islam. But this vast mass had their deep roots in Bengal countryside and was imbued with their traditional culture. As a result, unlike in other places, Bengal absorbed so much local culture and became so profoundly identified with Bengal's long-term process of agrarian expansion that in its formative years the cultivating class never seemed to have regarded Islam as alien.

In fact, one of the important factors that led to religious and cultural syncretism was that the Muslim conquerors had to live with the vanquished Hindus, and the former were actually surrounded by the latter. As a result, a state of perpetual hostility between the two was not possible. Centuries of contact between the two communities were bound to result in a mutual understanding, and a process of give and take. Moreover, many of the new converts to Islam could not break away from their Hindu past, and followed their old ways of life and culture side-by-side with the Islamic tenets most of which were alien to them. Thus the two communities, Hindus and Muslims, living together and having daily intercourses among themselves, evolved a popular religion and culture in

several parts of India, especially in Bengal where the Muslim population was more numerous than in other parts. Hence after the first shock of Muslim conquest was over, the two communities tried to find the ways and means to live side-by-side in harmony as friendly neighbours. This has been aptly put by Tarachand:²

The effort to seek a new life led to the development of a new culture which was neither exclusively Hindu nor purely Muslim. It was indeed a Hindu-Muslim culture. Not only did Hindu religion, Hindu art, Hindu literature and Hindu science absorb Muslim elements, but the very spirit of Hindu culture and the very stuff of Hindu mind were also altered, and the Muslim reciprocated by responding to the change in every department of life.

Religious Syncretism

Though I said that it is almost impossible to distinguish between religion and culture, yet for the sake of convenience I shall try to analyze syncretism during the period under review in two aspects – first, syncretism in religion and secondly, in culture. It so happened in Bengal that the Islamic tenets were not fully absorbed by the new converts as they were still immersed in their old habits, beliefs, practices and ceremonies. In a way their conversion to Islam was not complete as they continued to practise their old ways of daily life, especially in the villages. Thus we find that in Bengal the fundamental concept of Islam was changed due to the Hindu influence. Here Prophet Muhammad was sometimes characterized as an *avatar* – an incarnation that was endowed with supernatural power. In fact, the Muslim theory of creation then prevalent in Bengal was an adaptation of the Hindu theory. A contemporary Muslim poet wrote, almost echoing the *Sunya Purana*:³

God emerged out of nothing; out of Divine emanation came into being the sun,
the moon, heaven and hell. It was followed by the creation of earth, air, water
and fire. At last Adam was created and sent to earth.

It is out of the mutual religious practices of the Hindus and Muslims, there developed some sort of a new religious sect called '*Kartabhaja Dharma*, in eighteenth century Bengal.⁴ Its founder Aule Chand (died 1769) preached his *Dharma* in Nadia district and had as his disciples both Hindus and Muslims. In

2 Tarachand, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture*, Allahabad 1936, p. 137.

3 Quoted in Khodkar Mahbulul Karim, *The Provinces of Bihar and Bengal under Shah Jahan*, Dacca 1974, p. 208.

4 Md. Shah Noorur Rahman, *Hindu-Muslim Relations in Mughal Bengal*, Calcutta 2001, p. 49.

this cult there was no distinction between high and low, or Hindus and Muslims. Significantly, no outward sign of adherence to the sect was necessary. A Hindu could retain his sacred thread and a Muslim need not shave on becoming a member of the sect.⁵ However it should be noted that two streams flowed side-by-side. One was the orthodox religion – both Hindu and Muslim; the other was popular religion which was more a way of life than strictly a so-called religion.

The Sufis also contributed to the rise of new popular religious sects and the fostering of amity and unity between the two communities. As Enamul Haq writes:⁶

In the lowly Khanaqahs of the Sufis and the humble *Astanahs* of dervishes, both the Hindus and Muslims used to meet together and exchange their views. Liberal views and fraternizing influence of the Sufis were daily drawing the people of two different religion closer and closer, and ultimately during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the two communities were greatly united together by the inalienable bond of the mutual toleration and fraternity.

The *Bauls* and *Sahajias* are the off-shoots of Sufism in Bengal, and they played an important role in Hindu-Muslim harmony. The *Bauls* and *Sahajias* were a kind of religious sects which combined the principles of Hinduism and Islam. One of the famous *Bauls* in Bengal was Lalon Fakir who used to say that he was neither a Hindu nor a Muslim, and the only religion he believed in was humanism. In one of his songs, he preached that:⁷

Bhakter dware bandha aachen Sain
Hindu ki Jaban bole tar kacche jatir bichar nai.
Ek Chande hoi jagat aalo
Ek bije shob janma holo.

[God is ever present at the door of the devotee and He does not make any distinction of caste or creed, or a Hindu and a Muslim. As the world is lighted by the same moon, so also every living being is born out of the same Divine Spirit.]

The Pir cult in Bengal is another manifestation of the religious syncretism. The Pir worship was a form of joint worship of the Hindus and Muslims. The large settlement of foreign Muslims side-by-side with the Hindus and the newly converts (neo-phytes) enabled Islam to strike its roots deep into society. In this

⁵ Tarachand, *Influence of Islam*, pp. 219-20.

⁶ Enamul Haq, *A history of Sufism in Bengal*, Dacca 1975, p. 288.

⁷ S. M. Lutfar Rahman, *Lalon Shah: Jiban O Gan*, (in Bengali – Lalon Shah: His Life and Songs), Dhaka 1983, p. 113.

process the worship of local deities (gods and goddesses) contributed quite a bit. Garcin de Tassy observed in 1831 that the Pirs (Saints) were the

“substitutes for the Musalmans, in the place of the numerous gods of the Hindus. As amongst the saints venerated by the Musalmans, there were some personages who professed the faith of the *Vedas*, so several of the Musalman saints of India are venerated by the Hindus.⁸

That the Hindus in Medieval Bengal were devoted to the Pirs and regarded them as their own gods is absolutely clear from the such literary works like *Ghazi Vijay* and *Satyapir Vijay* of Faizullah (Muslim poet of 16th Century), *Ray-mangal*, *Shasti-mangal*, *Sitala-mangal* and *Kamala-mangal* (17th Century) of Krishna Das and *Dharma-mangal* of Ruparam. These sources clearly indicate that a large number of Hindus had a great veneration for the Pirs. Their tombs were visited by Hindus and Muslims alike.⁹ Thus a Muslim poet writes:¹⁰

Hindur devata hoila Musalmaner Pir
Dui kule loi puja hoiya jahir.

