

PROFILES OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE NARRATIVES FROM SYNCRETISM TO CONFLICT IN THE MID-SEVENTEENTH CENTURY MUGHAL BENGAL

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Abstract

The mid-seventeenth-century history of Mughal Bengal has hardly been visited in terms of the social aspects and counter identities of conflict. So many authors have widely worked in the field of medieval Bengal, but there has been no detailed study conducted on the aspect of social transformation and the phenomenon of syncretism to conflict in the last decade of Mughal Bengal because the primary sources of this period have not been carefully studied in terms of appropriate relevancy. That's why the major evolution of a changing social perception remain unnoticed until the close of Mughal rule. The objective of this paper is to analysis the transformation that occurred in the diverse social profiles of mid-seventeenth-century Bengal, simultaneously, a discourse to observe the conflict of this century against the long-established historical model known as 'syncretism' in Medieval Indian history. This work is using qualitative method-based on contemporary accounts of foreign travellers, Persian, and Bengali sources and a few secondary sources in which the new findings are-firstly, the emerging characteristics of the mid-seventeenth century Bengal's society like-the co-existence of Hindus-Muslims along with the newcomer Christians, the prevalence of folk beliefs and rituals, composite profiles in Pirism, and Distinctive caste identities; secondly, the modes of discrimination and violence.

Keywords: Bengal, Mughal, Medieval, Syncretism, Conflict

Introduction

Politically, the Mughals begin their rule over Bengal after the defeat of Daud Karrani by Munim Khan in the battle of Tukaroi, in 1575 AD. This province witnessed many battles, rebellions, and internal disputes among viceroys till 1757. However, such political events had no proper influence on the daily life of common peoples as they had no direct involvement either in royal activities or military campaigns. Even, they had not been the major subject of discourse in the contemporary court chronicles generally written in the Persian language. In our period of study, we can observe the presence of three dominant religions- Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Simultaneously, so many local beliefs and folk worship also existed with the varied form of regional diversity and geographical factors. The study of Mughal Bengal incorporated multiple forces of society, such as the rise of Vaishnavism, the process of Islamization, and the beginning of European settlements. Within Hinduism the most vital force was neo-Vaishnavism from here the Vaishnava Sahajiya movement had regenerated as a strong Yogic-Tantric practice. The entire structure of its thought system consisted of an inexorable faith in the superiority of devotion to knowledge, bhakti was the only acceptable creed among the people. The journey of Islam in Bengal was followed by two factors -one was the rise of the Sultanate and Mughals as political power and another was the spread of Sufi Khanqahs. That's why the question of Islamization was also raised as the basic phenomenon of Bengal which was said to have partly continued by the local Muslim clergies although it was not implemented

as a policy of government even during the time of Aurangzeb. Over time, a complete difference appeared between the foreign-originated Muslims and indigenous newly converted Muslims because mere conversion from Hinduism to Islam did not alter their customs and practices which they had inherited from their forefathers. Thus, it created the 'son of the soil' identity among the indigenous Bengali Muslims since medieval times. Bengal at the time of the Mughals witnessed the advent of many Europeans which gave a new shape to composite identity.

This work is based on contemporary primary and few secondary sources. Primary sources are divided into two categories-Bengali literature and accounts of foreign travellers. It is necessary to mention that Persian sources have little to do with this theme, therefore, only one of these sources is used here. Regarding Bengali sources we have *Manasamangal of Ketakadas*, edited by Sri Bijan Bihari Bhattacharya, a mid-seventeenth century work as per the argument of Sukumar Sen is concerned, which extensively depicted the society, religion, caste and position of women of that time. Perhaps, this literary text was the first to drastically signify the goddess' paramountcy against the male god. Secondly, the *Dharmamangal of Ruparam Chakrabarty*, edited by Sri Sukumar Sen and Panchanan Mandal. This work is said to have been completed in 1650 AD. The central figure of this literature is Lausen around whom the whole story continued. The basic reflections of this text are folk worship and the picture of rural society. Thirdly, the *Anadi Mangal of Ramdas Adak*, edited by Sri Basanta Kumar Chattopadhyay, was written in 1662 AD. His work was an imitation of Ruparam's *Dharmamangal*. But it supplied much information about the contemporary religious centres, various folk castes, and Pir eulogy. Fourthly, we have "Brahman Roman Catholic Sambad" by Dom Antonio, edited by S.N.Sen, this Bengali historical text was the most important theological discourse between Hinduism and Christianity of seventeenth-century India in which it not merely expounded the superiority of Christianity over Hinduism but also thematized it as a mutual understanding between these two religions through their debates over different issues like- the concept of God, Avatar(incarnation), karmafal, sin, and destiny. Fifthly, we have *Sapta Paykar of Syed Alaol*, edited by Munshi Saidar Rahman. This is a genuine literary work of the mid-seventeenth century that defined the composite identity of that time by amalgamating the Hindu-Muslim themes with a linguistic perspective. The accounts of foreign travellers provided many valuable sources on contemporary Bengal. Firstly, we have *Storia do Mogor of Niccolao Manucci*, translated with an introduction and notes by William Irvine. He visited the cities, and European factories, and described the condition of people, and their residence of living. Secondly, we have the account of J.B. Tavernier, translated from the original France edition by V.Ball. He chiefly narrated the practice and customs of Bengal's society. Thirdly, we have the account of Thevenot edited by S.N.Sen entitled "Indian Travels of Thevenot and Careri". He enumerated the communities, towns, and places of worship. In this work, one Persian source has been used as others have no better conjunction except the military and administrative history, that is *Tarikh-i-Bangala of Salimullah*, translated by Francis Gladwin as ' A Narrative of The Transactions in Bengal during the Soobahdaries'. The only fact of prince Azim-us-Shan's discourse with the Sufi saints is used here.

