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Syncretism in Mediaeval Bengal Society: A Historical Interpretation

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This article analyzes Muslim treatment of other religions in Medieval Bengal from 1204 to 1757 CE with a special reference to Muslim rulers and Sufi saints. The study is based on historical content analysis using a qualitative research design. The study shows the Muslim sultans and Mughals in the medieval period played a vital role in promoting interreligious harmony and human rights in Bengal. In addition, the Muslim missionaries and Sufis served as a force against religious hatred in society. The Muslim sultans and Mughals applied liberal and accommodative views toward non-Muslims. They did not force non-Muslims to accept Islam. Muslims and non-Muslims were integrated society, and they enjoyed full socio-economic and religious rights. Moreover, Sufis conducted various approaches toward Muslims and non-Muslims as well. They promoted the message of equality and moral conduct among the diverse faiths of the people. They also applied liberal, syncretism, and accommodative attitude in attracting non-Muslims to Islam in Bengal. The study concludes that most rulers were sympathetic and cooperative in dealing with the people of other religions.

The Indian society, culture and religion were influenced in different way by the expedition and occupation of Islamic religion in India. Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji came to Bengal in 1200 A.D., he defeated the ruler of Bengal, Lakshman Sen and occupied the throne. This event is significant as well as such event is most of the people of Bangladesh were compelled to convert in to Islamic religion and the entire nation, culture and civilization has transferred by this influence of Muslim invasion. It also implies the Bengal History starting a process of Bengal being politically integrated into the statehood of first the Delhi Sultanate and after a brief period of independence of the Mughals. Further, of deeper and more lasting consequences the fact Bakhtiyar's so journey in Bengal and inaugurated an era of new culture which was distinguishable from and parallel to the erstwhile culture of the Bengalis. Conversion either under compulsion or by choice enlarged the number of functionaries of Islam in Bengal but the administrative policy of the power elites. The Ulemas, Pir-fakir, Gazi-shahid, and Murshid have come to Bengal immediately after the domination of Islam in Bengal. Being coming West and North India, Sufi and Shia community of Iran also came to Bengal for their Security and safety of their culture in Bengal. In this way Bengal became the centre of Indo- Islamic culture naturally a question arises that how did the erstwhile Bengalis react or responded to this phenomenon. The objective of this paper is to analysis the transformation that occurred in the diverse social profiles during the Medial Bengal, simultaneously, a discourse to observe the conflict of this century against the long--established historical mode model-based on contemporary accountary of foreign

travelers, 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 coexistence of Hindus-Muslims along with the newcomer Christians, the prevalence of folk beliefs and rituals, composite profiles in Prism, and Distinctive caste identities; secondly, the modes of discrimination and violence.

The study endeavors to understand the interreligious relationship in Medieval Bengal from the conquest of Ikhtiyar Uddin Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1204 to the defeat of the last Mughal ruler Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah in 1757. In this research, the qualitative method has been conducted to in-depth study¹ Data are collected from books, including Bangla and English, articles, published lectures, conference proceedings, and online sources to understand the conditions of interreligious relations in the medieval period in Bengal. Either primary or secondary data or both together can be used for the content analysis of the qualitative method ² Therefore, in this study, processing and analyzing data is conducted in a descriptive qualitative approach ³

Through the analysis, highlight only three stages of Muslim rule in the medieval period in Bengal. In the first stage, from 1204 to 1338, Bengal was governed by the representatives appointed by the Delhi Sultanate.^{4,5,6} In the second stage, from 1340 to 1576, independent sultans ruled Bengal, with some becoming the emperor of India. The third stage (Mughal and Nawabi period) was from 1576 until the East Indian Company's takeover of Bengal in 1757.⁷ And, finally, Sufis's contributions in promoting peace and interreligious harmony in the Medieval Bengal are also considered for the study. Thematic analysis is most commonly used in qualitative research & ⁸ So, the data achieved from the different sources are classified mainly into three themes: the Sultanate period, the Mughal Period, and Sufis's contribution in these both periods. Societal integration is a top priority in Islam as it considers all humanity as a single-family called the ummah. ^{9,10}

