

BANGLADESH: HISTORY AND CULTURE

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Bangladesh is a vast stretch of a plain, unbroken by any relief, except in the south-east by the Chittagong Hill Tracts and minor extension of hills in the northern and southern parts of Sylhet. Except the hills, the country is a river-built alluvial plain interspersed by a large number of rivers and rivulets, which for ages, have followed their ever-shifting courses. The riverine scene is, however, dominated by three big rivers — the Ganges (the eastern course locally known as Padma), the Brahmaputra and the Meghna. They ultimately combine their waters and open out in a closed estuary into the Bay of Bengal. Beside these three great rivers, the Mahananda, Atreyi, Karatoya and Tista are notable rivers in north Bengal; the Bhairab, Madhumati and Arial Khan are distributaries of the Ganges in South Bengal, while Karnaphuli, Sangu, Halda and Matamohari drain the Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Bangladesh has an area of a little more than 55 thousand square miles with a population of nearly one hundred million. Administratively, the country is divided into four divisions which are again sub-divided into 64 districts. The capital is at Dhaka which stands on the left bank of the river Buriganga, a distributary of Dhaleswari, which itself takes off from the river Jamuna (Brahmaputra) and flows into the Meghna. The country has a coast line of 430 miles along the Bay of Bengal and thus shares the arm of the Indian Ocean with India and Burma. On the west of Bangladesh lie the two Indian provinces of West Bengal and Bihar and on the east lie Assam, Meghalaya and the Hill Tippera. Beyond the Indian border to the north lie two other SAARC countries, Nepal and Bhutan. In the south-eastern corner, Bangladesh has got a common border with Burma for about 180 miles. Thus Bangladesh has got a land and sea boundary of 2350 miles.

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The wide sweeping plain is fringed on the south by the marshes of the beautiful Sundarbans, famous both for its scenic beauty, forest resources and wild chase. Beyond lies the vast expanse of the Bay of Bengal, which is both a boon and a curse at the same time. It is a curse because of the annual damages of wealth and human life caused by cyclones and tidal bores and boon because for centuries men have journeyed and Bangladesh has carried on traffic in trade between the countries along the coast and overseas. In this area is now being developed the second seaport at Mangla, Khulna district. On the eastern boundary lie the tertiary ranges inhabited by tribal people known as the Mugs, the Chins, the Moros, the Tipras and the Jaintias. These tribes have all along resisted the migration of new people into their strongholds, though they have imbibed, through the ages, many traits and cultural practices of the people of the plains. In these areas, primitive tribes sticking fast to their traditional customs, and limited economy have survived. Of these, the Chittagong Hill tribes, like the Chakmas, the Moros are coming fast into limelight, with the opening of new economic avenues in their secluded areas. On the north also the boundary is demarcated by the Garo Hills in the east and Rajmahal hills in the west. In between opens the wide sweeping gap called *dvars* or gateways and it is through these *dvars* that the waters of the big rivers flow into the deltaic Bangladesh and the snow-capped Himalayas push down its melted water. In the past, some Himalayan tribes like the Koch, the Mech, the Kambojas trekked into Bangladesh through these openings and the people of Bangladesh moved into the Himalayan terrain right upto Tibet. The most important of these gaps is called the Teliagarhi pass, through which the Ganges winds its way down the plain of Bangladesh. Beyond this pass lies Darbhanga (Dar-i-Bang, i.e. gateway to Bang) in the northern part of Bihar. Horde after horde of people migrated to Bangladesh through this pass during the ancient and medieval ages. There came the soldiers, empire-builders, missionaries, religious preachers and the peaceful settlers from northern India and beyond. In the past invaders faced resistance at this narrow pass. Here, in this pass, the Aryans had to give way under strong resistance put up by the Pundras, the ancient people living in the area called Pundravardhana, in old days and Barind or Varendra (chosen by god Indra) later. It is due to this resistance that the holy places of the Aryans are

confined to the west of the Bhagirathi, the western channel of the Ganges, which flows down from West Bengal, India. The south western zone of the deltaic land, the ancient Radha, makes a different cultural zone having all along been a refuge of overflowing people and tradition of northern India. Further west spreads out the tableland of Chota Nagpur densely forested and inhabited by the Munda and other aboriginal tribes.