Social Transformation and the Syncretistic Profiles

As we are relating this study to deal with the social aspects, so we should provide a complete picture of the peoples of mid-seventeenth-century Bengal depending upon the sources. In this regard, it is necessary to mention that Persian sources have little to do with this theme due to their court-centric nature, therefore, we have to conduct this task based on indigenous Bengali texts and accounts of foreign travellers. Through an overall assessment of our period, it is clear that three major communities had occupied prominent positions in contemporary Bengal -the Hindus, the Muslims, and the Christians. The prospects of Hindu life were distinctive on the ground of faiths which can be divided into multiple dimensions, such as idol worships, local cults and devotional sects. We found the enumeration of this term (Hindu) differently because both Tavernier and Thevenot regarded them as 'idolaters' while Manucci identified them as 'Hindoo'.¹ We have instances of idol worship from the account of Thevenot who enunciated the Jagannath temple to be much more popular among the dwellers near Ganga. In the 'Dig Vandana' section of Anadi Mangal Kavya, written in this century, we have noticed various places of worship in Bengal like Ranaghat(present Nadia district) Tarakeswar(present Hoogly) for Shiva worship, Burdwan for Devi Sarbamangala worship.² Bengal was the heartland of Vaishnavism for a very long time, the emergence of the Chaitanya movement in the mid-fifteenth century gave it a fillip for wider spread from rural to urban life through the Sankritan movement. But many contemporary Mangal Kavya like- Ray Mangal, Shasti Mangal, Sitala Mangal, Kamala Mangal of Krishna Das and Dharma Mangal of Ruparam Chakrabarty indicate the transformation of the Hindu faith in which Vaishnavism seems to have lost its prior influence over the society,³ although we have seen the verses of 'Chaitanya Vandana' in both Anadi Mangal of poet Ramdas Adak⁴ and Ruparam's Dharmamangal.⁵ Also, we have an example of a petty Zamindar Sobha Singh who gave land-grant to Parasuram Brajabasi of Nimtala Vaishnavite monastery.⁶

One of the most remarkable features of this period was the prevalence of folk beliefs among a large number of the rural population. We have Manasa Mangal of Ketakadas written in the mid-seventeenth century which described the story of goddess Manasa and Chand Saudagar in which Chand was a Bengali merchant and fond of Siva who denied the worship of snake deity Manasa, as a result of this he suffered bitterly. Manasa Mangal Kavya delineated the superiority of the Goddess above the God Siva and even regarded Manasa as Visva-Mata⁷, which signifies the transformation of faith among the peoples. In every section of this literary text, we can trace a constant clash between goddess and god in which goddess Manasa was the winner, and she punished the Siva follower Chand to establish her paramountcy. Along with this, we can add Durga Mangal of Rupnarayan Ghosh, Kalika Mangal of Kalidas, and Sasthi Mangal of Krisnaram Das of that time which glorified the figures of female goddesses like Durga, Kali, and Sasthi, respectively.

We have several contemporary pieces of evidence to focus on the condition of Muslims in Bengal's society, who were the dominant community of that time. Since the days of the Delhi Sultanate, there had been many misunderstandings from the writings of a few European foreign travellers in their identification of Bengali Muslims. Duarte Barbosa, a Portuguese traveller who visited Bengal in the 15th century, used the term 'respectable moors' to refer to the Muslim inhabitants of Gaur.⁸ Simultaneously, in our study period, we can locate the same defects in most of the contemporary accounts. Thevenot mentioned in his account about the Muslims:

“The Country was kept in far better order under the Patan Kings, (I mean) before the Mahometans and Moguls were Masters of it because then they had Uniformity in Religion. It has been found by experience, that disorder came into Mahometan- it with, and that diversity of Religions there caused corruption in Manners”.⁹

His remark for Mohammedan and Mughal or Patan seems to be equal, and no proper difference he made between the two i.e., the former is religion and the other two means royal dynasties.

In Muslim society, Sufism was a pivotal force that created a new dimension in the field of religious syncretism in Bengal's society. It was an alteration towards the liberal ideas from the hide-bound ritualistic approaches of Islam. The Sufis seek to discover the spiritual world through their mystic path rather than the fundamental law of Islam i.e Shariah, and emphasized love for God as the only medium of salvation. However, the advent of Sufism in the Bengal frontier conveyed two significant historical facets -one was the considerable mystic preaching of Sufi saints facilitating the process of Islamization and mostly the localization of Islam in Bengal, while another was the growth of harmonious relationships in every sphere of society. The most important characteristic of the Sufi movement in Bengal was its native nature than that of the dominant mode of Sufism that prevailed in other parts of India. Such distinction in Bengal gave birth to a new offshoot which is popularly known as 'Pirism', a form of joint worship of the Hindus and the Muslims in Medieval Bengal.¹⁰ The popularity of the Sufi faith in Bengal can be traced from two contemporary examples. There was an established belief among the rulers that the blessings of Sufi saints bring prosperity, durability, and peace to their reign. In that case, we can mention prince Azim-us-Shan's visit to the tomb of Sufi saint Shah Behram Sakka at Burdwan after the death of Raheem Khan, a rebel chieftain. We have also another interesting story about the discourse between Azim us Shan and another Sufi Bizeed of Burdwan.¹¹ We have evidence from contemporary Bengali texts that ascertained the purview of Sufism and reflected the composite identity of the society. Ruparam Chakrabarty in his Dharmamangal expressed his adoration for Pir Ismailii, who was said to have been the protector of jungle and destructor of robbers, and Daria Pir Kalu Ray for river worship.¹² We also found the same instance of Pir eulogy in the Anadi Mangal of Ramdas Adak, like -Pir Ismaili, and Rasuvi Kha Pir.¹³ In all the above cases, we can indicate the folk figure of Pirs who were different from the dominant Sufi orders and merged with ordinary local faiths.