For this reason, Islam prohibits intervention in the rituals of other religions and asks to preserve their customs, beliefs, and property.¹¹ Historically, whenever Muslims ruled, non-Muslims were welcome and enjoyed the right of residence. There are numerous examples of Muslim rulers providing religious freedom to non-Muslims. Bengal, although geographically distant from the heartland of the Islamic world, both east and west, is one of the largest linguistic groups among Muslims as Bangladesh has 90% of the population following Islam, and at the same time there are millions of Muslims living in West Bengal of India. Islam is not only the religion of the majority of Bengali-speaking people but also their predominant culture ¹² Muslims ruled Bengal more than five and a half centuries beginning with Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji's (a military general of Qutb Uddin Aibak of Turkic origin) arrival in 1204 until the East India Company's take over in 1757 by defeating the last Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daulah¹³. The Medieval Bengal (1204–1757 CE) is not present Bangladesh and the West Bengal of India only, it also included parts of Tripura, Bihar, Assam, and Orissa where Bengali is the mother tongue. ¹⁴ The medieval Muslim rule in Bengal was a civilization based on tolerance, harmony, social liberalism, and human welfare.. ¹⁵

Rice-cultivating communities existed in Bengal since the second millennium BCE. The region was home to a large agriculturalist population, marginally influenced by Dharmik religions.¹⁶ Buddhism influenced the region in the first millennium. The Bengali language developed from Apabhramsa, Sanskrit, Magadhi Prakrit. Apabhramsa, Sanskrit, Mag between the 7th and 10th centuries. It once formed a single Indo-Aryan branch with Assamese and Oriya, before the languages became distinct. The fertile land and abundant wealth of Bengal attracted many conquerors who left their mark on its timeline; some only plundered while others became rulers. The harsh climate faded many footprints with age, some layers got merged, others transformed into something hybrid, while others got lost in time. This complex state led to many interpretations; over time myths converted to facts, misconceptions paved way for more misconceptions. In this book small attempt still brings new ideas and questions to front which no doubt will spark further investigation¹⁷ The spread of Islam in the Indian subcontinent can be a contested issues.¹⁸ Historical evidences suggest the early Muslim traders and merchants visited Bengal while traversing the Silk in the first millennium. One of the earliest mosques in South Asia is under excavation in northern Bangladesh, indicating the presence of Muslims in the area around the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁹ Starting in the 9th century, Muslim merchants increased trade with Bengali seaports.²⁰ Islam first appeared in Bengal during Pala rule,

as a result of increased trade between Bengal and the Arab Abbasid Caliphate.²¹ Coins of the Abbasid Caliphate have been discovered in many parts of the region.²²

The people of Samatata, in southeastern Bengal, during the 10th-century were of various religious backgrounds. During this time, Arab geographer Al Masudi, who authored *The Meadows of Gold*, travelled to the region and noticed a Muslim community of inhabitants,²³ In addition to trade, Islam was also being introduced to the people of Bengal through the migration of Sufi missionaries prior to conquest. The earliest known Sufi missionaries were Syed Shah Surkhul Antia and his students, most notably Shah Sultana Rumi, in the 11th century. Rumi settled in present-day Netrokona Mymensingh where he influenced the local ruler and population to embrace Islam.