The general unity of Bangladesh is broken into sub-alluvial zones by the river system. The Padma divides south Bengal from the north, i.e. the flooded plains of the south from the dry lateritic zones of the north. The north is again fragmented by the rivers Brahmaputra and Meghna. The western most is the well known Varendra plateau built up by red earth. The most ancient city of Pundranagar lies in this zone on the bank of the river Karatoya, identified with Mahasthan in modern Bogra district. Other capital cities also sprang up in this zone; Gaur and Pandua of the ancient period and Lakhnauti (Gaur) Firuzabad (Pandua), Ikdala and Tanda of the medieval period may be cited as instances. In the fortunes of these cities can be traced the rise and fall of many royal dynasties. The second part of the north may be called the Dhaka-Mymensingh zone, Madhupur being its central solid part. In fact, this zone is a continuation of the Varendra zone, but cut off from the latter by the Brahmaputra, here called Jamuna. Several ancient seats of government were established in this zone. These were Sabhar, Bikrampur, Sonargaon (Suvarnagram), Rampal and Jahangirnagar (Dhaka). These different places were selected at different periods of history and by different ruling princes keeping in view the ever shifting river courses. The eastern zone is Surma Valley, an alluvial plain between the hills of the north and the south and watered by the Surma, Kushiara and Manu. The hill tribes of Khasis and Jaintias live in the north and the Tipperas in the south. As opposed to the three northern regions, the south is a land of flood and marshes where people depend more on the vagaries of nature. The people of this region are tenaciously hardy ever ready to fight and overcome the natural calamities. The easternmost region of Bangladesh is the area beyond the Meghna, the old greater districts of Tippera, Noakhali and Chittagong. This is the ancient Samatata, the coastal land, wherein is situated the chief port of Bangladesh, that is Chittagong port. This is the point through which Bangladesh

came into contact in the past with the outside world — the Chinese, the Arabs and other Asiatic countries; the Portuguese and other European nations. Chittagong was truly the “Porto Grande” of Bangladesh.

The historic land now known as Bangladesh does not find mention in the Vedic hymns, which means that Bangladesh was outside the influence of the Aryans. The Aitreya Brahmana, however, refers to peoples beyond the frontiers of Aryandom who were called dasyus. Among such people Pundras are mentioned. The first reference to the Vangas is found in the Budhayan Dharmasutra which divides the land known to it into three ethnic or cultural belts. The holiest of the three was Aryavarta lying between the Himalayas and the western Vindhya and watered by the upper Ganges and the Jamuna. The zone coming next in point of sanctity consisted of Malwa, east and south Bihar, south Kathiawar, the Deccan and the lower Indus valley. The outer most belt included the Pundras of north Bengal and the Vangas of Central and Eastern Bengal.¹ The regions of this third belt were regarded as altogether outside the pale of Vedic culture. Persons living in these regions even for a temporary period were required to go through expiatory rites.

The old people of Bangladesh can hardly be recognized today; they can be conveniently called Bangs or Bangas, as they are mentioned so in the earliest available literary accounts. The old historians talk of the Dravidian origin of the Bangas, but it is doubtful whether there is any such strain in the local culture. Herbert Risley first made a scientific investigation and traced the round-headed elements among the Bangalis to Dravidian and Mongoloid admixture. But later this theory was equally opposed when all the elements from the broad-headed type of the Aryan people were traced. There is no evidence of the migration of Mongolian people into Bengal, nor there is any trace of large migration of Aryan tribes into Bangladesh. At the same time, there is no denying the fact that the people of Bangladesh have physical features that sharply distinguish them from those of northern India. The roundness of their faces, the deer like eye, the softness of limbs and their small stature are some of the features of the people of South-East Asia. This could be the influence of the climate rather than racial affinity; there is at least no evidence of movement of South-East Asian people into Bangladesh. Over and above these features, there

may also be discerned some characteristics which may be traced from north India and beyond. Indeed the Aryan influence could not be contained for long. The river Ganges was a great carrier of northern cultural influence; the Ganges has served as the main artery in the evolution of the Aryan classical culture in northern India. Wherever the "holy Ganges" flowed, the Brahmanical system followed. But the eastern limit of their sacred places was defined by the river Bhagirathi. Further east the Ganges lost its sacred character for the Brahmans. The land beyond, which now forms Bangladesh, was the *bratya* or discarded country, as it was dominated by the eastern people, quite distinct from the Aryans. The Pundras and the Vangas heroically resisted the Aryan infiltration into Bangladesh, but later in history the country came under the political influence of the Aryans, and this led to the fusion of different cultural elements within the Brahmanical system. The language was also Aryanized and Bengali was adopted to the framework of Sanskrit grammar. North Indian names like Jumna and Sitakunda and stories from the great epics were transplanted into this deltaic land.