In this period, we have noticed numerous advents of Europeans in Bengal, basically on two purposes- one was commercial and another was Christian missionary work. In terms of regional identity, they were Dutch, Armenian, Portuguese, and English, while Christianity was common faith for all of them despite remaining in different schools of thought, among them some settled in the 16th century and some in the 17th century. Such a long-lasting presence of European settlements in Bengal gave new outlooks on social scenarios that can be regarded as the historical phase of foreign Bengali interaction. We have many examples of European settlements from contemporary sources. Manucci visited two factories, – one of the English and another of the Dutch at Dhaka metropolis.¹⁴ Simultaneously, Thevenot while describing the European residence at Dhaka, raised a comparison that the English and Dutch houses were more solid than the native peoples.¹⁵ The gradual advent of Europeans led to the settlement of various Christian monasteries in Bengal which considerably resulted in the outcrop of a new affluent of foreign-Bengali discourse. We have the instance of Manucci who compromised with Mirza Gul, a governor of Bengal province, on behalf of the Jesuit father to build up a church at Hugli; even though he noticed at Dhaka that there were many Christians, white and black Portuguese, with a church served by a monk named Agostinho.¹⁶ Thevenot while talking

about Dhaka mentioned the existence of an Augustine monastery.¹⁷ In the account of Manucci, we have seen that there was a prominent group of Christian monks whom he mentioned as ‘friars. Although we don’t know much about the Europeans from contemporary Bengali texts except the “Brahman Roman Catholic Sambad” of Dom Antonio, who himself was of Bengali origin and said to have been a prince of Bhusana which is originally located in the Jessore-Faridpur area of present Bangladesh. Perhaps, this Bengali historical text was the most important theological discourse between Hinduism and Christianity of seventeenth-century India in which it not merely expounded the superiority of Christianity over Hinduism but also thematized it as a mutual understanding between these two religions through their debates over different issues like- the concept of God, Avatar(incarnation), karmafal, sin, and destiny.¹⁸

There was a long tradition of caste in the history of medieval Bengal. The literary works of the mid-seventeenth century refer to three major castes, the Brahman, the Kayasthas, and the Vaishyas. Although we have no strong evidence to elucidate the caste stratification in Muslim society in our period, few Bengali texts, like *Manasa Vijaya* of Bipradas and the *Chandimangal* of the late fifteenth and sixteenth century speak about many Muslim functional castes such as Sayyids, Mullahs, and Qazis holding social position in Bengal.¹⁹ In our period, the caste origin could be defined in both occupational and hierarchical ways. There was no strict basis for the fourfold caste order in Bengal of that century rather it was more centred on a professional layout. The Brahmans were a reverent caste in Bengal’s society who enjoyed much priority everywhere. We have seen that before the arrival of the Turkish, Brahmanas used to have mastery over Bengal’s society which had been crushed due to the increasing interference of localized Islam. Meanwhile, during the fifteenth century various new anti-Brahman forces were amplifying within Hinduism, as mentioned earlier the minor cults, prominently Vaishnavism. The existing ruling groups of the Delhi Sultanate probably sheltered them to annihilate their major Brahmin opponents. In due circumstances, the Brahmans tried to revive their glory which can be exemplified by the foundation of the *Nyaya* school and the composition of Smriti texts by Raghunandan and his contemporaries.²⁰ Some prominent scholars sought to identify another aspect through the rise of Raja Ganesh amid the 15th century, which they have promulgated as the rejuvenation of Hindu power, even a trend had been inculcated among the Brahmanas of Navadipa to occupy the throne of Gaur that is reflected in the work of Brindabanadas and Chaitanya Mandal of Jayananda. It is also argued that the ruling groups adopted the policy of Kayastha’s appeasement to curtail the power of Brahmans. Abul Fazal witnessed in the 16th century that many Zamindars flourishing in different Sarkars of Bengal were Kayasthas.²¹ Whether the rulers had any objective to support the Kayasthas or to prevent the Brahmans is not certain still, but due to their growth, the Brahmans must have suffered a setback from social pre-dominance. Equally, the same things of lucid Brahmanical influence have been reflected in *Rashikamangal*, a contemporary Vaishnavite text of our period in which we have seen that Brahmans despite being the prestigious section of society didn’t hesitate to accept ‘Prasad’ from Rasika who was a Vaishnava fellow. Although Tavernier narrated an incident witnessed by him in which we can notice the despicable work of a Brahman for an ordinary person to protect his caste identity-

“Here is yet another somewhat curious custom. When an idolater loses a coin or a sum of gold, be it by mistake or that he has been robbed, he is bound to take as much as he has lost to the chief Brahmin, and if he does not do so and it gets known he is driven with ignominy out of his caste, through policy, to make people careful”.²²

