

*S. H. Osmany*

## **CARDINAL ELEMENTS OF NATIONALISM IN BANGLADESH**

The history of nationalism in Bangladesh is the sum total of the dynamic interaction between numerous historical forces some of which are cardinal and others marginal. Secular and Islamic forces as the two foremost cardinal elements of nationalism in Bangladesh have contributed immensely to the evolution of Bangladeshi nationalism. Historically speaking, there have been many convergences and divergences of various elements of these two clearly identifiable forces of Bangladeshi nationalism. Some factors of these two streams have maintained a degree of parallelism while others have experienced mutual assimilation. Competition, controversy and even conflict have been in evidence among and between secular and Islamic elements at different periods of Bangladesh history. An enquiry into the process of interaction between secular and Islamic elements makes a fascinating study of the socio-political history of Bangladesh. The scope of a study of this nature limits the range of treatment of all the elements of nationalism and hence there is a need for a selection of some significant factors. Selectivity of material included in this analysis has substantially been influenced by the vast time frame and numerous forces.

Roots of most of the cultural practices, symbols and values are lost in the hazy mists of historical past and popular folklores. While many of these could quite possibly originate and develop

independently of each other both in time and space, many practices, symbols and values could have been the product of long and intense interaction between social and religious forces. As a consequence one can discern a relative shift in socio-political significance of the same practices, symbols and values at different periods of history. Bangladeshi nationalism is no different. Relative socio-political sensitivities have shifted from time to time, while essentially some of the cultural practices, symbols and values themselves might not have been subject to any major transformation. Relative continuity of objective cultural practices, symbols, norms and values and evident discontinuity in socio-political consciousness and response are also among the interesting features of historical interaction between secular and Islamic elements of Bangladeshi nationalism.

The historical process of interaction between and among the secular and Islamic elements of Bangladeshi nationalism has been more reactive in nature. In pre-1947 days the Hindus of West Bengal were more active and militant in socio-political movements. To every initiative taken by the Bengali Hindus there was a defensive response from the Bengali Muslims. Similarly the Bengali Muslims also were generally more reactive in their response to socio-political initiatives taken outside Bengal by the Muslim leadership of India. The nature and degree of response changed from issue to issue over the period of history.

Objectivity and continuity of secular elements of Bangladeshi nationalism are somewhat diffused in the historical process of interaction between cultural elements of Bengal, the waves of immigrants and the three major religions - Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. In order to appreciate the process of interaction between secular and Islamic elements study of the geographical importance of ancient Bengal and its subsequent influence on the social, cultural and religious life of the region is essential.

Bangladeshi psyche is a complex product of thousands of years of history of a people living in the deltaic plains. Ethnic and cultural blending over such a long period produced some practically indistinguishable features in terms of period of history. For the purpose of this paper we may divide the long history of Bangladesh into three broad segments before the arrival of the British i.e., pre-Aryan, Aryan and Muslim period. The precise religious character of pre-Aryan period is largely a matter of interpretation of very few dependable archeological and socio-anthropological evidence. Aryan period witnessed the intense and long interaction between two major faiths, Buddhism and Hinduism. It is not easy to attribute with a degree of confidence different cultural symbols and norms to one or other of these two systems of faiths. Islam came to Bangladesh to encounter a high level of cultural and social organisation. A close look at the nature of introduction and consolidation of Islam as a faith and Muslims as political masters in Bangladesh will give a clearer picture of the extensive and intensive interaction of the indigenous cultural values and symbols with the cultural system brought in by the Muslim preachers, immigrants and rulers.

The primary focus will be naturally on the Muslim period as we are concerned in this study about the nature and outcome of interaction between pre-Islamic culture and the system of values and symbols of the Muslim immigrants and rulers. The other two periods of Bangladeshi culture are relevant only in the context of analysis of the dialectics of secular and Islamic elements of Bangladeshi nationalism. In general individual values, symbols and practices have been studied in this paper without any rigid adherence to systematic time frame of history.