The early history of Bangladesh is obscure; except for the reference to Pundras and the Vangas ruling in the country, there is hardly any details about it. The obscurity becomes somewhat clear from the later half of the 4th century B.C. when the Greek and the Latin writers speak of a people as Gangaridai whose sway extended over the whole of Vanga and possibly some adjoining tracts. Then north Bengal went under the control of the Mauryas. The Brahmi record of Mahasthan refers to Pundranagar as a prosperous city. The city enjoyed a good government, its storehouse was filled with coins which were at the service of the people in times of emergency due to water, fire and pests.² The discovery of terracota figurines of the Sunga period at Mahasthangarh show that Pundravardhana flourished as an important city even after the fall of the imperial Mauryas. Silua in Noakhali has yielded fragments of an image, the pedestal bearing an inscription assigned to the 2nd century B.C.³ The next glimpse of the political condition of Bengal is afforded by the inscriptions of the age of Samudragupta. These inscriptions disclose that at least two great kingdoms arose in Bengal — in eastern Bengal rose the kingdom of Samatata and in West Bengal, the kingdom of Pushkarana, with its capital Pakharna

in modern Bankura district, West Bengal, India.⁴ In the reign of Kumaragupta I, northern Bengal formed an important administrative division of the Gupta empire under the name of Pundravardhana-bhukti and the Damodarpur copper plates of Budhagupta indicate that the Gupta rule in north Bengal continued up to the end of the 5th century A.D. Although Samatata was a semi-independent feudatory state in the time of Samudragupta, it appears that it was gradually incorporated into the Gupta empire. In the year 507-8 A.D. Maharaja Vainyagupta was the ruler of this region and granted land in the Tippera district.⁵ Probably this Vainyagupta later carved out an independent kingdom, but soon his reign came to an end. The Gupta empire itself came to an end before the middle of the 6th A.D. The empire already weakened by the inroads of the Hunas, collapsed before the onslaughts of Yashodharman, a military adventurer, who suddenly leapt to fame and power and proudly claimed to have extended his rule up to the river Brahmaputra.⁶ How far the boasts of Yashodharman were based on facts, is not known; in any case his power was extremely short-lived as no trace of his power was to be found after the middle of the 6th century A.D.

The end of Gupta rule saw the rise of independent kingdoms in Bengal — one in Samatata or Vanga and the other in Gauda. Five inscriptions discovered at or near Kotalipada in Faridpur and one in Burdwan reveal the existence of three rulers named Gopachandra, Dharmaditya and Samachardeva; they all took the title of Maharajadhiraja indicating that they were independent and powerful. The northern Bengal and the northern part of western Bengal were outside the dominion of these rulers. From about this period these areas came to be known as the kingdom of Gauda and this geographical term, sometimes covered the whole of Western Bengal. Throughout the Hindu period, Gauda and Vanga henceforth, denoted the two great political divisions of Bengal, the former comprising the northern and whole or part of western Bengal. Actual political boundaries varied at different times but the rough geographical divisions persisted through the ages. Geographical names, Pundra or Varendri (north Bengal), Radha or Suhma (western Bengal), and Samatata or Harikela (eastern Bengal) and Vanga (southern Bengal) were also used. During the weakening of the power of the Guptas, Gauda changed hands having been under the control of one or the other expansionist power. Out of this chaotic condition rose

Sasanka, said to be originally a vassal of Mahasengupta or the Maukharis. What is definitely known about Sasanka is that sometimes before 606 A.D. Sasanka became the king of Gauda with his capital at Karnasuverna, identified with Rangamati a few miles south-west of Berhampur in Murshidabad district (west Bengal, India). Both northern and western Bengal were included in the dominion of Sasanka, but there is no evidence to show that he had control over south and east Bengal. He, however, extended his dominion to the west and came into conflict with Harshvardhana of Thaneshwar. The Buddhist sources accuse Sasanka of intolerance to the Buddhists, according to Hiuen Tsang, Sasanka cut down the Bodhi tree at Gaya and ordered the removal of the image of Buddha in a neighbouring temple.⁷ Sasanka died in between 619 and 637 A.D.