The Brahmans were engaged with religious duties and played significant roles as teachers by opening many rural schools popularly known as 'Tol'. The author of Dharmamangal, Ruparam Chakrabarty (himself was a Brahman) belonged to a highly traditional educated family who mentioned his father as a famous scholar who had his own 'Tol' in which many students used to study but after the death of his father, his elder brother became the master of this institution which compelled him to become homeless. In due circumstances, he left his own home because of the constant quarrels with his brothers and shifted to the nearby 'Tol' of Raghuram Bhattacharya.²³ However, on account of a growing intensity between them, he again left Raghuram's 'Tol' and went to Nabadwip.²⁴ Brahmans had their huge erudition in religious scriptures, examples can be enumerated from a contemporary source 'Brahman Roman Catholic Sambad' in which an anonymous Brahman debated over the issues of his religion with a native Catholic Dom Antonio.²⁵ Along with these the Brahmans were also respected for being the ritualistic head, as we have seen that rich families had their appointed 'Purahita' for the ceremonial task. In the Manasa Mangal of Ketakadas when Chand was preparing for his last son Lakhindar's marriage he summoned his family Brahman who not merely suggested caste marriage but also played the role of marriage broker on behalf of his family.²⁶ Anadi Mangal gives us an example of Rajpurahit belonging to the 'Ghosal' class, named Binod Ghosal.²⁷

Although contemporary Bengali sources provide a no better description of the Kshatriyas, but we can shed light on this aspect depending on a few primary and secondary works. During the last decades of Aurangzeb's reign, one of the most momentous facts was Sobha Singh's insurgency, who was a petty ijaradar of Midnapur district, revolted against his master Chaudhuri Krishnaram Roy as he obliged him to pay a huge tax of 22 thousand annually. Indigenous sources of that time bear witness that both Krishnaram Roy and Sobha Singh might have been born of a Kshatriya caste.²⁸ Similarly, another contemporary Zamindar of Mahmoodabad Parganah, Sitaram can be regarded as a Kshatriya, who had a short skirmish with the army of Jaffar Khan.²⁹ In this period the significant position of Vaishyas was most noticeable as merchandise class. The Manasa Mangal Kavya of Ketakadas mentioned the term Sadaghar for Chand who used to trade by sea voyages.³⁰ Even, we can trace their existence from Anadi Mangal of Ramdas Adak in which we have seen a daughter of the head of Vaishyas.³¹ As per as the contemporary English factory records are concerned these merchants were known as Sahas who had a proper business deal with the Europeans.³² Since the fifteenth century of the Bengal Sultanate, we have seen the incorporation of adequate numbers of *Kayasthas* in the court of Gaur. Examples can be marked in the field of literature- Vijaya Gupta, Yashraj Khan, Shrikara Nandi, and Kavindra Parameshvara were all vernacular Kayashta poets. Most of our contemporary poets were too belonged to this caste, exclusively emerged as a club 'literati persons' their works serve as valuable pictures of society and culture of that time. Ketakadas Khemananda, the author of Manasa Mangal Kavya was a Kayashta³³, also Sitaram Das, author of Ray Mangal was a Kayashta.³⁴ Maintaining caste identity was the elementary mode of this society, which can be observed in Manasa Mangal where Chand proposed to his Brahman marriage broker to search for a daughter of a merchant (Vaishya).³⁵

Now, outside the principal caste identity, we found numerous information about several folk castes which were not formally affiliated with the hereditary orders but seems to be professional by nature. Among them, the most remarkable was the 'Vaidyas', actually known in rural Bengal as the reliever of someone who has either been suffering from a snake's bite or nearly half death. We noticed in Manasa Mangal Kavya the role of a Vaidya, who wanted to save the life of Behula's husband with his lustful offer.³⁶ Similarly, Anadi Mangal mentioned 'Ojha',³⁷ a local group of people, especially associated with the tasks of treating snake diseases

and controlling the snakes. Here we have also seen that Som Ghosh(a character of this kavya) and his father Kanu Ghose both belonged to the 'Goala' or dairymen caste. Even, we have evidence of 'Kamar' or blacksmith caste.³⁸ The author of this Kavya(Anadi Mangal), Ramdas Adak was a Kaivarta whose chief occupation was the fishery.³⁹ Ruparam Chakrabarty mentioned in his poetry that he went to the resident of 'Tati' or tailor for having food after being set out from his own home.⁴⁰

Practice and Customs of Mid-Seventeenth Century Mughal Bengal

Contemporary sources of our period give us ample evidence regarding the practice and customs of that time. The indigenous Bengali literature and the foreign traveller's account help us to trace this theme. In Manasa Mangal Kavya of Ketakadas, we found the custom known as 'Saadh' among the Bengalis of present days. It is a name of a ceremony for giving desired articles of food to a pregnant woman or entertaining a pregnant woman with choice dishes. We have seen here that Sanaka, the wife of merchant Chand desired to have the foods of 'Saadh' at the time of her last pregnancy after the death of her six sons by the curse of Manasa Devi.⁴¹ Similarly, the mother of Lausen(the central figure of Anadi Mangal kavya), performed 'saadh' during her five months of pregnancy.⁴² Another most horrible practice can be traced to that is known as 'Narabali' or human sacrifice it was a popular custom in which it conducts an act of killing one or more humans as a part of the ritual, which is naturally intended to please gods or goddess. In this text, we have seen that Karnasen killed ten little children to satisfy his favourite goddess Chandi.⁴³

The foreign travellers of our period supplied much information about several customs of that time which they had witnessed during their journey. But there are several shortcomings with the travelogues because of the absence of credibility in their observations, and another is the misunderstandings of those narrators in several cases about Indian society, culture, and heritage because of their scarcity of acquaintance with this exotic sub-continent. The problem is that their narrations are mostly based on observation. Even, in this regard we have two categorizations, -one is eye-witnessed while another is hearing from someone else. Also, one more thing we must intertwine is that they have merely enunciated those which seem to be strange to them on the special ground. Despite their descriptions are worthy to depict this aspect.