[The Pirs of the Muslims became the gods of the Hindus. They manifested themselves and were worshipped by both the communities.]

In fact Hindu popular literature and ballads like the various *Mangal Kavyas*, *Purba Banga Gitika*, *Maymansingh Gitika*, etc. had spaces earmarked for the Pirs and the places associated with them. In their compositions, some of the Muslim poets of the period first showed regard for the great personalities of Islam, and then to the Hindu deities. Thus we find poet Faizullah (19th century) wrote in his *Satya Pir Panchali*:¹¹

Selam karib aage Pir Niranjan
Muhammad Mustafa bondo aar Patanjan.
Sher Ali Fatema bondo ekida koriya
Hassan Hossain poida hailo jahar lagiya.
* * * * *
Sati Thakurani bondo aar jata Sati
Daibaki Rohini bondo Sachi Thakurani.
Jar garbhe Gorachand janmilo aapani
Gailo Faizullah kari satya pade mon.

8 Quoted in Jagadish Narayan Sarkar, *Hindu-Muslim Relation in Medieval Bengal*, Delhi 1985, p. 67.

9 Ahmad Sharif, *Bangali O Bangla Sahitya*, Dhaka 1983, p. 829.

10 Abdul Qadir and Rezaul Karim, ed., *Kavya Malancha*, Calcutta 1945, p. 30.

11 Quoted in Ahmad Sharif, *Bangali O Bangla Sahitya*, p. 824.

[I shall first of all salute Pir Niranjana and then sing in praise of Muhammad Mustafa and Panjatan. After concentration I worship Sher Ali and Fatima for whom Hassan and Hossain were born. I worship the goddess Sati and other chaste women. I worship Daibaki, Rohini and mother Sachi who gave birth to Gorachand (Sri Chaitanya). Dedicated to truth, I, poet Faizullah, sing this.]

Cultural Syncretism

Though I shall be concentrating on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the syncretism in Bengali culture can actually be traced to a much earlier period, at least from the time of the Sultans. In the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, state-sponsored mosques built in native style proliferated in deltaic Bengal. It was during this period that the Muslim court lent vigorous support to Bengali language and literature. The Chinese traveller Ma Huan observed in the early fifteenth century that Bengali was “the language in universal use”¹². In fact, the court started patronizing Bengali literary works in a big way in the late fifteenth century. It was under the patronage of Sultan Ruknuddin Barbak (r. 1459-74) that Maladhar Basu wrote *Sri Krishna Vijaya*. Again *Manasa Vijaya* by Bipradas, *Padma-Purana* by Vijay Gupta and *Krishna-mangala* by Jasoraj Khan were composed during the time of Alauddin Husain Shah (r. 1493-1519) and Nasiruddin Nasarat Shah (r. 1519-32). It was during this period that Bijoy Pandit and Kabindra Parameswara translated portions of the *Mahabharata* from Sanskrit.¹³

It is evident from the observation of Sebastian Manrique who visited Bengal in 1629 that Bengal had already evolved a syncretic culture by the time the Mughals had established their authority there. He stated that some of the Muslim kings had been in the habit of sending for water from Ganga Sagar (a holy place where the river Ganges flows into the sea). During the ceremonies connected with their installations, these kings would wash themselves, like the previous Hindu sovereigns of Bengal, in that holy water.¹⁴ Thus the Bengal Sultans, especially of the restored Iliyas Shahi dynasty and its successors, evolved a stable, mainly secular, *modus vivendi* with Bengali society and culture in which the state systematically patronized the culture of the subject

12 Rockhill, “Notes on the Relations”, p.437, quoted in Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, OUP, Delhi 1994, p. 66.

13 Nihar Ranjan Ray, “Medieval Bengali Culture”, *Visa Bharati Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No.2, 1945, p. 54; Md. Enamul Haq, *Muslim Bengali Literature*, Karachi 1957, pp. 38-39.

14 Sebastian Manrique, *Travels of ...1629-1643*, Trans. E. Luard and H. Hosten, (Oxford: Hakluyt Society, 1927), Vol. 1, p. 77.

population.¹⁵ They yielded so much in their public architecture to the Bengali conceptions of form and medium that prompted Percy Brown to comment, “the country, originally possessed by the invaders, now possessed them”.¹⁶

Again it should be noted that with the coming in of the Mughals, there were fundamental changes not only in the region’s economic structures and its socio-political system but also in the cultural complexion, both at the court and in the countryside. As for example, Mughal officials in Bengal preferred *ayurvedic* medical therapy to the *yunani* medical system inherited by classical Islamic civilization. Thus we find that subadar Islam Khan, himself an Indian Muslim, asked for an Indian physician when he was in his death-bed.¹⁷ Again, when half of the body of the governor of Bihar was paralyzed because of an illness, Emperor Jahangir sent two Indian physicians for his treatment.¹⁸ Similarly when Mirza Nathan, the erstwhile Mughal general in Bengal, fell ill, his advisers sent for a *kabiraj* who successfully treated him by consulting the appropriate astrological signs and by administering a poisonous brew dissolved in lemon juice and ginger.¹⁹ Such reliance on *ayurvedic* treatment, even at the cost of neglecting the *yunani* system, brings to bold relief how thoroughly Indian values had penetrated into Mughal culture, thus underlining the cultural syncretism in Mughal Bengal by the early seventeenth century.

Further, the legends of pioneering *Pirs*, (who were mainly responsible for clearing the jungles and making the land useful for cultivation), which abound in the Bengali literature of the seventeenth century, underscore the process of cultural syncretism that had become a feature of Mughal Bengal. Krishram Das’s epic poem, *Ray-mangala*, written in 1686, is an illustration in point. The story here concerns the conflict between a tiger god named *Dakshin Ray* (sovereign deity of the Sunderban forests) and a Muslim called Bade Gazi Khan who represented a personified memory of the penetration of these same forests by Muslim pioneers. The encounter between the two, though initially hostile, was ultimately resolved in a compromise – *Dakshin Ray* would continue to exercise absolute authority over the whole of the Sunderbans (Lower Bengal) but people would have to show respect to Bade Gazi Khan by worshipping his

15 Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, pp. 69-70.

16 Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture: Muslim Period*, 5th edition, Bombay 1968, p. 38.

17 Mirza Nathan, *Baharistan-i- Ghaibi*, Trans. M. I. Borah, Vol. 1, Gauhati 1936, p. 256.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 262.