Located almost at the eastern most part of India, "the geography and nature substantially helped Bengal in maintaining an independent political character for several centuries."<sup>1</sup> Its huge

1. M. A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, Vol. I (translated into Bengali by Md. Asaduzzaman ) Bangla Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh 1982, p.28.

rivers, marshy lands, heavy rainfall and geographical distance from the imperial capital in northern India acted as barriers to aggression from northern India while at the same time it gave refuge to those who wanted to take shelter there.<sup>2</sup> Its fertile rich soil and its wealth on the other hand, attracted adventurers to it. Muslim conquest of Bengal began about 1203 and from then to 1765 Bengal was under the Muslim rulers. With the advent of Islam, Muslim population in Bengal began to increase, any by 1872 it was "inhabited by larger number of Musalmans than any other part of India"<sup>3</sup> Several factors promoted these Musalmans to make Bengal their home. The first and foremost was the trade link between Bengal and Arabia. Even before the Muslim conquest of Bengal Arab traders frequented the ports of Bengal, particularly that of Chittagong.<sup>4</sup> They were drawn to Bengal by its fine cotton garments (Dhaka Muslins), ligu aloes, (Aggur wood), sable skins (otter skins) and rhinoceros horns.<sup>5</sup> In course of time many traders settled in Bengal which became "the seat of a colony of Musalman merchants"<sup>6</sup> as early as in the 8th century.<sup>7</sup> The presence of a large number of Arabic words, idioms and phrases in the local dialect of Chittagong and Noakhali in present Bangladesh gives support to this fact.<sup>8</sup>

During the 562 years of Muslim rule in Bengal 76 Musalman Governors, Kings and Nazims ruled Bengal. All these people

---

2. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

3. Khandkar Fazle Rubee, *The Origin of the Musalmans of Bengal*. (K. F. Rubee was the Diwan of the Murshidabad Nawab Estate. This book was originally written in Persian in 1895 and was called *Haqiqat-e-Mussalman-e-Bangla*), Society for Pakistan Studies, Dhaka, 1970, p. 1.

4. S. H. Osmany, "Chittagong port : A Study of its Fortunes", (unpublished Ph. D. Thesis, London School of Oriental and Africa Studies 1978), p. 12-13.

5. K. F. Rubee *op. cit.*, p. 7.

6. *Ibid* p. 7.

7. *Ibid* p. 7, see also Richard Symonds, *The Making of Pakistan*, Karachi, 1966.

8. Abu Jafar, *Muslims Festivals in Bangladesh*, 1986, p. 11.

except for Jalal-ud-din Shah, Ahmed Shah and Rajahs Todermal and Man Singh were of either Afghans, Mughal, Iranian or Arab origin.<sup>9</sup> On account of the sovereign being of foreign origin many people from these Muslim countries came and settled in Bengal. Thus when Bakhtiyar Khilji conquered Bengal many former inhabitants of Ghor, Ghazni and Khorasan who had left their respective country on account of revolutions there joined him. Moreover, all the Muslim rulers followed the practice of granting lands to civil and military functionaries, to the learned and to the gentry to encourage them to settle in Bengal. Thus it is found that Bhakhtiyar Khilji granted Jagirs to his Ameers and relations and encouraged them to settle in the newly acquired territory.<sup>10</sup> Sultan Ghias-ud-din Khilji who ruled Bengal from 1214 to 1227 followed a similar policy. "He caused Syyads, ecclesaistics and learned men to settle in his dominions by granting them Aima and rent-free lands."<sup>11</sup> Boghra Khan, son of Sultan Ghiasud-din Balban, Emperor of Hindustan who ruled Bengal as an independent ruler for 45 years<sup>12</sup> (1282-1325) likewise encouraged the gentry and nobility. After the establishment of Mughal supremacy in Bengal madadmaash and jagirs were given to encourage settlement and to pay for the services of the civil and military functionaries.<sup>13</sup> These practices led to large scale settlement of the ruling class in Bengal.

Disturbances which prevailed at the Imperial capital at Delhi from time to time also forced many noble aristcratic families to migrate to and settle in Bengal. When Emperor Babur slew Ibrahim Shah Lodi, "most of the Afghan nobles fled to Bengal".<sup>14</sup> Even Sultan Mahmood, brother of the late Emperor did so along with the daughter of the Emperor who later married Sultan Nasrat