We have to conduct the first discussion based on Jean Baptiste Tavernier's travelogue. He enumerated an incident of female infanticide, although he knew nothing about this practice, precisely what the Bengali peoples called 'Sati' or 'Sahamarana'. But he provided an unblemished eye-witnessed picture in his writing that in the kingdom of Bengal women are burnt in another manner. He observed that a woman in that country (Bengal) must be very poor if she didn't come with her husband's body to the margin of the Ganges to wash it after he is dead and bathe herself before being burnt. He saw them come to the Ganges more than twenty day's journey, by that time the bodies being altogether putrid and generating unbearable smell. He wrote:

"I was there at that time. As throughout the length of the Ganges, and also in all Bengal, there is but little fuel, these poor women send to beg for wood out of charity to burn themselves with the dead bodies of their husband..... The woman who intends to burn herself, preceded by some drums, flutes, and hautboys and dressed in her most beautiful ornaments, comes dancing to the funeral pile, and having ascended it

she places herself, half lying, half seated. Then the body of her husband is laid across her, and all the relatives and friends bring her, one a letter, another a piece of cloth, this one flower, that one piece of silver or copper, saying to her, give this from me to my mother, or my brother or to some relatives or friends, whoever the dead person may be whom they have most loved while alive. When the woman sees that they bring her nothing more, she asks those present three times whether they have any more commissions for her and if they do not reply she wraps all they have brought in a taffeta, which she places between her lap and the back of the body of her defunct husband, calling upon the priests to apply fire to the funeral pile...⁴⁴

Secondly, he witnessed another inhuman practice of Bengal about how a newborn infant was treated to verify his/her human existence to differentiate from demon origin. Tavernier explored this incident on account of his curiosity, as many times he saw that there were people who had one eye, while another one had either been injured or altogether gone. He observed that when a woman gave birth to a child, and if the infant is unwilling to take to its mother's breast to suckle, it is carried outside the village and placed in a cloth, which is tied by four corners to the branches of a tree, and is thus left from morning to evening. In this way, the poor child is exposed to the crows, which come to torment it, and some have been found whose eyes have been torn out of their heads, therefore, it is the reason why idolaters are seen in Bengal who has but one eye. Again, in the evening the infant is taken to see whether it is willing to suckle during the following night, and if it still refuses the breast, it is taken back on the following day to the same place. This is done for three days in sequence, after which, if the infant is finally unwilling to take the breast, it is believed that it is a demon.⁴⁵ He also experienced at Hugly that the English, Dutch and Portuguese inhabitants took care of these misfortune children by fostering them at their factories.

When we are talking about rituals and customs, it would not be wrong to claim that all such practices have their legacy even in recent times. One of them is called Charak Puja or Charak Mela, also known as Nil Puja and Hajrha Puja, a popular folk festival in both West Bengal and present Bangladesh. The followers believe that it is to say God Siva, by whose blessing they will bring prosperity by eliminating the sorrow and sufferings of the previous year. It is also to note that women fast before this festival. Sometimes men devotees swing from the pole by hooks thrust through their backs, the hooks being attached to the pole by ropes. We can relate one fact from Tavernier's account who mentioned about this practice happened at Maldah (present district of West Bengal), although he had no idea regarding its exact name, even his remarks are silent in its proper identification. He said:

“On the 8th of April, when I was in Bengal at a town called Maldah, the idolaters made a great feast which is peculiar to the inhabitants of that place. They all leave the town and attach hooks of iron to the branches of trees, to which many of these poor people hook themselves, some by the sides and others by the middle of the back. These hooks enter their bodies, and they remain suspended, some for an hour and others for two, till the weight of the body drags the flesh..... I asked some of these people wherefore they made this feast and these penances, and they said it was in memory of the first man, whom they called Adam like us”.⁴⁶

Although Tavernier misunderstood the faiths of Hindus and mistakenly assimilated Adam of Abrahamic religion with ‘the first man’ of Hinduism, known as Siva or Adi Purush. Another contemporary account of a French traveller, Jean de Thevenot, and Tavernier who visited Bengal and provided an elaborate description of the incident in which they observed that there was a super-dominance of the notion of Penance over the psyche of Bengalis.

Thus, we have seen that notable changes in people’s perception can be observed in Bengali literary texts like, - the Goddess’s paramountcy in the place of Gods, and the transformation of dominant worships into rural folk beliefs. Similarly, at the indigenous level, we have seen the harmonious social relationship among the ordinary peoples, but we are unable to identify because of the paucity of sources how much the Muslims modified their lifestyle due to conversion. Regarding caste yet our sources supplied abundant descriptions of Hindu society, but no broad overview is explorable of native Muslims. It can be said beyond dispute that the beginning of European settlement must have created a model of foreign-Bengali discourse in the fields of culture, religion, and society. Along with this, it cannot be denied that it gave a new shape to composite identity in Bengal by imparting Christianity inclusive of Hinduism and Islam.