The political condition of Vanga during the days of Sasanka is not clearly known. Hiuen Tsang refers to the kingdom of Samatata, which seems to have included the major part if not the whole of Vanga proper.⁸ Samatata was then ruled by a line of Brahmana kings, but Hiuen Tsang does not give any information beyond saying that Silabhadra, the patriarch of Nalanda, was a scion of this family. The Brahmanical royal family was ousted by a line of Buddhist kings whose names end in Khadga. The history of this dynasty, generally called Khadga dynasty, is known from two copper plates found at Ashrafpur, 30 miles north east of Dhaka and a short record inscribed on an image found at Deulbadi 14 miles north of Comilla.⁹ These records supply the names of kings Khadgodyam, his son Jatakhadga, and the latter's son Devakhadga. The names of the queen and son of Devakhadga are also known; they were Prabhavati and Rajaraja, also called Rajarajabhata. The plates were issued from Karmanta-Vasaka, the capital, doubtfully identified with Badkamata, near Comilla. The history of the Khadga dynasty after Rajarajabhata is not known. According to the traditions recorded by the Tibetan scholar Lama Taranath, the Chandra dynasty had been ruling in Vanga and occasionally over Gauda; the last two rulers of this dynasty Govichandra and Lalitchandra reigned during the last part of the 7th and first part of the 8th century A.D. It is not unlikely that the Khadgas were supplanted by the Chandra rulers.

It may be assumed from the above discussion that there was no

strong government either in Gauda, in Vanga or in Samatata during the later part of the 7th and early part of the 8th centuries A.D. Several ruling dynasties occupied power in one or the other part, but they were short-lived. Taking advantage of the situation some foreign kings invaded and occupied parts of the country, notable among them were Yasovarman of Kanauj and Lalitaditya of Kashmir, but their occupation was for brief periods.¹⁰ As a result there came about a state of anarchy and lawlessness in the country. In Gauda this state of affairs can be seen after the death of Sasanka. In the *Arya-manjusri mulakalpa* we get the following information about the political disintegration:

After the death of Soma (Sasanka) the Gauda political system (the Gauda tantra) was reduced to mutual distrust, raised weapons and mutual jealousy one (king) for a week; another for a month; then a republican constitution — such will be the daily (condition) of the country on the bank of the Ganges where houses were built on the ruins of monasteries. Thereafter Soma's (Sasanka's) son Manava will last for 8 months 5½ days.¹¹

Taranath portrays almost the same picture. According to him, “. . . the death of Lalitchandra was followed by a period of anarchy and confusion. There was no king ruling over either Gauda or Vanga . . . every Kshatriya, Grandee, Brahmana, and merchant was a king in his own house”.¹² The contemporary record, the Khalimpur copper plate of Dharmapala also describes the political condition in the middle of the 8th century as *matsanyeya*. The term *matsanyeya* is used in the works of politics to denote a state of anarchy in the absence of any central authority where every local chief assumes royal authority and where might alone is right. Under such state of anarchy the people suffer miserably. This lamentable state of political disintegration was caused by a series of foreign invasions and the successive changes of ruling dynasties in Gauda and Vanga. This anarchy and confusion for more than a century led to a natural reaction. After years of sufferings, people suddenly developed political wisdom and a spirit of self-sacrifice. They realized that a strong central government offered the only effective remedy against political disintegration within and invasions from foreign rulers. They could see the advantages of surrendering the authority to one person by the petty chiefs, who had been exercising independent political authority in different parts of the country. The independent political chiefs, therefore, surrendered their power and accepted the suzerainty of one person named

Gopala. Thus was established the Pala kingdom in the middle of the 8th century A.D.¹³

The above theory of election of Gopala by the people is put forward by the old historians; the modern scholars, however, refute the probability of an election in the 8th century A.D. They say, "Having thus explained the evidence of Khalimpur plate and Taranath's account, we can reasonably conclude that Gopala, a military adventurer, succeeded in restoring peace and order by putting an end to the forces of lawlessness". He must have had a host of supporters, as is very natural in such a time. This has been referred to by the eulogistic court poet as that the Prakritis made Gopala "take the hand of Fortune to put an end to the state of lawlessness".¹⁴

Gopala proved himself to be a worthy king. He brought the turbulent elements under his control and restored peace and order in the kingdom. He founded a dynasty of kings which ruled for several centuries. The location of the original kingdom of Gopala is not definitely known. The inscriptions, which are the most important sources do not help solving the problem. During the first two hundred years of Pala rule covering the reigns of eight kings, all the copper plate grants were issued from the victorious camp at Magadha and all other inscriptions with only a single exception, belonged to that region. This fact led many scholars to conclude that the Palas originally established rule in Magadha.¹⁵ But *Ramcharita* definitely says that Varendri was the ancestral home of the Palas and Gwalior inscription suggests that Dharmapala was a Vangapati. Therefore the modern view is that Gopala first established himself at Varendri and Vanga and later occupied Magadha. Gopala was a Buddhist and established a Buddhist dynasty of rulers. He founded the great monastery at Nalanda and established many other viharas. Gopala successfully ruled his kingdom and was succeeded by his son Dharmapala in about 770 A.D. Dharmmpala inherited a well-ordered kingdom from his father.