19 *Ibid.*, pp. 323-24.

graveyard, marked by a symbol of *Dakhin Ray*'s head.²⁰ Mukundaram's Chandi-mangala can be regarded as a grand epic dramatizing the process of civilization-building in Bengal and particularly the push of agrarian civilization into formerly forested lands. Here Muslim pioneers were unambiguously associated with the clearing of forests. One Zafar Mian was said to be the leader of the Muslim work force numbering twenty two thousand. It was also said that these labourers chanted the name of the pir, quite possibly that of Zafar Mian himself.²¹ Though this poem cannot be taken as an eyewitness historical narrative, but it can be asserted nonetheless that the poet drew his theme from the culture of his own time which means that he was quite familiar with the theme of thousands of Muslims clearing the forests under the leadership of charismatic pirs.

Sheikh Jalauddin Tabrizi's, *Sekhsubhodaya*, like Mukundaram and Krishnaram Das's poems, belongs to *mangal-kavya* genre, a genre that typically glorified a particular deity and promised the deity's followers bounties in return for their devotion. However, the hero of the Sheikh's work was not a traditional Bengali deity but the Sheikh himself.²² But *Sekhsubhodaya* can be seen as revealing the folk process at work. Its story seeks to make sense of the gradual cultural shift from a Bengali Hindu world to a Bengali Muslim world. In part this was achieved by presenting the new in the guise of the familiar. Sheikh Tabrizi established an alien cult within a Hindu conceptual framework. The Sheikh gave the king "grace" which is nothing but *prasad*, the food that a Hindu deity gives to a devotee. His consecration of the mosque followed a ritual consistent with the consecration of a Hindu temple, and his patron deity, "Allah", although not identified with a Hindu deity, was given the generic name, *prasadapurusha* (Great Person).²³ Thus it can be said that in the midst of dramatic socio-economic changes occurring in Mughal Bengal, Islam creatively evolved into an ideology of "world-construction"— an ideology of forest-clearing and agrarian expansion. On the one hand, Islamic institutions proved sufficiently flexible to accommodate the non-Brahmonized religious culture already present

20 Asutosh Bhattacharya, "The Tiger Cult and Its Literature in Lower Bengal", in *Man in India*, Vol. 27, No.1, March 1947, pp. 49-50.

21 Mukundaram, *Kavikankan Chandi*, eds., Srikumar Bandyopadhyay and Biswapati Chaudhuri, Calcutta 1974; Richard M.Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, pp. 213-14.

22 Sukumar Sen, ed. and trans, *Sekhsubhodaya* of Halayuda Misra, Calcutta 1963.

23 Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, pp. 215-18.

in Bengal. On the other, the religious and cultural traditions already present in Mughal Bengal made accommodations with the amalgam of rites, rituals, and beliefs that were associated with the village mosques and shrines then proliferating in their midst. As Richard M. Eaton rightly observes: “In the process, Islamic and Bengali worldviews and cosmologies fused in dynamic and creative ways”.²⁴

There were also several Muslim poets in Mughal Bengal with Vaishnava inclinations, the most notable among them being Daulat Qazi and Alaol in the seventeenth century. Their works are significant indications of the religious and cultural syncretism in Mughal Bengal. In his poem *Sati Mayna* along with the adoration of Allah and Rasul, Daulat Qazi referred to Dwarka of Sri Krishna, stories of the Puranas, Hindu dresses and *kirtan*. It also bears the clear impress of Vaishnava lyrics. Alaol adopted a pure Vaishnava theme for his lyrics. He writes on Radha’s secret meeting with Krishna. Another Sufi Pir and Vaishnava poet, Syed Murtaza, says in his prayer allegorically:²⁵

Par karo par karo more naiya Kanai
 Kanai more par karare! (Dhun).
 Ghatar ghatial Kanai panther chaukidar
 Nayali jauban dimu kheyar pai par.

[Carry me across, carry me across, oh boatman Kanai, oh Kanai do thou ferry me across. Oh Kanai, thou art the custodian of the ferry ghat and the watchman of the path (of life). I offer my fresh youth as the ferry fare]

The poems of Muslim-Vaishnava poets clearly bring out the cultural dimension of the syncretism in Mughal Bengal. The poet Lal Mamud, though born in a Muslim family, was a dedicated devotee of Krishna. He says of himself:²⁶

Janma niya Musalmane banchita hobo Sricharane
 Aami mone bhabina ekbar.
 (Ebar) Lal Mamude hare Krishna naam korecche shar.

[Though born Muslim, I do not ever think that I shall be deprived of the sacred feet of Krishna. Now Lal Mamud has indeed accepted the name of Hare Krishna as his be-all and end-all.]

24 *Ibid.*, p. 267.

25 Quoted in Y. M. Bhattacharya, *Banglar Vaishnavabhavapanna Musalman Kabir padamanjusha*, Calcutta 1984, pp. 317.

26 *Ibid.* p. 250.

In another composition he says:²⁷

Hindu kimba hok Musalman
 Tomar pakshe sobai saman.
 Aapan santan jatir ki bichar!
 Bhakta sokal jatir shrestha Chandal ki Chamar.
 Keha tomai bole Kali, keha bole Banamali
 Keha Khoda Allah boli tomai dake saratsar.

[Whether a Hindu or a Muslim, it is all the same to you. Who bothers about the caste of one's own son? A bhakta (devotee) is the best of all castes whether he is a Chandal (low caste) or a Chamar (cobbler). Some call you Kali, some Banamali (lit. gardener, here Krishna) and others call you Khoda Allah; this is the secret (essence) of all secrets.]

The same sentiment reflecting the religious and cultural syncretism that was achieved in Mughal Bengal is to be found also in the various ballads of the *Purba Banga Gitika* and *Maimansingh Gitika*. In one of the ballads, it has been emphasized that:²⁸

Hendu (Hindu) aar Musalman eki pinder dari
 Keha bole Allah Rosul keha bole Hari.
 Bismilla aar Cchiribistu ekkei goan
 Dofak kori diye parava Ram Rahiman.