General Ideas of Syncretism and Conflict in Medieval India

Syncretism commonly defines the environment of peaceful co-existence of different communities that share equal customs, cultural habits, and heritage. Before the beginning of this discussion, we have to visit how medieval India actuated the condition of mutual understanding. In that case, we have seen that Islam emphasized strict monotheism by refuting all Gods except Allah, while Hinduism fostered diversified Gods instead of being monotheistic. The coming of the Turks, Afghans and Mughals from the twelfth to sixteenth centuries led to the beginning of a new era in the Indian sub-continent. The layer of mass society remained untouched by the influence of royal policies. The process of a new socio-cultural milieu came distinctively from the multiple forces of transformation in this perspective. Firstly, compared to other central Asian Muslim empires there was no hidebound Islamic model initiated in India since the time of the Delhi sultanate because the outsider ruling Muslims in terms of proportion were minorities than the existing Hindus and newly converted Muslims. On the other hand, though these new bunch of Hindus embraced Islam, they had not been separated from their ancestor’s practices and rituals. Secondly, Muslims in India did not emerge as a ‘homogeneous monolithic community’ in both Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods because ethnic, cultural and class differences played a vital role that interrupted the rise of the Shariah-based nuclear Muslim community. There was an offshoot of Indo-Islamic great tradition in which Hinduism and Islam found deep reflection in the growing religious cults and philosophical discourses, also in art, literature and architecture in a form of syncretism. The growth of the Bhakti and Sufi movement kept the two-community close to each other. On one hand, the Bhakti movement wholly influenced the different affluents of medieval society by its grand objective of individual salvation and mystical union with the divine being. On the other hand, Sufism emphasised ‘Tariqa’ by rejecting the principal virtues of Islam and seeking the ultimate truth ‘haqiqa’ i.e getting nearer to God. Syncretistic identities are largely discernible in the field of literary works as along with the existing Sanskrit there was the prevalence of Arabic, Turkish and Persian, therefore, we found so many translation works of this century. Examples can be drawn from the work of Zia Nakhshabi, a mid-fourteenth century scholar who translated an old Indian treatise on sexology into Persian known as Kok-Sastra and wrote Tuti-Nama, based on a tale of a parrot. During the time of Firuz Shah Tughlaq, we have seen the instances of Sanskrit

books on medicine and music translated into Persian. Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin of Kashmir is credited for two famous historical translation work in Persian under his patronage, one was Rajtarangini of Kalhana and another was Mahabharata. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, another notable phenomenon was visible in the composition of many combining stories and fables which incorporated the elements from Hindu mythology and adjoined it with the notion of Sufi philosophy. For instance, we have the early text of Mulla Daud's Chandayan dated 1379 AD that manifested a common identity of mundane love by providing an equal glimpse of two dominant religions.

Now, the idea of conflict is a controversial historical paradigm in medieval India. Earlier we have seen in the works of historians like K.S.Lal, Iswari Prasad and A.L.Srivastava about separate historiography of violence in which they emphasised temple desecration, religious conversion and discriminatory policies of medieval rulers. In this paper, conflict exactly means the related counter-narratives which has not been promptly emphasized earlier by the 'medievalists' of the present time. Hence, we must also define what counter-narrative means in this study. Commonly narrative refers to stories, telling, and accounts of connected events mostly derived from the past. Post-modernist scholar Michel Foucault widely insisted on narrative studies by challenging the traditional historiographies. Although, this paper is not a kind of that academic exertion. Here 'counter-narrative' refers to an alteration of medieval Indian history writings that are not formally oriented to any school that had been in the line of pre-conceived notions. Such allegations can be directed to the earlier Hindu and Muslim nationalist historians, and similarly to the Marxists or left linear authors who tried to establish their respective approaches depending upon the specific sources. In this respect, several common generalizations have been settled for medieval Indian history viz, -1. The Sultanate and the Mughals were invaders who had no contribution to India, 2. The medieval rulers were not always intolerant in their treatment of infidels, 3. The conflicts between the Hindu and Muslim ruling houses were not political but religious 4. The action of temple demolition and policy of conversion was not taken by the ruling house and had no impact on the larger society, 5. Emperor Akbar was always great and Aurangzeb was only a fanatic. It is clear from those above-mentioned facets that either these conclusions were made depending upon specific sources or there was an invisible crisis of scientific historical perception. Regarding medieval Bengal, there has been a long set up argument of 'syncretism' or composite culture, but inside this historical perspective, there was conflict also which has not been studied.

Identities of Conflict

Now we are turning to another aspect of this paper which is the conflict in the place of syncretism on which we have done a discussion earlier. As we know that the condition of writing a true history lost its basis since the beginning of colonial historiography who has although a great contribution to the formation of professional historical studies in India but generated many more negative impressions for India. As a counter-reaction, therefore, nationalist historians went to illustrate the great heritage of India to refute the colonial thoughts. Nevertheless, there was also some disease among nationalist scholars that cannot be denied who were indirectly influenced by the colonial model of Indian history, precisely, in the context of periodization, like Hindu, Muslim and British periods. Even, sometimes they grouped themselves as Hindu and Muslim nationalists which later inspired the communal 'two-nation theory. The advent of Marxist historiography revolutionizes the academic circle imparting new modes of authorship in the post-independence period. No one can indeed reject their relevance if it's concerned with the materialist interpretation of Indian history even today. But being the

dominant writers of Indian history, they have always assessed every aspect of medieval India either in economic perception or as a dynamic model of politics and socio-cultural relationships. Hence, they have disregarded many essential subjects which are controversial. It is high time when we must save history from the tussles of different schools by insisting more upon scientific historical study for every period so that we can present an unblemished picture of our past to the forthcoming generation. However, we know that it is quite a difficult task for us because we are born as human beings, we are made of bone and blood, and it is very difficult to be unbiased because we are bounded by various psychological behaviours on account of our diverse environment. At least, we can try our best to reach the very approximation of truth in our pursuance of history.