---

9. K. F. Rubee, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 15 and 25.

Shah of Bengal.<sup>15</sup> During the rule of Nawab Suja-ud-din Muhammad Khan of Bengal Nadir Shah, King of Persia, invaded India and sacked Delhi and other cities. It is reported that many of the inhabitants of Delhi and the surrounding areas took refuge in Bengal. The liberal treatment of the Nawab "gave a new impetus to the influx of immigrants".<sup>16</sup> Moreover to escape the harsh rule and the various plans and projects of Muhammad Bin Tughlak many people left Delhi and its surrounding areas during his reign and sought refuge in Bengal.<sup>17</sup> Many Shias from Persia also came to Bengal during the reign of Shah Shuja the son of Emperor Shahjahan. Upon them he depended for the success of the fight for the throne against his Sunni antagonist and brother Aurangzeb. He invited a large number of Shias and settled them in the capital city, Dacca.<sup>18</sup> Their number was so large that "Dacca during his Viceroyalty became veritably a Shia city. The result was that there arose a second Lucknow in Bengal, namely, the city of Dacca if judged by the number, influence and importance of Shia emigrants".<sup>19</sup>

In addition to the disturbances in India, disturbance in the muslim world also led to settlement in India and Bengal. When all central and western Asia from Khorasan and Afghanistan to Baghdad, the seat of the Caliphate erupted under the impact of the invasion of Chenghis Khan and his descendants many fled to other countries including India where there was a powerful Musalman Government.<sup>20</sup> The ancestors of the Armenians who had settled in Bengal had come from Persia to escape the persecution and violence of some of its kings.<sup>21</sup>

15. *Ibid.*, p. 15 and 25.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

18. Muhammad Yasin, *A Social History of Islamic India 1605-1748*, Munshiram Monoharlal, New Delhi 1974, p. 7.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

20. K. F. Rubee, *The Origin of the Musalmans of Bengal*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-35.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

Spencer Trimingham thus writes, "the thirteenth century was an age of disturbance and change as the Mongal hordes swept over central Asian Muslim states one after the other, Baghdad being conquered in A. D. 1258. Many refugees fled to those parts of the Muslim world which seemed more remote from the scourge. Among these were Anatolia in the north-west and Hindustan in the south-east. Many Sufis found a new home within the jurisdiction of the Turkish Sultanate of Delhi".<sup>22</sup>

Sufis who made their appearance in Bengal in the wake of Turkish conquest in 1250 might have helped the Sultan in "conquering inaccessible and difficult frontier regions".<sup>23</sup> It is however not known for certainty whether these early Sufis came as warriors or were lead into jihad<sup>24</sup> out of religious zeal.<sup>25</sup> Writing about the warrior Sufis, Kabir states, "it is unbelievable that small contingents of fighting forces without the backing of big armies in or around Bengal could have achieved such wonders as traditional accounts would have us believe".<sup>26</sup> The beginning of the activities of the reforming Sufis is assigned to Ilyas Shah rule when he in 1352 united the whole of Bengal bringing peace and stability in its wake and assumed the title of Shah-e-Bengal. Shah-e-Bangalyan or Sultan-e-Bangla.<sup>27</sup> Thus trade facilities, political tensions both within and outside India coupled with the geographical advantages which Bengal presented at the time, its

22. J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, Oxford University Press, U. S. A. 1973, p. 22.

23. M. Kabir "Aspects of Sufism in Bangladesh (1200-1700) : Search for a Conceptual framework", Rafiuddin Ahmed (Ed.) in *Islam in Bangladesh. Society, Culture and Politics*, Bangladesh Itihas Samiti, Dhaka 1983, p. 62. See also Abdul Karim, *Banglar Itihas; Sultani Amal*, Bangla Academy, Dhaka, 1977, pp. 166-168, 168-196 & 186-87 For reading on Sufism see Walter T. Stage. *The Teaching of the Mystics*, A. Mentor Book, the New American Library, 1960, pp. 201-220.

24. *Jihad*, religious war for the cause of Islam.

25. M. Kabir, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 62-63.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

wealth and rich soil made Bengal an ideal place for all those seeking refuge or a peaceful and comfortable existence, either for spiritual fulfilment or worldly gains.

The impact of Islam on different regions of the world has been different. Islamic world embraces within its fold various regional cultures which makes for diversity within its broad cultural unity. Depending to a great extent on the level of civilization at the time of the advent of Islam to a particular area, Islam had influenced and was influenced by that region. Another factor which determined the effect of the impact of Islam on a given region was the cultural maturity of Islam at the point of time it encountered a new civilization. When Islam entered Black Africa, Islam was "fully developed and acted as a strong factor in unifying culture".<sup>28</sup> On the other hand when it entered Iran, "Iran had behind it millennia of advanced culture, and Iranians, receiving the impact of primitive Arab Islam, contributed significantly towards the formation of Islamic culture proper."<sup>29</sup> Similarly when Islam entered Bengal it encountered an advanced culture.