[The Hindus and Muslims are ropes of the same bundle; someone says Allah Rasul, someone says Hari; Bismillah and Sri Vishnu are the same; when they are made different, they are called Ram and Rahim]

In fact, in the corpus of medieval Bengali literature celebrating indigenous deities such as *manasa*, *chandi*, *satyapir*, *dharma*, *dakshin ray*, etc., one can see local cosmologies expanding in order to accommodate new superhuman beings introduced by foreign Muslims.²⁹ As we have seen in the *Manasa-mangala*, the conflict between *Dakshin Ray* or the tiger god and Bade Gazi Khan was resolved not by one defeating the other but by the elevation of Bade Gazi Khan to a revered saint and by peaceful co-existence of the two. The two, however, were not fused into a single religious personage but remained mutually distinct. The inclusion of Muslim alongside local divinities is also to

27 *Ibid.*

28 Quoted in Md. Shah Noorur Rahman, *Hindu-Muslim Relations*, p. 81.

29 M. R. Tarafdar, Husain Shahi Bengal, pp. 17-18, 164-66, 233-35; P. K. Maity, *Historical Studies in the Cult of the Goddess Manasa*, Calcutta 1966; Asutosh Bhattacharya, "The Tiger Cult...", pp. 49-56; Also see especially, Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, Princeton 1983.

be found in the rich tradition of folk ballads of Bengal.³⁰ The invocation (*bandana*) in the ballad, *Nazim Dacoit*, a ballad of Chittagong district dating from the seventeenth or early eighteenth century, includes both indigenous and exogenous religio-cultural ideas. We see here the tenacity of the Bengali emphasis on divine power as manifested in female agency - – Mother Earth, Sita, Radha, etc. And it is significant that this emphasis is extended to include prominent females of Islamic history: special reverence is shown to Amina, the Prophet's mother and Fatima, his daughter. Thus it shows that themes wholly foreign to Bengal had also infiltrated into the religious and cultural universe of rural Bengal.

In some parts of Bengal, especially in the lower regions, this sort of inclusion crept in easily. The fishermen in the Sunderbans performed their *pujas* to the forest goddess *Bana Bibi* before putting their nets into the water as a ritual to protect them from harm. A small thatched bamboo hut was raised for this purpose, and a clay image of *Bana Bibi* seated on a tiger was placed in the hut. Flanking her on her right was an image of *Dakshin Ray*, depicted as a strong and stout man standing with a sword and behind him stood a bearded Muslim *fakir* known as *Ajmal* and behind *Dakshin Ray* lay the severed head and body of a young boy. The trio – a tiger deity, a soldier and a superhuman agent identified with Islam - have remained constant over the centuries, distinct from one another but yet included within a single cosmology.³¹

As a matter of fact we find identification of a similar type in the Bengal literature dating from the sixteenth century. Haji Muhammed,³² a sixteenth century poet, identified "Allah" with "Gosai" (Master), while another poet, Saiyid Murtaza,³³ identified the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, with "Jagat-janani" (mother of the world), and Saiyid Sultan³⁴ identified God of Adam, Abraham

30 As for example, "Nazim Dacoit", a ballad of Chittagong District dating from seventeenth or eighteenth century. See, D. C. Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal*, Calcutta 1920.

31 H. L. Sarkar, "Note on the Worship of the Deity Bon Bibi in the Sunderbans", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. 22, No. 2, (1956), pp. 211-12; Asim Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Traditions*, pp. 46, 53, 222, 239.

32 Haji Muhammed, *Nur Jamal*, in Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Traditions*, pp. 158, 162, 170-72.

33 Sayid Murtaza, *Yoga-Kalandar*, cited in Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Traditions*, pp. 175-77.

34 Saiyid Sultan, *Nabi Banksha*, cited in Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Traditions*, pp. 155, 163, 171.

and Moses with “Prabhu” (Lord) or more frequently with “Niranjan” (without qualities). Similarly, Ali Raja³⁵, the eighteenth century poet, identified Allah with Niranjan, Iswar (God), Jagat Iswar (God of the universe). Even when the forest pioneers were planting the institutional foundations of Islamic rituals, Bengali poets deepened the semantic meaning of these rituals by identifying the lore and even the superhuman agencies of an originally foreign creed with those of the local culture.³⁶ Another instance of cultural syncretism is to be found in the 18th century poet Bharatchandra. In his *Annadamangal*, he wrote:³⁷

Hindu Musalman adi jibjantu jato
Ishwar sabar ek nahi dui mat.
Puraner mat cchara Korane ki aacche
Bhabi dekho aage Hindu-Musalman pashe.

[There are no two opinions about the fact God is the same for the Hindus, Muslims and all human beings and animals alike. What is there in Koran except what is in the Puranas? Oh, all Hindus and Muslims, you all ponder over this!]

The reasons for poets to employ this mode of literary transmission are rather obvious. The rural masses of deltaic Bengal, mostly Muslims, were familiar with the Hindu epics. A sixteenth century poet wrote that “Muslims as well as Hindus in every home” would read the *Mahabharata*. Another poet observed that the Muslims moved to tears on hearing of Rama’s loss of Sita in the *Ramayana*.³⁸ In fact the masses in Bengal were fully conversant with the *Mangal-kavya* literature that extolled the grace, power and exploits of specifically folk deities like *Manasa* and *Chandi*. Hence it is natural that romantic tales from the Islamic tradition drew on this rich indigenous substratum of the popular religious culture. This is reflected in an eighteenth century Bengali version of the popular Iranian story of Joseph and Zulaikha where the imagery employed clearly reminds Radha’s passionate love for Krishna, the central theme of the Bengali Vaishnava devotional movement.³⁹

35 Ali Raja, *Jnana –sagara*, cited in Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Traditions*, pp. 185-86.

36 Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, p. 276.

37 Bharatchandra, *Annada Mangal* in *Bharatchandra Granthabli*, ed. Bajendranath Bandyopadhyay and Sajani Kanta Das, 3rd edn. Calcutta 1369 B.S., p. 307.

38 Asim Roy, “The Social Factors in the Making of Bengali Islam”, *South Asia*, 3 (August 1973), p. 29.

39 Qazi Abdul Mannan, *The Emergence and Development of Dobhashi Literature in Bengal up to 1855*, Dacca 1966, p. 99, cited in Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*. pp. 277-78.

Similarly the authors of the Bengali Muslim literature (popularly known as *Muslim Bangla Sahitya*) consciously presented Islamic ideas in terms readily familiar to a rural population of nominal Muslims who were quite aware of the Bengali folk and Hindu religio-cultural traditions and ideas. A case in instance, like many others, is the composition by poet Saiyid Sultan who spares no details in endowing Eve with the attributes of a Bengali beauty. Here she (Eve) uses sandal powder, wraps her hair with flowers, wears black eye paste and a pearl necklace is draped around her neck. Adam was struck by the beauty of the red spot (*sindur*) on her forehead.⁴⁰ But in doing so the Bengali Muslim authors were faced with a dilemma. Though they knew that Arabic was the appropriate language for the transmission of Islamic ideas but they could not do so because their audience was not familiar with the language. Reflecting this, Abdul Nabi, a poet of the seventeenth century wrote:⁴¹

I am afraid in my heart lest God should be annoyed with me for having rendered Islamic scriptures in Bengali. But I put aside my fear and firmly resolve to *write for the good of common people*.