While Bengal was under the Hindu Sena Empire, subsequent Muslim conquests helped spread Islam throughout the region.²⁴ Bakhtiyar Khilji, a Turkic Muslim general, defeated King Lakshman Sen in 1206 CE and annexed large parts of Bengal to the Delhi Sultanate. Khalji also mounted an Islamic invasion of Tibet. Following this initial conquest, an influx of missionaries arrived in Bengal and many Bengalis began to adopt Islam as their way of life. Sultan Balkhi and Shah Makhdum settled in the present-day Rajshahi Division in northern Bengal, preaching to the communities there. A community of 13 Muslim families headed by Burhannuddin also existed in the northeastern Hindu city of Srihatta (Sylhet), claiming their descendants to have arrived from Chitaagong.²⁵ By 1303, hundreds of Sufi preachers led by Shah Jalal aided the Muslim rulers in Bengal to conquer sylet turning the town into Jalal's headquarters for religious activities. Following the conquest, Jalal disseminated his followers across different parts of Bengal to spread Islam, and became a household name among Bengali Muslims. The establishment of a single united Bengal Sultanet in 1352 by Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah finally gave rise to a "*Bengali*" socio-linguistic identity.^{26,27,28,29}

Alongside Persian and Arabic, the sovereign Sunni Muslim nation-state also enabled the language of the Bengali people to gain patronage and support, contrary to previous states which exclusively favored Sanskrit, Pali and Persian.³⁰ The converted Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah funded the construction of Islamic seminaries as far as Mecca and Madina in the Middle East. The people of Arabia came to know these institutions as al-Madaris al-Bangaliyyah. The Bengal Sultanate was a melting pot of Muslim political, mercantile and military elites. During the 14th century, Islamic kingdoms stretched from Muslim Spain in the west to Bengal in the east. Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta's diary is one of the best known accounts of the prelude to the Bengal Sultanate.³¹

Ibn Battuta visited Bengal during the reign of Sultan Fakhruddin Mubarak Shah, a rebel governor of the Delhi Sultanate who established a city state in Sonargaon. At the time, Bengal was divided into the three city states of Sonargaon, Satgaon and Lakhnauti. In 1352, the three city states were united by Ilyas Shah into a single, unitary, independent Bengal Sultanate. The creation of the Bengal Sultanate sparked several Bengal- Delhi Wars, which resulted in Delhi recognizing Bengal's independence. The Ilyas dynasty consolidated Bengali statehood, the economy and diplomatic relations. A network of Mint Towns - provincial capitals which produced the Sultan's sovereign currency called the tanka - was established across Bengal. The Bengali state followed the Persian model of statecraft. Muslims from other parts of the world were imported for military, bureaucratic and household services. These immigrants included Turks from upper India who were originally recruited in Central Asia; as well as black Abyssinians imported via East Africa into the Bengali port of Chittagong.

A highly commercialized and monetized economy evolved. Islamic architecture was introduced on a major scale. A huge mosque called the Adina Mosque was built following the design of the Great Mosque of Damascus. A distinct Bengali Muslim architectural style developed, with terracotta and stone buildings showing a fusion of Persian and Bengali elements.^{32,33} Mosques included two categories, including multi-domed rectangular structures and single-domed square structures. A distinct style of Bengali mihrabs, minbars, terracotta arabesque and do-chala roofs developed; this influence also spread to other regions. The Bengal Sultanate was ruled by five dynastic periods; with each period have a particular ethnic identity. The Ilyas Shahi dynasty was of Turkic origins. It was replaced by the Bengali-origin dynasty of Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah and Shamsuddin Ahmad Shah for a few decades before being restored. In the 1490s, a series of Abyssinian generals took turns in becoming the Sultan of Bengal.^{34,35}

They were succeeded by the Hussain Shahi dynasty which claimed Arab descent. They were in turn replaced by the Pashtun rulers of the Suri dynasty, who first acted as regional governors before restoring Bengali independence. The last dynasty, the Karrani dynasty was also of Pashtun origin. The sultanate period saw a flourishing of Islamic scholarship and the development of Bengali Literature. Scholars, writers and poets of sultanate-era Bengal included Usman Serajuddin, Alaul Haq, Nur Qutb Alam, Alaol, Shah Muhammad Sagir, Abdul Hakim, Saiyid Sultan, Qadi Ruknu'd-Din Abu Hamid Muhammad bin Muhammad al-'Amidi, Abu Tawwama, Saiyid Ibrahim Danishmand, Saiyid Arif Billah Muhammad Kamel and Saiyid Muhammad Yusuf among others. Bengal's tradition of Persian prose was acknowledged by Hafez. The Dobhashi tradition saw Bengali transliteration of Arabic and Persian words in Bengali texts to illustrate Islamic epics and stories.