Act of Violence During the Viceroyship of Azim us-Shan

The beginning of the viceroyship of prince Azim-us-Shan in Bengal witnessed so many rebellions or skirmishes that took place in different corners of Bengal. We have instances of discontent by Shobha Singh, a petty zamindar of the Chandrakona subdivision of Midnapur who with the assistance of Rahim Khan, an Afghan chief, revolted against Krishnaram Ray, the zamindar of Burdwan. However, the Dutch were also involved in this clash to subdue the rebellion. The actions of Shobha Singh seem to be very much aggressive in this condition. In this regard, we have a long terracotta inscription from the eka-ratna brick temple of Gopinath of the Das family, which speaks of Sobha Singh as more than a cruel zamindar. He mercilessly ordered his men to cut off the head of Shyama Das who was said to have been the founder of this temple.⁴⁷ We can observe that this fact contradicts the common explanation given by a group of authors who claims that oppression in this period always occurred from the Mughals to non-Muslims. Undoubtedly, it is true that so many incidents are like that. But, very surprisingly we have another piece of evidence from a contemporary Bengali poet, Krishnaram who wrote panegyric of emperor Aurangzeb: "Aurangzeb, the ruler of the land, is more dreadful than the fiercest enemy. And his kingdom is said to be Ram-Rajya"⁴⁸

Here we can see that the notion of power and exploitations are varied from one to another, and one common justification for selective circumstances is not historically appropriate as per as the above two motives are concerned. In this discourse, we have to examine Azim-us-Shan's policies during his Bengal Subahdari. After fixing his residence at Burdwan he built a palace and a mosque as the symbol of royalty. By imitating emperor Aurangzeb, he used to attend Islamic theological discourses gathered by scholars on this subject. He resumed the collection of taxes which was remitted from many articles before. But in this regard, he promptly initiated discriminatory policy among the Muslims, Hindus, and Europeans, and directed that "Muhammadans(Muslims) should pay two and a half percent, and the Hindoos and Europeans five percent".⁴⁹ We have noticed in this period that the Sufi saints played vital roles in the formation of any ruling house or accession of monarchs to the throne. There was an established belief among the rulers that the blessings of Sufi saints bring prosperity, durability, and peace to their reign. Hence, Azim us Shan got the same opportunity at Burdwan when he came in contact with Sufi Baizeed (Byazid), at that time who was very popular for his sanctity. An interesting story is that Azim sent his two sons Sultan Farrukhsiyar and Sultan Karimuddin(Muhammad Karim Mirza) to invite him to his court. Being proud of his superior status, Karimuddin did not descend from his horse, on the contrary, Farrukhsiyar eagerly went to visit him with huge respect and veneration. The Sufi placed him in the palanquin with the hand of Farruksiyar and said "*you are a king, seat yourself; and may the almighty prove favourable to your wishes*".⁵⁰ Farruksiyar and the Sufi together reached the

court in one palanquin, and Azim us Shan took him to his chamber. Here Azim sought his blessing so that he could be the next successor after the death of the present emperor. The Sufi answered, “that which you require, I have already bestowed upon Farruksiyyar; my prayer, like the arrow which has left the bow, cannot be recalled”. Hearing these unexpected words from the Sufi, Azim us Shan was bitterly dissatisfied, but he controlled himself knowing the further effect of Sufi’s anger and bid him farewell with great honour.

Azim-us-Shan and Tolerant Perception

Yet, we have seen various dealings of Azim us Shan, such as his discriminatory manner of tax collection, fondness of Islamic seminary, and patronage of Sufis. But, we also have an alternative experience from Azim: his liberal participation in many Hindu ceremonies like, playing Hooly and wearing a yellow or crimson turban during Basant(spring) festival.⁵¹ Emperor Aurangzeb was very much disappointed by such an act of his son Azim us Shan and wrote a strict letter to him saying “to wear a yellow turban, and a crimson robe at the age of forty-six is making a blessed used on your beard”.⁵²

We can draw Azim us Shan’s tolerant aspiration through another of his act. It was a case of Murshid Quli Khan’s time. A Fakir asked for charity from Brindaban, a Talukdar, having been displeased by his manner he drove the Fakir away from his house. Later, the Fakir collecting together several bricks constructed a petty mosque on Brindaban’s road and called the people for prayer. Whenever he saw Brindaban passing the way he used to vociferate Azaan, thence, he became enraged and throw down some of the bricks from the wall and abused the Fakir. This Fakir submitted a complaint to Murshid Quli Khan also known as Jaffar Khan to punish Brindaban by death sentence.⁵³ Although Murshid Quli was not willing to do that and asked the Qazi whether there was any provision to save this person, all his efforts were futile. However, Brindaban was given mercy by Azim us Shan on behalf of emperor Aurangzeb’s recommendation. Regretfully, Brindaban was already killed by the Qazi’s arrow. Azim us Shan was bitterly displeased by this wrongdoing and wrote to the emperor that Qazi Mohammad Sharif killed Brindaban out of his madness. But the emperor replied, “Qazi Sharif is on the side of God”.⁵⁴

In that case, we should make one generalization between the approaches -firstly, we must admit Azim us Shan’s liberal involvement with regional culture is contradictory to his father’s expectation of adopting the above practices, and secondly, we should not refute his narrow policy of taxation in which he gave much exemption for Muslims and less for the infidel Hindus and Europeans.