A similar concern was voiced by Saiyid Sultan who lamented that nobody has transmitted the Islamic ideas in local vernacular and so nobody has understood any of the discourses of his own religion. So he resolved to disseminate these ideas in Bengali.⁴² But the rural masses do not appear to have been troubled by such tensions or even to have noticed them.

It is also interesting to note that the gender division of labour and female seclusion, long entrenched in Islamic hinterlands, had still not appeared among the Muslims in the countryside as this was contrary to socio-cultural traditions of Bengal. A ballad, *Dewana Madina*, composed by Mansur Baiyeoti around 1700 and set in southern Sylhet, dwells on a Muslim peasant woman's lament for her deceased husband where she stated with tears in her eyes:⁴³

“Oh Allah, what is this that you have written in my forehead? ...In the good month of November, we both used to reap the autumnal paddy in a hurry lest it should be spoilt by flood or hailstorm. My dear husband used to bring home the

40 Saiyid Sultan, *Nabi Banksha*, Vol. 1, p. 115, cited in Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, p. 278.

41 Abdul Nabi, *Vijay-Hamza*, quoted in Muhammed Enamul Huq, *Muslim Bangla Sahitya*, 2nd edn., Dacca 1965, pp. 214-15; emphasis added.

42 Ahmed Sharif, *Saiyid Sultan: Tar Granthabali o tar Jug*, Dhaka 1972, p. 203.

43 D. C. Sen., trans. and ed., *Eastern Bengal Ballads*, Vol. 1, pt. 1, pp. 307-08, quoted in Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, pp. 299-300.

paddy and I spread them in the sun. Then we both sat down to husk the rice. ... In December when our fields will be covered with green crops, my duty was to keep watch over them with care. I used to fill his *hooka* with water and prepare the tobacco – with this in hand I lay waiting, looking towards the path, expecting him! ... When my dear husband made the fields soft and muddy with water for transplanting of the new rice-plants, I used to cook rice and await his return home. When he busied himself in the fields for this purpose, I handed the green plants over to him for replanting We reaped the *shali* crops together in great haste and with great care. How happy we were when after the day's work we retired to rest in our home.

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of cultural syncretism is to be discerned in the history of the cult of *Satya Pir*. The early literature composed in praise of *Satya Pir* depicts a folk society that freely assimilated a variety of beliefs and practices that were “in the air” in medieval Bengal’s socio-religious and cultural environment. Several compositions devoted to the cult identify *Satya Pir* in various ways. Thus in *Satya Pir*, composed by Sankacharya, *Satya Pir* is said to be the son of one of the daughters of Sultan Alauddin Husain Shah and hence a Muslim while in Krishnahari Das’s composition, which begins with invocations of Allah and the stories of the Prophet, as born of the goddess Chandbibi. But some other texts identify *Satya Pir* with the divinity of *Satya Narain* who represents a form of Brahmanic God, Vishnu.⁴⁴

Generally scholars interpret *Satya Pir* cult in terms of a synthesis of Islam and Hinduism. The famous folklorist D. C. Sen wrote: “When two communities mixed so closely, and was so greatly influenced by one another, the result was that a common god was called into existence, worshipped by the Hindus and Muslims alike.”⁴⁵ That the two communities in Mughal Bengal followed each other’s socio-cultural and religious traditions is apparent also from the observations of the contemporary European travellers. Thus we see Pyrard de Laval wrote in 1607: “Mahometans as well as Gentiles deem the water [of the Ganges] to be blessed and to wash away all offences, just as we regard confession”.⁴⁶ In this context Richard M. Eaton’s observation seems to be quite appropriate.⁴⁷

44 D. C. Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal*, reprint, Delhi 1985, pp. 99-102.

45 D. C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, Calcutta 1954, p. 677.

46 Pyrard de Laval, *The Voyages of ...*, ed. and Trans. By Albert Gray, reprint, New York, n.d., Vol. 2, p. 336.

47 Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, p. 281.

Instead of visualizing two separate and self-contained social groups, Hindus and Muslims, participating in rites in which each steeped its “natural” communal boundaries, one may see instead a single undifferentiated mass of Bengali villagers who, in their ongoing struggle with life’s usual tribulations, unsystematically picked and chose from an array of reputed instruments – a holy man here, a holy river there – in order to tap super human power.

In fact, what Dusan Zbavitel wrote of the ballads of Mymensingh district, *Maimansingh Gitika*, - that they were “neither products of Hindu or Muslim culture, but of a single Bengali folk culture – may be justly said of the medieval Bengali folk culture and religion.”⁴⁸

That the composite culture and religious harmony between the two communities, especially among the masses in the rural areas, was a salient feature of pre-modern Bengal, and actually reached a high watermark in the eighteenth century is very much evident from literary sources, despite the discordant notes on this aspect from several historians. It was S. C. Hill who first propounded the thesis that in the mid-eighteenth century there was a vertical division in Bengali society on communal lines - between the Hindus and Muslims. He asserted that the majority Hindus, oppressed by the Muslim rulers, were eager to get rid of the Muslim nawab and welcome the British as their saviours.⁴⁹ As if taking the cue from him, Brijen K. Gupta upholds the theory of schism in Bengali society in the mid-eighteenth century.⁵⁰ It is strange that the thesis of a communal divide has held ground for so long despite the fact that most of the high officers and zaminders during Alivardi’s time – and for that matter during Sirajuddaullah’s time too - were Hindus.⁵¹

Had there really been any serious rift in the society in the mid-eighteenth century Bengal and anything contrary to the religious and cultural syncretism that evolved and flourished in medieval Bengal, it would have definitely been reflected in the contemporary vernacular literature. But this sort of evidence is conspicuous by their absence in the sources. On the contrary the fact that

48 Dusan Zbavitel, *Bengali Folk Ballads from Mymensingh and the Problem of their Authenticity*, Calcutta 1963, p. 133, cited in Eaton, *Rise of Islam*, p. 281.

49 S. C. Hill, *Bengal in 1756-1757*, Vol. 1, London, 1905, p. xxiii; *Three Frenchmen in Bengal*, London 1905, p. 120

50 Brijen K. Gupta, *Sirajuddaullah and the East India Company, 1756-57*, Leiden, 1962, p. 41. Some such hints, though rather very subtle, is to be found even in Chris Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire*, Cambridge 1987.