During the independent sultanate period, Bengal forged strong diplomatic relations with empires outside the subcontinent. The most notable of these relationships was with China Ming China and its emperor Yongle. At least a dozen embassies were exchanged between China and Bengal³⁶ The Bengal, in the era of the Sultanate and Mughal, has a significant role in the society where many of the Muslim leaders tried to balance the diversity of religions and cultures. Muslims ruled Bengal for more than five and a half centuries³⁷ The Muslim leaders left some exemplary works during their time to maintain harmony and peace in the multireligious and cultural society. Since the beginning of Islam in India, where the Arab traders are used to come to South India and later introduced Islam to the people, they always showed respect and harmony to the other religions.³⁸ It was noted that the religious affairs of Hindus were not interfered by Muhammad Bin Qasim when he came to India. The traditional local courts (panchayats) were operational at that time. In the Sultanate period, history proves that Muslim leaders were more accommodating and appreciating the other religions and faiths. The non-Muslims were appointed as officers, secretariat, zamindars, and so on in the government and administration sectors.³⁹

Many Hindus were given the status of a powerful landlord. The highest position like wazir (prime minister) was a Hindu during Alauddin Husain Shah's time, and the position of dabir-i-khas (the Sultan secretary) and *sakarmalik* (state minister) was also held by Rupa and Sanatana. The Hindu poet Vijaya Gupta considered Alauddin Husain Shah as one of the incarnations of Krishna because of his all noble work for the people's different faiths and cultures. As for religious development, the Sultanate period did not differentiate between a Muslim and a non-Muslim in terms of receiving their religious rights. The Tomb of Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah is an example of having such integration among the multireligious community. The Islamic rulings were not forced to the people, which can be seen through having many non-Muslim zamindars and other higher positions holders all around the Bengal area. The non-Muslim scriptures and Sanskrit books were translated into the Bengali language by the support of the Sultans such as Mahabharata, Manasa Vijaya, Krishna Mangala, and Padma Purana Muslim rulers also helped to build new temples and provided the Hindu community untaxed land for the use of religious activities

Like the Muslim rulers during the Sultanate period, the Mughal rulers were also being kind and welcoming to anyone regardless of their religions. The non-Muslims hold higher rank and position in the governance and administration of the Mughal rulers. The position like *dewan* (the chief revenue officer) and member of the advisory council was given to the non-Muslims Nawab Alivardi Khan and Siraj-ud-daulah also appointed many non-Muslims for higher positions in their time. The Bengal has seen the growth and development of religions other than Islam in the era of the Mughal period. The Hinduism, Sikhism, and Christianity have their peace to practice their religions and to spread the religious messages to the community. The development of the religions was taken place in many ways, for example, the translation of religious scriptures such as Atharva Veda, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, and the Harivamsa into Persian language. In addition, Akbar assigned a translation department to translate many religious scriptures into Persian and Arabic languages. He granted several villages in the name of Guru Amar Das Akbar also built many temples and churches during his time providing sponsorship to non-Muslims. The Emperor Humayun also provided various support to the non-Muslims granting land for Jangamvadi Math of Banaras and being balanced to control Muslim and Christian conflict.

The Bengal Muslim leaders did not impose jizyah (poll tax) on non-Muslims. However, there are some claims against some rulers among Muslims who imposed such tax on non-Muslims such as Emperor Aurangzeb who imposed jizyah lavishly upon non-Muslims also highlighted that jizyah was exempted from non-Muslims in the case of crop failure. Therefore, the high positions of the non-Muslims in the Sultanate and Mughal period and the support for the non-Muslims provided by the Muslim rulers show the integrity of the diversity among those leaders and other peoples and more specifically the level of harmony and tolerance among multi religious society during the Medieval Bengal.