Bangladesh as a nation has a history which dates back to ancient period. It comprises the major part of the region which was known as Bengal. Bengal from ancient times consisted of five regions namely Rarh, Gourha, Vanga, Varendra and Samatata. Of this Vanga or Ganganidai,<sup>30</sup> comprising the central region of Bengal including within it the Presidency Division and Dhaka Division, Samatata roughly the Chittagong Division, and Pundravardana embracing Rajshahi Division (and the state of Cooch Bihar) are to be found in Bangladesh. Rarh and Gourha comprise West Bengal.<sup>32</sup> This demarcation of the area, however,

---

28. J. Spencer Trimingham, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

30. R. C. Majumder, *History of Bengal*, Vol. I, Dhaka, 1943, p. 2.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Gourha* included some areas of Rajshahi and Dinajpur.



varied from time to time. Though in the eighth century Bengal was probably unified by the Palas it was only in the fourteenth century during the Ilyas Shahi rule that the name Bangala was used for the whole region.<sup>33</sup> Bangala came to be known as Bengal during the British period. West Bengal was dominated by the Hindus while East Bengal was inhabited mostly by the Muslims.

Geographically cut off from other parts of India and blessed by a fertile and rich land Bengal developed a culture and tradition distinct in many ways from the rest of India. Four major routes connected northern and southern India. Along these routes both trade and cultural influences followed. One such route was through Western Bengal along the coastal plain, into Orissa towards the southern Kingdoms.<sup>34</sup> The coastal plain, however, was intersected by numerous large rivers and their distributions. This led to the development of independent Kingdoms<sup>35</sup> which could continue their isolated existence with some measure of security. The fertile soil and heavy rainfall made the production of food easy and left plenty of time for the pursuit of other activities. As a result Bengal did not have to look beyond its frontier for its need, either cultural or otherwise. As a consequence, on account of these characteristics of the eastern coastal plain, "Bengal played a feeble part in the transmission of culture from north to south".<sup>36</sup> However, it was not long before that Aryan influence began to penetrate Bengal mainly through the efforts of monks and warriors of the middle country. Though it is not definitely known when Aryan civilization entered Bengal it is generally believed that a gradual process of Aryanization began in the first millennium B.C.<sup>37</sup>

33. A. M. A. Muhith, *Bangladesh : Emergence of a Nation*. Bangladesh Books International Ltd. 1978. p. 1-2.

34. Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Modern Bengal*, California, 1959, p. 3.

35. R. C. Majumder, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

36. Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Modern Bengal*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

37. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1988, Vol. 14, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. Chicago U. S. A. p. 594-5.

One result of the late arrival of Aryan influence in Bengal was that it had lost, over the years much of its strength while Bengal on the other hand had firmly established its pre-Aryan legacy. As a consequence Aryan civilization could not completely prevail over Bengal. A new kind of culture, being a synthesis of both evolved giving rise to "the characteristics in the socio-religious life of Bengal which can be said to be typically Bengali".<sup>38</sup> The advent of Islam gave a new dimension to Bengali culture. Pre-Islamic cultural practices, symbols and values of Bangladesh were strong, rich and vibrant as such the cultural over-lay resulting from the spread of Islam in Bangladesh in the thirteenth century A. D. both influenced and got influenced by the indigenous culture. Political and administrative necessities, religious compulsions and the desire to adapt themselves to their new environment led the Muslim rulers to look upon Bengal as their new home. They made a conscious effort, therefore, to give the best they had and to adopt from the indigenous culture what best suited them. Thus references are found of Muslims joining in Hindu festivals like 'Holi', Diwali (the festival of lamps) and Dasehra. However, these were practised more as social customs rather than as religious obligations. Under Akbar 'Dewali' and 'Dasehra' were celebrated as state festivals.<sup>39</sup> Sultan Muhammad Bin Tughlaq was one of the rulers of India who dreamt of making India the home of the Muslims. He encouraged Muslims to settle in India and discouraged their return home. Foreigners were forbidden to be called "Gharib" (a stranger), instead they were to be addressed as Aziz (a relation). Whenever necessary Muhammad Bin Tughlaq used force to compel the Muslims to stay in India. Similarly the Afghans and the Mughals never looked back on the land they had