51 Sushil Chaudhury, *The Prelude to Empire – Plassey Revolution of 1757*, New Delhi 2000, pp. 64-65.

emerges from a critical study of the vernacular literature of the period is that Bengali Hindus and Muslims, particularly in the lower stratum of the society, who lived together for centuries in peace and harmony, and who evolved and nourished a composite culture, maintained the same ethos even in the mid-eighteenth century. Actually the process of assimilation and fusion of the two religion and culture, i.e. the religious and cultural syncretism which started much earlier, not only continued but reached the high watermark in the mid-eighteenth century. This is exemplified by numerous evidence to be found in Bengali literature. In Kshemananda's *Manasa-mangala*, written in the latter part of the seventeenth century, a passage tells us that in the steel chamber prepared for Lakshminder, the hero, a Hindu, a copy of the Quran was kept along with charms to avert the wrath of *Manasa*, the goddess of snakes.⁵² Again in a poem called *Behula Sundar*, written about the same period, we find the Brahmins consulting the Quran and advising a Hindu merchant to recite the name of Allah so that he may be blessed with a son. The same poem tells us that the Brahmins consulted the Koran for an auspicious day for the hero's journey abroad. The hero, the son of an orthodox Hindu merchant, obeyed the injunctions 'as if they were laid in the Vedas' and started on his journey praying to Allah for his safety.⁵³

In fact cultural syncretism reached its culmination around the mid-eighteenth century. This is evident from the fact that even Prince Azim-us-Shan, Mughal emperor Aurangzeb's grandson and the *subadar* of Bengal in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century took part in Holi festival in Dhaka. Nawab Sahamat Jung (Nawazish Muhammed Khan), along with Saulat Jung who came from Patna, celebrated Holi for seven days in the garden of the former's palace, Motijheel, in Murshidabad.⁵⁴ Nawab Sirajuddaula too hurried to Murshidabad after the treaty of Alinagar in February 1757 to participate in the Holi festival in his palace.⁵⁵ It is significant that by this time Holi did not remain exclusively a Hindu festival, it became an essential part of the composite culture that evolved in Bengal in the earlier centuries. In the villages predominated by the Shia Muslims, especially in Bengal and Bihar, the *Tazia*

52 D. C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, pp. 288, 793.

53 *Ibid.*, pp. 319, 793.

54 Karam Ali, *Muzaffarnamah*, in J. N. Sarkar, trans. and ed., *Bengal Nawabs*, Calcutta 1952, p. 49.

55 Karam Ali, *Muzaffarnamah*, in J. N. Sarkar, trans. and ed., *Bengal Nawabs*, p. 72.

processions were conducted with special splendour, outward show and grief. In the early nineteenth century Buchanan found that of the 1400 *Tazia* processions of Patna and Bihar Sharif area, as many as 600 were conducted by the Hindus.⁵⁶ There is evidence that even as late as the early nineteenth century, Muslim villagers in Bengal joined their fellow Hindus not only in the *Durga Puja* celebrations, but also worshipped Krishna and Sitala (the goddess of small pox). Even in the twentieth century, some Muslims in Rajshahi district (now in Bangladesh) specialized in composing songs on the occasion of the immersion of *Manasa* (goddess of snakes), while other Muslims wrote syncretic hymns in honour of Siva-Parvati (Durga) and elsewhere sang hymns to Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth.⁵⁷

Indeed it was common in the eighteenth century for Muslims to offer *puja* at Hindu temples and for Hindus to offer *sinni* at Muhammedan shrines.⁵⁸ It was during this period that the worship of the *Satya Pir*, by both Hindus and Muslims, became a common feature and an integral part of Bengali life, especially in the rural areas.⁵⁹ The poet Bharatchandra's poem, *Satyapirer Katha* bears ample testimony to this phenomenon.⁶⁰ It is said in *Shamser Gazir Punthi*, written about the middle of the eighteenth century, that a Hindu goddess appeared twice before the Gazi in his dream, and in obedience to her behest, he worshipped her the next morning, with the help of Brahmins and according to prescribed rites.

It is also to be noted that in social and religious matters, the opinion and testimony of the Muslims were sought by the Hindus. A Bengali document, dated 1732, which marked the victory of the *sahajiya* cult over the orthodox Vaishnava cult, had a few Muhammedan signatories as witnesses.⁶¹ All this only signifies that in day to day life the two communities had lived side by side for centuries in harmony and mutual attachment which led to religious and cultural syncretism in the Mughal period. In an interesting essay, Edward C.

56 Quoted in Jagadish Narayan Sarkar, "Mughal Cultural Heritage" in *History of Bangladesh, 1704-1971*, Vol. III, *Social and Cultural History*.

57 D. C. Sen, *History of Bengal Language and Literature*, pp. 368, 793, 796-98.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 793.

59 *Ibid.*, pp. 396-97.

60 Bharat Chandra, "Satyapirer Katha", in *Bharat Chandra Rachanabali*, Calcutta 1963.

61 S. R. Mitra, *Types of Early Bengali Prose*, pp. 135-38; *Sahitya Parishad Patrika*, Calcutta, B.S. 1308, pp. 8-10.

Dimmock, Jr., observed that a reading of the medieval Bengali literature from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century gives little indication of any deep-rooted antagonism between the two communities.⁶² The mutual tolerance for each other's faith which is an aspect of the composite culture that evolved in Bengal is typically reflected in a poem, *Satyapir*, written by Faizullah, where the poet laid down that what Muslims call Allah is Hari (God) to Hindus.⁶³ This is nothing but a manifestation of the cultural syncretism that became a significant feature of Bengali life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

**Caught between the pulls of “Bengal Localism” and
“Islamic Extra-territoriality”**

It was in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Bengali Muslims experienced that the socio-territorial identity plays a crucial role in defining and redefining the parameters of a community. They also felt the usefulness of trying to identify a fixed criterion for a definition of the cultural boundaries of such a community: a Bengali Muslim may have seen himself primarily as a ‘Muslim’ the other day, as a ‘Bengali’ yesterday, and a ‘Bengali Muslim’ today, depending on objective conditions but on none of these occasions did his thoughts and his idea of destiny become separated from his territorial identity. His entire personality bears marks of this socio-territorial imprint. The songs he sings, the music he plays, the poems he composes, the literature he produces, his daily life, marriage rituals, dietary habits, are all clearly linked to the territory of his birth⁶⁴. As Amartya Sen asserts: ‘A Bangladeshi Muslim is not only a Muslim but also a Bengali and a Bangladeshi is typically quite proud of the Bengali language, literature, and music.’ As such, attempts to forge closer links to an Arab or Persian dream could scarcely distance him from his roots.