Regarding the treatment of Sufis with non-Muslims, the Sufis were not involved in the leadership of the state, nor were they influencing the leadership except spreading their message with the ultimate level of peace and harmony. The Sufis's method in spreading their message did not bother non-Muslims; rather, it impressed them to follow their practice. Being open to all the community members regardless of their religions and races made their way more natural to reach all levels of people to communicate and understand their values and accommodate them with a peaceful message and mutual respect. The spread of morality and equality among the community led the Sufis's approach more welcomed and appreciated by the different faiths of peoples. Some researches support this study; for example, mentioned that Muslim rulers in Medieval Bengal applied liberal views toward non-Muslims to keep peace and religious coherence among divers' faiths and cultures stated that Sufis had liberal views in promoting Islam and religious harmony in Bengal. It described that the Sufis had a syncretic and accommodative approach in attracting non-Muslims to Islam.

Finally, the study shows that ensuring better treatment by the rulers to their minority group is it Muslims or Hindus or any other religions or races, will bring prosperity and balance to the society. The adoption of harmony and tolerance will lead to peace and smoothness in the life of the people. Thus, the Muslim majority in Bangladesh shall provide the rights of non-Muslims to practice their religious obligations, and at the same time, the Muslim minority in India shall receive their religious rights and be allowed to carry out the obligations and duties. Both majority and minority, Hindus or Muslims should believe and treat others as a citizen of a country to have equal right regardless of their faith, religion, culture, and race.

Sufism is a significant dimension of religious and cultural expression in Islam. It often refers to Islamic mystical theology and philosophy ⁴⁰ states that Sufism provides a mystical way of life for Muslims.⁴¹ says that the Sufis emphasize individual religious experience through a process of training between an experienced mystic leader—*pir*, *murshid* or *sheikh*, and disciple or murid.⁴² He mentions that Sufism has played a significant role in the formation of Muslim morality through universal kindness to all living beings. By and large, Sufis are regarded as spiritual Guides and are also known as Pirs or Darbis or Fakir. ⁴³ Generally, Sufis reached Bengal in the mid-11th century and spread such that there was no city or village of Bengal except that a Sufi had settled ⁴⁴ Some of the Muslim saints (Sufis) who came from Arabia and Persia to different parts of Bengal before the establishment of Muslim rule in the region include Baba Adam Shahid, Shah Sultan Rumi, Shah Sultan Mahiswar Mokhdudh Shah Dowlah Shahid, and Mokhdum Shah Gajnawi in Netrokona, Bogra, Pabna, Bikrampur, and Bardaman ⁴⁵ In Medieval Bengal, Sufis contributed significantly to the formation of Islamic culture ⁴⁶

In the Sultanate period, the majority of Sufis came from Turkey, Central Asia, and Persia mention that throughout the medieval period, Islamic scholars and Sufi saints continuously came to Bengal from Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Central Asia, Khurasan, and Northern India. Sufis applied various methods and approach toward Muslims and non-Muslims as well. One of the most common and influencing approaches was taken by Sufis providing a *Langarkhana* (free kitchen for giving food to those in need) in the Khanqah (the abode of Sufis). People belonging to all religions, cultures, and creeds used to visit Khanqahs for their spiritual healing. This enabled the Sufis to reach ordinary people and advocate their spiritualism mentions that the Islamic culture was patronized through the mosque or *dargah* and was predominantly influenced by Sufism.