---

38. M. A. Chowdhury "Conversion to Islam in Bengal, An Exploration", in Rafiuddin Ahmed (ed.) *Islam in Bangladesh, Society, Culture and Politics*, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

39. Muhammad Yasin, *A Social History of Islamic India 1605-1748*, *op. cit.*, p. 46. It is recorded that when it was reported to the Sultan that some Hindustani Mussalmans wanted to go back he ordered that they be beheaded. *Ibid.*

left behind.<sup>40</sup> The independent Muslim rulers of Bengal in order to acquaint themselves with the local people and their way of life took to educating themselves on Bengal. This brought them in close contact with the local people which led to the fusion of the two cultures and the propagation of Islam. Pathan rulers like Nasir Shah, Sultan Giasuddin, Hussain Shah, Chhuti Khan and Paragot Khan are all known to have patronised Bengali language and literature.<sup>41</sup> The famous Mughal Ruler Akbar the Great in order to bring about a synthesis of the two faiths and cultures introduced his famous Din-e-Ilahi. Moreover, Mughal rulers had Indian wives and appointed Indians in important offices of the state. However, it is interesting to note that while the Pathans treated Bengal as their home and fought with the Delhi "imperialists" for the independence of Bengal<sup>42</sup> the "Mughal Government of Bengal was in character a military occupation."<sup>43</sup> However, whatever might have been the nature of the Mughal rule in Bengal the fact remains that some Mughals did settle down and mingle with the local people. As a result of the Muslim rule, therefore, a completely new code of life embracing administration, education, moral values and religion was introduced into the Bengali culture.

Besides the conquerors and rulers many Shia devotees and traders came to Bengal from Basra and Bandar Abbas. Political tension in Persia, as mentioned earlier, also compelled many Persians to settle in Bengal.<sup>44</sup> The number grew and during the time of Nawab Murshid Quli Khan and his descendents they became an influential group in the community. Persian culture

---

40. *Ibid.*, p. 77-78.

41. A. K. Nazmul Karim, *The Dynamics of Bangladesh Society*, Vikas Publishing House, New Delhi 1980, p. 147-148.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 147-148.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

44. M. Inamul Hoque, "Some Aspects of the Society and Culture of the Muslims of Bengal in the Eighteenth Century", in Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslim 1871-1906. A Quest for Identity*, Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1981, p. 90.

gradually spread in Bengal and soon "Arabic-Persian words took permanent root in the Bengali language"<sup>45</sup> both among the Hindus and the Muslims. Chandi Das, one of the earliest poets of Medieval period, used some Perso-Arabic words in his 'Shrikrishnakirtan'.<sup>46</sup> During the pre-Mughal period in all matters relating to religion Arabic was used. During the Mughal period Persian not only was recognised as previously as the official but was used in all spheres of life.<sup>47</sup> From the eighteenth century Persian and Arabic words were widely used in Bengali language and books began to be written in Persian. Of these mention may be made of *Tarikh-i-Bangalah* of Munshi Salim Allah (1760-1763), *Shigarf Namah* (Itisam al-Din Panchnuri Nadia district of 1960), *Salim's Reaz-al-Salatin* (1787) and *Seiyar al-Mutakhhirin* of Ghulam Hussain Tabtabai.<sup>48</sup> Besides the use of Persian, Arabic and Turkish words were also found in Bengali language.

Relatively speaking, the impact of Sufism in Bengal was much more profound and lasting than that of the Muslim rulers.<sup>49</sup> Their main contribution apart from conquest, administration and education was in the enhancement of the psychological and moral development of the Muslims of Bengal.<sup>50</sup> Writing about them Trimingham commented, "Indian Islam seems to have been essentially a holy-man Islam. These migrants in the Hindu environment acquired an aura of holiness, and it was this which attracted Indians to them, rather than formal Islam".<sup>51</sup> Sufis and darvish were mainly great scholars. Hence in the initial stage of the Muslim rule the influence of these Sufis both in Bengal and in India was immense.<sup>52</sup> There were two categories of Sufis : those

---

45. *Ibid.*

46. *Ibid.*

47. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

49. M. A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 175.

50. *Ibid.* p. 81.