Dharmapala was a great king, probably the greatest of the Pala rulers. He was not content with the kingdom inherited by him, and made a bid for building an empire in northern India along with the Gurjaras Pratiharas and Rashtrakutas. His court poets give an exaggerated account of his success. A critical examination of the inscriptions of Dharmapala and his adversaries, however, shows that

Dharmapala launched Bengal on a career of aggrandizement. For a time, he definitely succeeded in pushing forward his suzerainty over Kanauj. He raised the prestige of his home country Gauda to an amazing height. In establishing his empire, at times he met reverses, particularly at the hands of the Gurjara-Pratiharas and Rashtrakutas, but undaunted he pursued the policy of conquests, and ultimately achieved a great success. The vision of an Indian empire as depicted in the Pala records, though may not be literally true, shows that Bengal for the first time, saw under his leadership prosperity and success. These successes must have elated the court poets, and they in their eagerness, glorified the successes of their master. The assumption of imperial titles, Prameswara, Parambhataraka, Maharajadhiraja by Dharmapala was justified. He was a Buddhist and established the Vikramasila and Somapura viharas.

Dharmapala was succeeded by his son Devapala in about 810 A.D. He proved himself a worthy successor of his father and the records of his family attributes the same glory for him as for his father or make him more glorious. Devapala was no doubt a powerful ruler, the records give him credit for aggressive campaigns and success achieved in these campaigns. There is no doubt that Bengal enjoyed the same vigour and initiative as she enjoyed under Dharmapala.

The Pala power reached its zenith under Dharmapala and Devapala. With them ended the period of ascendancy and a period of weak succession followed which gradually led to its decline and disintegration. In about 1000 A.D. there was a rebellion in north Bengal under the Kaivartyas. They killed the king Mahipala II but the rebel chief Bhima was defeated by Rampala, another great Pala king. Rampala reigned from 1084 to 1130 A.D. but he was followed by weak kings. The last Pala king was ousted by the Senas.

Towards the end of the 11th century A.D. Bengal saw the emergence of a new dynasty of rulers — the Senas. They were of external origin, they belonged to Karnata in south India. They found an opportunity of gaining a position for themselves in western Bengal, when the Pala empire was in the process of disintegration. There are various theories as to how the Senas came and occupied power; some say, they came in the wake of foreign invasions, while according to others the Senas came to Bengal and took service under the Pala kings. They ultimately gained power and supplanted their

masters. Samanata Sena was the first historical figure of this dynasty, his son was Hemanta Sena. His son Vijay Sena laid the foundation of the independent rule of his family and took the title of Maharajadhiraja. Vijay Sena reigned from 1097 to 1160 A.D.; he was a great warrior. On his death Vallalaseña inherited a well defined kingdom from his father. Vallalaseña's rule was marked by peaceful pursuits. Traditions associate his name with important social reforms and revival of orthodox Hindu rites. He was also a great scholar and an author of repute, and two of his works, *Danasagara* and *Adbhutsagara* have come down to us. Vallalaseña was succeeded by his son Lakshmanaseña in about 1179 A.D. Lakshmanaseña was a literary man and a patron of Sanskrit poets. His court was graced by the presence of eminent poets like Jayadeva, Dhoyi, Sarana and Umapatidhara. The great scholar Halayudh Misra was his chief minister and chief judge. Lakshmanaseña took the title of Gaudeshvara, thus indicating that he conquered Gauda which could not be done by his father and grandfather.

Lakshmanaseña was fairly old when he succeeded his father. He was a valiant warrior and took part in many battles during the time of his grandfather. He also began with a brilliant career of conquest, but his reign ended in a sea of troubles that overwhelmed him and his kingdom. An inscription of Dommanapala dated 1196 A.D. shows that the latter revolted against the Sena power and established an independent kingdom in the coastal belt of Bengal bordering Sundarbans.¹⁶ The Deva family also set up an independent kingdom to the east of the Meghna river about the same time.¹⁷ These two instances indicate the weakness of the authority of Lakshmanaseña and the disruption of his kingdom in his old age. During this period of turmoil, sometime about 1204-05 A.D. when Lakshmanaseña was probably very old, Bengal was invaded by the Muslims who had by that time conquered nearly the whole of northern India. Muhammad Bakhtyar Khalji conquered Nadia, said to be the capital of Lakshmanaseña and finally established his headquarters at Gauda, called Lakhnauti by the Muslim historians.