But the language controversy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was a hard reality. The pro-Bengali group regarded Bengali both as their mother tongue and as the national language of Bengal. Among the opponents of this group was a small Urdu-speaking *ashraf* (who claimed descent from the Prophet's family) who for a considerable period of time kept arguing that, as Urdu was spoken by majority of Muslims of the Indian sub-continent and

62 Edward C. Dimmock, Jr., “Hinduism and Islam in Medieval Bengal”, in Rachel van M. Baumer, eds., *Aspects of Bengali History and Society*, Honolulu 1975, p. 2.

63 Ahmed Sharif, *Madhyajuger Sahitye Samaj O Sanskrit Rup*, Dhaka 1977, p. 423.

64 Rafiuddin Ahmed, *Understanding the Bengal Muslims*, pp. 3-4.

Bengali was Hinduised by Sanskrit *pundits*, it was in the interest of Muslim solidarity that Bengali Muslims should also speak Urdu and regard it as their mother tongue. This view was obviously rejected by an overwhelming majority of the Bengali Muslims, including some members of Urdu-speaking group. They accepted Bengali as their national language in the limited sense of territorial nationalism by arguing that there was no contradiction between territorial identity and Islam. By the turn of the nineteenth century, pro-Bengali views were being vigorously expressed. In the 1880s and early 1900s, the *Mihir-o-Sudhakar*⁶⁵, gave solemn calls to Bengali Muslims to regard Bengali as their mother tongue and censure those who looked down upon it. In 1903 the journal *Navanur* asked: ‘What else could be the mother tongue of the Bengali Muslims, except Bengali?’ It asserted that those who wanted to make Urdu the mother tongue of the Bengali Muslims were attempting the impossible.

Bengali Muslim intellectuals also joined the movement in great numbers. In 1905 Ekinuddin Ahmad appealed to Bengali Muslims to cultivate Bengali in order to build up their ‘national’ life. In 1909 the newspaper *Sanjibani* wrote that Bengali was Islamised in Bengal by infusing Arabic and Persian words into it, and this Bengali was the mother tongue of Bengali Muslims. In 1915, Khademul Islam Bangabasi condemned the scornful attitude of a section of Muslims towards Bengali and pointed out that such Muslims only insulted their ‘Mother and Motherland’. Again, in an article in 1916 in the *Al Islam*, Abdul Malek Chaudhury ridiculed those Muslims who slept in thatched houses in the mango groves or bamboo bushes of Sylhet [now in Bangladesh] but dreamt of Baghdad, Bukhara, Kabul, Kandahar, Iran and Turkey. He argued that regardless of whether their forefathers came from West Asian countries, or originated from local Hindus, Bengali alone was their mother tongue.

In fact, pro-Bengali views continued to be repeatedly asserted by many eminent Muslim writers throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Maniruzzaman Islamabadi argued that Urdu was neither acceptable to the Bengali Muslims as their mother tongue, nor was it possible to reject it. Urdu could be cultivated as an additional language. Syed Emdad Ali advised the Muslims to regard Bengali as their mother tongue. He regretted the tendency of some Muslims to treat Urdu as their mother tongue. Abdul Karim Sahitya

65 *Mihir-o-Sudhakar*, Report on the Indian Newspaper and Periodicals, selected issues, 1880s & 1890s.

Visharad (1896-1953) asserted that without due regard to the predominant language of the land, no country could prosper. Another prominent writer, Kaikobad, wrote that the primary need of the Bengali Muslims was to build up Muslim 'national' life through the cultivation of Bengali because Bengali was not only their mother tongue, but also the language of the land of their birth.

As a result of the above literary and intellectual movement, the supporters of Urdu as the language of the Bengali Muslims gradually realized the futility of their efforts. Thus Arabic continued to be regarded as the sacred language of the Koran, alongside Bengali as the mother tongue. But the urge to restore Bengali to its proper status and to use it as an active language outweighed all other literary concerns. A sort of a settlement was eventually reached to retain Arabic and Persian words that had crept into Bengali as spoken by Bengali Muslims. However, in the process of linguistic change, as disputes expressed in the literature, the Muslim sense of community was being reinforced, redefined and extended.

But at the same time, the Bengali Muslim exercised his differences with "others" at different times in different ways, which dictated his choices of symbols. During the Khilafat movement which spread in India as a national movement in the early twentieth century, following the abolition of the Islamic Caliphate by Mustafa Kamal of Turkey, the Bengali/Indian Muslims were in a dilemma. One important group of Bengali Muslims was greatly attached to a collective Muslim identity with a Pan-Islamic bias, rather than to an Indian or Bengali identity. Such a basis for explanation of identity often confused the Bengali Muslims. They hesitated to demonstrate their territorial identity clearly. Muslim Bengali identity was thus caught between the pulls of collective Muslim identity with its extra-territorial characteristics, and the geographical or territorial Bengali identity. However, the advocates of collective Muslim identity maintained that in the 1920s the Indian nation was in the course of formation and thus India was then a nation of different races and communities. But many could not accept unhesitatingly the political formula of a section of Indians that 'We are Indians first, and Hindus and Muslims next'. They argued that there was no contradiction in being a Muslim and a Bengali, that Islam was not incompatible with patriotism. This argument that there is no conflict between one's religious and territorial identities had been forcefully presented by following assertion of a Bengali Muslim intellectual, Syed Badraddoja:

We are Muslims by virtue of the religion we profess, Indians because of geographical unit to which we belong, Bengalis because of the province that had given us our birth. Islam is not inconsistent with nationalism or patriotism. It is not in any way incompatible with the noblest urge for freedom and liberty, or with other genuine aspirations of human life.

The protagonists of Bengali Muslim identity were not prepared to accept the unity of Indian Muslims or the Islamic world in the name of religion, though the cry of 'Islam in danger' was raised. A small group among them supported the abolition of the Caliphate by Mustafa Kamal, and argued that it was under the command of the 'thick-headed' *mullahs* that the modern Muslim dreamt of a Pan-Islamic state. A prominent Bengali poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam, expressed his indignation against what he considered to be the extra-territorial loyalty of the hypocritical *mullahs* towards a decadent Caliphate. He wrote in 1922:

Kamal, even though a Muslim, realized that neither Khilafat [Caliphate] nor the country could be saved by keeping beards, by eating beef, or by observing *roza* [fasting]. Otherwise, he would, just like our *liungi*-clad *mullahs*, have been constantly performing *namaz* turning his face towards the Kaba Such religious hypocrisy cannot save them.