51. J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, op. cit., p. 22.

52. M. A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 156.

associated with Khanqahs and the wanderers.<sup>53</sup> "The Khanqahs were in a way the focal points of Islam in India. They were the "centres of holiness, fervour, ascetic exercises and sufi training."<sup>54</sup> They were also great centres of learning and as such attracted many from far and near.<sup>55</sup> The character, moral dedication and integrity of the sufis attracted both educated and uneducated Hindus towards them. Open discussions were held in the Khanqahs which did much in the development of better understanding between the converted Muslims and the newly arrived Muslims<sup>56</sup> and in the assimilation of the two cultures. Gradually Islam influenced greatly the Bengali Muslim society and its influence was found in every walks of life. It was found in art, dress, social customs and mannerism, architecture, music and in the cooking and preparation of food. A special range of cooking developed in Bengal known as 'Mughlai Khana'. The development of education especially Islamic helped in the spread of Islamic ideas. New maktabas, madrassahs and special Muslim schools and anjumans and a whole range of literature, produced by the Mullahs transmitted the Islamic way of life and teaching to the people of rural area.<sup>57</sup> This diffusion of education both western and Islamic coupled with the improvement in the means of communication in the 19th century brought the "rural masses into close contact with their urban co-religionists".<sup>58</sup> Later on Islamisation of Bengal was further hastened with the aid of journals and newspapers. Of the Bengali Muslim journals published between 1873 and 1900 about 29 per cent dealt with Islam in the Middle East, seven per cent with Islam in India, 32 per cent with subject matters relating to Islam and only about six per cent about Bengali culture and language.<sup>59</sup> Commenting on this

53. J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, op. cit., p. 22.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

55. M. A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, Vol. I, op. cit., p. 156.

56. *Ibid.* p. 160-161.

57. Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslim 1871-1906*, op. cit., p. 108-111.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 107.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

Rafiuddin Ahmed wrote, "this was a fair reflection of the educated Muslim mind, their deliberate indifference to their immediate environment and their enthusiasm for the supposed links with the world of Islam".<sup>60</sup>

Thus the third and final stage in the Bangladesh national characteristic was reached which was a synthesis of pre-Aryan, Aryan and Islam elements. The historical process of interaction between the secular and Islamic elements were so even in certain areas of life that one hardly could discern any value dichotomy or cultural discontinuity. This was more so as Islam does not take a narrow view of life. Muslim Jurists state that what is not closer to 'Kufr' or un-Islamic is Islamic.<sup>61</sup> Islam does not dictate the way a person should dress, the language they should speak or that the culture of the Islamic world should be within a set pattern. Thus we find the Arabs wore the same dress after the advent of Islam as they did before it. So did the Persians. After their conversion to Islam the Persians did not give up their traditional dress to put on Arabic clothes. In fact in the twentieth century in many Arab countries, amongst which mention may be made especially of Iraq and Egypt both men and women have largely given up their traditional dress to put on European attaires.

The same goes for social manners, customs and day to day behaviour patterns. Many existing customs of the idolaters, Jews and Christians were incorporated into Islam by our Prophet. The customary law of the Arabs, 'Usul' was incorporated into and constituted a major part of Muslim law. Similarly in pre-Islamic Arabia some pagans called their idol 'Allah'.<sup>62</sup> Allah was later used in Islam to refer to the one and only Creator of mankind. In Bangladesh 'Khuda' is widely used along with Allah. Khuda was

---

60. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

61. Shamsul Alam, *Islamic Thoughts*. Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh 1986, p. 212.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 212.

the Persian god of the fire worshippers. "When they (the Persians) embraced Islam they attributed the concept and import of the Muslim deity to their God Khuda. Khuda is One Who created Himself....that means that there was a period of time of nothingness before God. But Al-Quran says that Allah is Ever Existing and Eternal. He does not have any beginning nor end. The Persians definitely accepted the Quranic concept of divinity but the love for the familiar name Khuda was so deep that instead of discarding Khuda they attached the meaning of Allah to Khuda and understood Khuda in that sense."<sup>63</sup>

Similarly the pre-Islamic customs and manners of the Bangladeshi muslims conditioned their approach to life. However, most of their pre-Islamic practices glided so smoothly into and adjusted with the Islamic way of life that at times it becomes difficult to draw a sharp line between the two. The wedding ceremony of Bangladeshi Muslims would serve as an example of such a complete and complex blending of secular and religious elements. Social and economic factors dominate the preponderant practice of arranged marriage in rural Bangladesh. Pre-wedding ceremonies like "Gaye-Holud"<sup>64</sup> strongly underline the continuity of secular social practices. In some areas "Gaye Holud" ceremonies is also called "Mendhi". The whole range of wedding folk-songs of Bangladesh are essentially secular in origin. The wedding ceremony itself is a religious occasion as the religious rites are performed according to Islamic laws and traditions. But again the post-wedding reception of the bride and the bridegroom at the bride's parent's home is essentially a secular ceremony, Ceremonies with pitcherful of water, tray with different food items and 'pradip' i.e., light in a small lantern, alpana and

---

63. *Ibid.*, p. 212-213.