Another significant approach by Sufis' was their liberal views, which attracted people of different religions. Sufis preached against religious hatred and fanaticism and worked for unity among the people of Bengal. The majority of scholars think that Sufis contributed the most toward the Islamization in Bengal Their interpretation of Islam's unqualified faith in strict monotheism, brotherhood, human equality, and accountability attracted local people who were oppressed and suppressed by the practice of the caste system and strict religious regulations. The spreads of equality and morality by the Sufis was also among the influencing factor that impressed many people.⁴⁷ It highlights that the Sufis advocated the message of equality and moral conduct which impressed people and lead them to embrace Islam during the 15th and 16th centuries. He also explains that Sufis, such as Shah Jalal, Jalaluddin Tabrizi, Shah Makhdum, Shah Mahisawar, and others, came to Bengal with the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. They verbally preached Islam, but their pious and straightforward life inspired many conversions to Islam
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Sufis promoted a syncretic and accommodative attitude in charming non-Muslims to ⁴⁹ says that the Sufis had a syncretic approach in attracting non-Muslims to Islam. They did not insist that newly converted Muslims forsake their previous practices at once and inspired them to observe minimum Islamic injunctions. maintains that after converting to Islam, new Muslims also displayed a higher degree of syncretism.⁵⁰ states that syncretism is central to the identity of Muslims in Bengal. Again, Roy (1983) is quoted in "Islam got on its feet in Bengal because of its accommodative nature developed by the Sufis or Pirs, who absorbed the local traditions into the egalitarian values of Islam"⁵¹ mentions that under the rule of Muslims in India, Hindus attended the ceremonies of many Muslim festivals. In the same way, many Muslims attended similar festivals in the Hindu states. The same approach was also applied to Christians in the region.

Conclusion:

Above all we may conclude that throughout the Muslim rule in Medieval Bengal, a tradition of religious tolerance and inter religious harmony prevailed. Social cohesion was the priority of the rulers. Every individual was considered an equal citizen of the society irrespective of their religious or ethnic identities. The Muslim sultans and Mughals in the medieval period applied liberal and accommodate strategies toward non-Muslims in Bengal. The rulers significantly contributed to the development of religious literature of non-Muslims and did not prevent them from propagating their religion. They also patronized the institutions of all religions. Although a very few examples of religious intolerance can be found, these cannot be generalized that medieval Muslim rulers were intolerant of non-Muslims or were unjust to them as the vast majority of them showed equal treatment of Muslims and non-Muslims in every aspect of their life. Again, the Muslim Sufis played a vital role in mitigating hatred and establishing peace among the people of Bengal, irrespective of their religion. They promoted liberal, syncretic, and accommodate views in attracting non-Muslims to Islam. Their simple life and humanitarian activities impressed people of all religions and helped establish inter religious harmony in Medieval Bengal.

So, it is assumed that if the examples of medieval Muslim rulers and Sufi saints are followed today, religious antagonism and hatred will be mitigated, and a real environment of interreligious harmony will be established. This was the element of the society that gave a great impetus to the Medieval Bengali literature for its development and growth in secular forms in composite culture. This was possible because the converted Muslims and the Hindus were not deprived of the privileged to pursue their faith but due to their interdependence for economic reasons and the identity which they have established amongst themselves in cultural terms a composite culture has developed. From this point of view we may quote Asit Kumar Bandopadhyaya's observation that sense a person in spite of his Muslim originality, Nazrul Islam has indeed composed Shyama Sangeet. This is certainly an output of the tradition of composite culture of medieval Bengal. This is certainly an output of the tradition of composite social aspirations of the people could be articulated and that people in Medieval Bengal expressed the same feeling indicated that the cultural nexus had common components.⁵²

It was in the context of these religious currents and cultural nexus that Islamic emotionalism became a force in its own right in the Bengal delta. Thus far we have seen Muslims as rulers, soldiers, Sufis, merchants, administrators, or judges, but we have not yet seen them in the role of the ordinary cultivators who came to pervade the modern Bengali countryside. Indeed, Bengali Muslim cultivators would eventually form the basis of one of the largest Muslim communities on earth. This raises the question of Islamization, and the contested issue of conversion to Islam.

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