Another Bengali intellectual, Kazi Abdul Wadud (1894-1940) argued, as he explicitly did in his address to a young Muslim audience in Faridpur in 1927,⁶⁶ that the Bengali Muslim was a human being first by the right of his birth, then a Bengali by being made of the soil of Bengal, and then a Muslim – a Bengali Muslim last. He asserted that one did not need to be a Muslim first by being blind to the requirements of the time and one's own country. He even went to the extent to suggest that it was unnecessary to go to Mecca to prove oneself a Muslim. One could be a Muslim living in a thatched cottage in a Bengal village in the midst of one's relatives and neighbours.

Some of the above Bengali intellectuals did not stop there. They formed a group called Muslim Sahitya Samaj [Muslim Literary Society] in Dhaka in 1926 and the *Sikha* group (named after its mouthpiece *Sikha*). They launched a movement known as the *buddhir mukti andolan* (movement for the emancipation of the intellect). They argued that the observance of the *parda* system, the prohibition of the practice of realizing interest on capital, and the objection to the culture of fine arts were 'obstacles' to the freedom of thought and activities beneficial to the Muslim society. They believed there was no fixed road to the progress of

⁶⁶ Wadud, "Abhibhashan" in *Naba Parjay* 2, p. 35.

mankind. The Muslims should, therefore, think afresh rationally. Their view of Bengali identity was thus associated with more radical modernist approaches which dogmatic Muslims were not prepared or educated to swallow. Orthodox Muslims launched a strong offensive against the group through the press and other platforms. The members of the liberal intellectual group were almost ostracized. As a result, by 1935 the leading figures of the group had fallen silent. The *Samaj* became defunct, and the *Sikha* had ceased publication. They were silenced by the emergence of the Muslim League as a powerful factor in Indian politics and the *Praja*-League alliance in 1937.

However in 1947, during the partition days, the Bengali Muslim tended to distinguish himself more from his Bengali Hindu neighbour than any other, and emphasized the Islamic content of his identity. But this definition was somewhat modified during the 1969-71 when language became a powerful political symbol, primarily in response to domination by the Urdu-speaking Pakistani elite. It would however be too much to suggest that on any of these occasions, the Bengali Muslim had either ceased to be a Bengali or had rejected his identification with Islam. Thus it seems, the socio-territorial pull continued to exert a powerful impact on him. This dual pull is often reflected in his continued hesitation to define the cultural boundaries of his identity in specific terms: "Am I a Muslim first or a Bengali" he continues to ask himself.

As a matter of fact, this dichotomy between a Bengali and a Muslim identity has been continuing to persist for a long time from the early modern era. The Muslim masses living in the countryside were so fragmented from their upper class co-religionists (the *ashraf* and the orthodox *ulema*) that the notion a 'community' hardly existed. In fact this did not develop until the late nineteenth century. Till then, there was little organized effort, if any, to articulate a sense of community identity among these disparate groups; nor were any institutional links forged. The real problem was how to integrate the masses of converts with their own inherited ideas, traditions and practices within the framework of a single Muslim community. It was not easy but the religious preachers in medieval Bengal – the *gazis*, *pirs* who are now termed 'cultural mediators'⁶⁷ – adopted a policy of compromise and concession in an effort to propagate the Islamic message. They incorporated some of the local cultural idioms and symbols to popularize Islamic themes among the Muslims of rural Bengal.

67 Asim Roy, *Islamic Syncretistic Tradition*, p. xii; chap. 2.

There was hardly any alternative: while not compromising the identity of Islam as a religion, what was considered an unchangeable and standardized system of beliefs and rituals, had to be adjusted to the realities of life in pre-modern deltaic Bengal.

As a matter of fact, early efforts by medieval Bengali writers to transmit Islamic religious ideas and cultural symbols suffered from the immediate problem of finding the appropriate vocabulary and idiom in the local language. Moreover, many did not approve this and resented the use of local cultural symbols, including the language, considered ‘un-Islamic’ in conveying the message of Allah and His Prophet. But there were quite a few who reacted sharply to such aspersions. Saiyid Sultan, a mid-sixteenth century poet, lamented that nobody has transmitted the Islamic ideas in local vernacular and so nobody has understood any of the discourses of his own religion. Hence he resolved to disseminate these ideas in Bengali.⁶⁸ But in doing so, the Bengali Muslim authors were faced with a dilemma. Though they knew that Arabic was the appropriate language for the transmission of Islamic ideas, they could not do so because their audience was not familiar with the language. Reflecting this, Abdul Nabi, a poet of the seventeenth century wrote: ‘I am afraid in my heart lest God should be annoyed with me for having rendered Islamic scriptures in Bengali. But I put aside my fear and firmly resolve to write for the good of the common people’.⁶⁹ Shah Abdul Hakim, another seventeenth century poet, wrote: “Whatever language a people speak in a country, the Lord understands it. He understands all languages, whether it is Hinduani [Hindustani or Urdu?] or the language of Bengal, or any other.” He even went to the extent to assert: “Those who, born in Bengal, are averse to Bengali language cast doubt on their birth. The people who have no liking for the language and the learning of their country, had better leave it and live abroad”.⁷⁰ Thus local environment and local culture continued to have a decisive influence on the life of Bengali Muslims, despite all attempts at conformity. However, these cross-currents in Bengali Muslim society inevitably produced a dichotomy between the “Muslim” and the “Bengali” contents of their identity and culture.

68 Saiyid Sultan, *Shab-I Miraj, Muslim Bangla Sahitya*, (henceforth *MBS*, ed. M. E. Haq), p. 161.

69 Abdul Nabi, *Vijay Hamza*, Quoted in *MBS*, pp. 214-15.

70 Shah Abdul Hakim, *Nur Nama*, quoted in *MBS*, pp. 205-06.

Here one might ask a pertinent question, especially in the present context. Did the emergence of Bangladesh, ostensibly on the basis of linguistic-cultural identity, fundamentally transform the orientation and character of the Bengali Muslims? There is little doubt that it meant, not only theoretically, a greater emphasis on Bengali cultural identity but perhaps it also signified a fundamental break with the earlier trend. The scholars can probably throw more definitive light on this aspect than I can with my limited knowledge about the present scenario.