64. *Gaye Halud*, is a pre-wedding social ceremony generally celebrated in the whole of South Asia. It involves exchange of gifts including large fish and traditional sweets and the ceremonial colouring of the palm of the bride with hena paste. Tamarind paste is also used on the hand and face. It is usually accompanied by special wedding songs and dances.

"chandan tip"<sup>65</sup> are not to be found in Islamic tradition. In fact use of tip or a small coloured spot on the forehead are misunderstood and misinterpreted by many. It is a secular practice in Bangladesh as it has no religious implication. Ladies wear different colour 'tips' on their forehead to match their sarees. It can be red, blue, green, purple or a mixture of colours. In India ladies wear 'tip' like those of Bangladesh. But when this is of a special red powder and is used on the forehead and on the parting of their hair it has especial meaning. In Bangladesh such 'tips' are not used. This is known in India not as 'tip' but as 'shidur'.

Muin-ud-Din Ahmed Khan points out that "the local customs consisted of various mystic cults, customs and ceremonies which apparently represented a survival of pre-Islamic practice or blending of Muslim influence with that of the Hindu and buddhist neighbours". Mystic cults, he adds, were "peculiar to Bengal or Eastern India".<sup>66</sup> A number of mystic cults were popular among the Muslims of Bengal. Some among them were Khowaj Khizir, Zinda Ghazi, Pir Badar and Shaykh Shadhu.<sup>67</sup> The festival of 'Bera'<sup>68</sup> can be cited as an example. In the eighteenth and the nineteenth century the festival of Bera dedicated to Khowaj Khizir was observed by all Hindus and Muslims alike. According to James Wise it coincided with the coming of the rains and was celebrated on the last Thursday of the Bengali month Bhadra.<sup>69</sup> Ghulam Husayn informed us that Nawab Suraj-al-Daylah celebrated it at Murshidabad.<sup>70</sup>

Devotional songs like Peer-Murshidi, Baul, Lalan Geeti and Hasan Raja's songs have always entertained and inspired the

65. Paste of sandal wood powder is used for putting tip.

66. M. Ahmed Khan, *History of the Fara'idi Movement*, Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh 1984, pp. 90-91.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 96.

68. The Beral were boats made of paper and ornamented with tinsel. At sunset they were placed on raft and see afloat. Their flickering light added to the beauty of the ceremony.

69. M. Ahmed Khan, *History of the Fara'idi Movement*, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 96.



people of Bangladesh. Secular traditions of songs, dance and music were integrated by the traditions of Mustim Sufis and saints in devotional practices as they propagated and consolidated Islam in Bengal. Saint veneration was already a part of spiritual and social life of Bengal as such veneration of Muslim saints and their shrines did not seem alien to the values of the new converts to Islam. Karim considers 'pirism' the most important element of popular force of Islam in Bengal.<sup>71</sup> He points out however that pirism<sup>72</sup> did not originate in Bengal but that reverence for Pirs were 'imported from Persia'. According to him, "the converts found in the Pir a resemblance of the 'tantric gurus' and in the tombs and 'dargahs' shrines that of chaitya or stupa" of the Buddhists.<sup>73</sup> Dargahs or shrines were the mosuleum built on the tombs of the first generation sufis who came to Bengal. Gradually veneration of Dargahs began to take place during the Husain Shahi rule (1494-1583). Both Muslims and non-Muslims locked to these Dargahs seeking spiritual peace and praying for worldly gains. Soon 'urs' i.e., the death anniversary of the sufis, milad and congregations came to be organised.<sup>74</sup> Darghas thus become the platform where both Muslims and Hindus came together, one effect of this was the development of new rites and ceremonies not strictly Islamic.<sup>75</sup>

71. Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal Down to A. D. 1538*, Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1959, p. 209 also M. Ahmed Khan, *History of the Fara'idi Movement*, *op. cit.*, p. 93. See also S. Sajjad Husain (Ed) *East Pakistan. A profile*, Orient, Longmans Ltd. Dhaka, 1902. p. 50.