Acts of Murshid-Quli-Khan

Now we have another most prominent figure of Bengal of this century known as Murshid Quli Khan. Sir Jadunath Sarkar informed us that he was actually born as a Hindu but later converted to Islam. Over time, he had become the endeared associate of emperor Aurangzeb because of his role in Shariah-based instruction on imperial finance strategies. Murshid Quli Khan’s fame lies in his dynamic initiative of revenue system for Bengal province as he replaced Jagirdari with the Malzamini system also he was the founder of the famous city of late Mughal Bengal ‘Murshidabad’. But in previous works, many things have been unnoticed about Murshid Quli Khan which provides both positive and negative viewpoints on him.

At the very beginning of his rule, he advised several strict orders for the Zamindars, examples can be taken from the course of his actions, like-he displaced the less trusted Zamindars, he did not allow the inferior Zamindars in public access, neither he permitted the local Rajahs nor any of his officers to be seated in his presence.⁵⁵ One fact of his narrowmindedness appeared when he forbade the riding of Zamindars and Hindus in a palanquin and merely allowed them to use the straight bamboos for their travels.⁵⁶ Being expertise in revenue administration Murshid Quli Khan knew that the Hindus had hereditary experience in revenue administration, in this regard we have seen emperor Aurangzeb was also much more dependent on his Hindu chief finance minister Raghunatha.⁵⁷ The same goes for Murshid Quli Khan as well because he employed none but Bengali Hindus in the matter of revenue collections.⁵⁸ Here the reasons were two in which one was convenient power dominance and another was the theocratic approach, as he understood that they could easily be discovered from malpractices in the name of punishment. But we have a very bad impression about him when he detected that a Hindu Amil or Zamindar dissipated the revenue and failed to balance the report properly, at that time he forced this perpetrator, his wife, and children to be converted to Islam.⁵⁹ Many times, we have noticed in former scholarly works of reputed historians who have often rejected this forceful process of conversion or skilfully tried to overlook them through multiple exaggerated historiographical dimensions which have meant to please a particular group of dominant readers who are controlling our academia. Upholding this above evidence, we cannot just deny the ‘forceful conversion’ entity in our period of study equally with other good circumstances.

We can regard another most remarkable divine orientation of Murshid Quli Khan from one of his conduct which happened during his first phase of Subedari; the Katwal of Hoogly forcefully abducted a girl from her father’s house but unfortunately, the faujdar of this place named Ahsanullah was unable to take action on its behalf. The father of this girl being helpless carried the complaint to Murshid Quli Khan, hearing this from him he promulgated that the criminal should be stoned to death by the ordinance of the Holy Quran.⁶⁰

One of the most sensitive issues of medieval Indian history is the temple destruction or building of mosques after ruining the temples, which has inadequately been studied in our modern historical writings to emphasize more upon economic and political aspects. We have a wonderful scientific work by Richard M. Eaton entitled “Temple Desecration and the Indo-Muslim States” in which he explained the modes of temple demolition from early medieval to late Mughal times. He defined the instances of temple destruction in early medieval Hindu kingdoms where he has shown how conflicting Hindu kingdoms attacked the temples of each other and plundered the ‘Rastra Devata’(state-deity) which symbolize their hereditary worship.⁶¹ Here Eaton tried to identify the cause of the attack was to diminish the enemy state’s glory. In his study of both the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal period he interpreted this process on two grounds –firstly, temple desecration and state-building where he described the same reason for raiding temples as mentioned in the case of early medieval India was to curb the authority of respective Hindu state. Secondly, he also analyzed another facet of temple protection and state maintenance in which he enumerated how the medieval ruling house conserved many temples under their care. But Eaton has not properly defined the manner of replacing the temples with a mosque in this period, even though no such case has been adequately cited in his work from the later Mughal period. As we are working on Murshid Quli Khan we have some notable examples of this process that should be considered as a reflection of his intolerance.

It appeared that Murshid Quli Khan's health declined in his last life and he became much more concerned about heaven and hell. Following the footsteps of Muslim monarchs, he also ordered the foundation of his tomb, and a mosque herewith. He appointed a person named Murad to superintend this work. He pitched upon a spot located in the Khas Taluk of the city's east side. But the most heinous job he did by pulling down all the Hindu temples nearby this place and using the materials for erecting the new work.⁶² The Zamindars had an intent to protect the temples even using bribes, but this was not allowed. Here we can look at the cases of violence under the direct authority of this ruling group. In the remote villages close to Murshidabad, many Hindu houses were threatened with destruction, though some were forgiven instead of payments. The officer compelled the servants of Hindus of all ranks to work for the construction unless they paid for their release.⁶³

Conclusion

In the above discussions, we have gone through multifarious social perspectives of mid-seventeenth century Bengal by which it constructed a contradictory theme that can be distinctive from earlier works. Depending upon the primary Bengali, Persian, and accounts of foreign travellers this paper specifically analyzed the religious beliefs, caste system, practices, and prejudices of contemporary Bengali peoples. Although Persian court chronicles have little to do with this subject, except we have a regional one composed in a later time, based on the narratives of the mid-seventeenth century and eighteenth century onward. The accounts of foreign travellers which are hitherto unnoticed in former scholarly works have become a mandatory portion of this study despite having several shortcomings in their understanding of the society. Simultaneously, we have also discussed the notion of 'conflict', hitherto unnoticed in earlier works in which we tried to make an impartial endeavour as much as possible. A society of every period cannot run partly with the process of cooperation; therefore, conflicting interests must not be disregarded. Beyond dispute, Syncretism was the dynamic force of mid-seventeenth century Bengal but the conflict in this perspective must be imparted for a true insight into the study of the history of late Mughal Bengal. There has been a long-established belief in composite identity in medieval Bengal but these above-mentioned facts defined the contrary facets of history. Indeed, the unblemished picture of that time has been drawn in a way to revisit the set up historical approaches.

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