72. M. Ahmed Khan writes about Pir, "The term 'Pir' is however, especially used in Indo-Pakistan subcontinent to denote a mystic guide' i. e. Sufi....A distinction has to be made, however between the connotation of the terms 'Pir and Sufi', especially as they are used in Bengal. For a sufi is a person who practises the science of mysticism (ilm-e-tasawwaf), but a pir is a person who besides being a sufi, initiates disciple into mystic orders. In popular conversation, this distinction is almost exclusively maintained in Bengal. All pirs are, therefore, sufis, but all sufis may not be pirs". See, *History of the Fara'idi Movement*, *op. cit.*, p.91-92.

73. Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslim in Bengal Down to A. D. 1538*, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

74. M. Kabir, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

75. *Ibid.* See also, M. Ahmed Khan, *History of the Fara'idi Movement*, *op. cit.*, p. 95-96.

Muslim of Bangladesh have historically been quite open and generous in assimilating institutions and practices from all sources. In fact this has been one of the inherent strengths and vitality of the rich cultural traditions of Bangali Muslims. The sufis and saints of Islam brought with them the use of lunar calendar for regulating religious life. The society of Bengal for the first time in recorded history came to know of the lunar calendar. The local calendar was the solar calendar introduced by the Emperor Harsavordana, while the present area of Bangladesh was a part of his empire. Bangali Muslims, converts and immigrants, all retained the parallel use of traditional solar calendar for agriculture, trade and economic life while accepting the use of lunar calendar for religious life and some aspects of social life. With the advent of British rule the use of Gregorian (Solar) calendar found its way into the society of Bangladesh. Today we see three calendars in use in Bangladesh. This is a clear testimony to the open-mindedness of Bangladeshi Muslims in using and absorbing secular traditions and practices without giving up their commitment and respect for their faith. Islamic new year is observed by the Muslims of Bangladesh while the Bengali new year is also observed in various ways. Bangla new year is marked by traditional business houses by opening new accounts books and by distributing sweets to friends and visitors.

The last independent Nawab of Bengal Nawab Sirajuddowla represents probably the first universal symbol of unified Hindu-Muslim spirit of Bengali nationalism. The Nawab being a secular ruler, like almost all Muslim rulers of India before the advent of British rule, had both Hindus and Muslims in high positions in government and society. In the battle of Plassey, while the Muslim General Mir Jafar betrayed the Nawab, the Hindu General Mohan Lal valiantly fought for the Nawab. The Chief of Finance was Jagath Seth, so were many landlords and social elites. These are the reasons why both Hindus and Muslims saw and probably even today see Nawab Sirajuddowla as the common symbol of

secular Bengali nationalism. This fact is confirmed by the popularity and appeal of the famous play on Sirajuddowla, which moved most Bengali patriots in the days leading upto 1947.

This history of evolution of Bengali identity is rife with all the complexities of social process of interaction between faith, hopes and realities. Buddhist faith does not permit of any class composition of society. Classless Bengali Buddhist society encountered the harsh class-ridden social system under the Hindu Kings during the centuries preceding arrival of Islam. Islam, like Biddhism, decrees a classless social system. Large number of Buddhists therefore embraced Islam, inter alia, in the hope of escaping the ignominy of social stratification. Some low caste Hindus might also have joined the ranks of immigrant Muslims and Buddhist-turned Muslims in the same hope. But in Bengal the Hindu class system had in reality taken so firm and deep social roots that Islamic concept of classless society could not fully meet the high hopes of the new-comers to this faith. The class-less philosophy of Islam found the class-ridden social values superimposed on it. As a result economic and cultural class system based on the differentiation between Ashraf and Atraf developed in Muslim Bengal. This class division was far less rigid but it was still there. Unlike the Hindu class system the Muslim class system permitted of a very high degree of mobility.<sup>76</sup>

Thus gradually Bengal was Islamized, new values and beliefs took root while old practices and ideas merged with the new giving rize to a new Bengali ethos. The Muslims of Bengal acquired a new identity and orientation which crystalized and led in the decades that followed to the emergence of these specific national characteristics which are distinctly Bangladeshi.

---

76. See for details, A. K. Nazmul Karim, *The Dynamics of Bangladesh Society*, op. cit., pp. 131-133.