We have given above, in brief, the political condition obtaining in Bengal before the coming of the Muslims. It is clear that the geographical unity of Bengal was not realized in ancient times. No common name for the whole of Bengal was evolved. The Palas ruled

for several centuries over almost the whole of Bengal except the south-eastern regions, and the Senas ruled also almost over the whole of Bengal for a shorter period, but a common designation for the whole country could not be evolved and there was broad demarcation between Eastern and Western or South-eastern Bengal. Both the Gaudas and Vangas had attained definite status; the inscriptions and literature of other parts of India show that they were recognized as two important and distinct political units. Proud of their past history and achievements, living in a compact territory with well-defined areas, the Gaudas and Vangas, particularly, remained content with the old designation of their compact areas. The task of evolving a common name Bangalah, for the whole of Bengal, was left to a Muslim ruler in the early Muslim period.

The general features of the religious life in Bengal may now be discussed in brief. We begin with the comparative influence of different sects or cults. The testimony of Hiuen Tsang leaves no doubt that Buddhists and Jainas were fairly outnumbered by the followers of Brahmanical religion in the 7th century A.D. The Jainas gradually declined. The patronage of the Palas gave an impetus to Buddhism and saved Buddhism from the fate that overtook it in the rest of India, but does not seem to have affected the dominant position of the Brahmanical religion. It is to be noted that by far the large majority of images and inscriptions of the period from 750 to 1200 A.D. are Brahmanical. Among the non-Brahmanical sects, the Nirganthas, who later came to be known as Jainas, were numerous at the time of Hiuen Tsang. This sect must have lost its influence to a considerable extent during the subsequent period. Very few Jaina images have come to light. Of the two great sects in the Brahmanical religion, Vaishnavism seems to have been more popular than Saivism, judging by the number of cult images.

The ruling dynasties belonged to one or the other religious systems. The Khadgas, the Chandras and the Palas, and individual rulers like Kantideva and Ranavankamalla were Buddhists. Vainagupta, Loknath, Sasanka and the early Sena rulers, Vijayasena and Vallalasena were Saivas; the Varmanas, the later Sena kings and the Devas were Vaishnavas. No royal Jaina family is known, nor even any individual ruler professing the Jaina faith. The Buddhist Pala rulers were catholic in their attitude towards other systems. The great Pala ruler Dharmapala patronized Buddhism, but he appoin-

ted Garga, a Brahman, his minister. The Badal Pillar inscription refers to a family of Brahmana ministers of the Palas—Garga, Darbhapani, Kedar Misra and Guravamisra. Some Pala rulers are given credit for maintaining the orthodox social order of castes. Vighrahapala is said to have attended the sacrificial ceremonies performed by his Brahmana minister, and poured holy water over his own head for the welfare of his own empire. Such other instances are also available; in contrast some Hindu rulers showed intolerance towards Buddhism. Sasanka's attitude has already been noted; the Sena rulers were also intolerant.

Both Vaishnavism and Saivism derived their strength and inspiration from the temples and the Brahmanas attained distinction for their religious zeal, learning and scholarship. On the other hand, the main strongholds of the Buddhists were the viharas. Hiuen Tsang records that there were seventy viharas, accommodating eight thousand monks and no less than three hundred Deva temples in Bengal proper. So far as can be judged from archaeological evidence and the accounts left by the Tibetan writers, the number of viharas, monks and temples increased in the period subsequent to Hiuen Tsang. The country was then the home of a body of learned Brahmans and Buddhist monks, some of whom achieved fame beyond frontiers. The names of Shantirakshit, Atis Dipankara, Silabhadra may be mentioned with pride. Shantirakshit and Dipankara went to Tibet to preach Buddhism. Silabhadra became the patriarch of Nalanda. The livelihood of the Buddhist monks and Brahmana teachers were made easy by private or royal charities and they dedicated their lives to the highest ideals laid down for them in the holy scriptures. The most important evidence in this respect is furnished by I-tsing. He lived for some time in a monastery at Tamralipti and gives a detailed account of the monastic life. "After describing how the monks lived their just life, avoiding worldly affairs, and free from the fault of destroying lives", I-tsing refers to the strictness of procedure observed when the monks and the nuns met . . . A minor teacher sent a small quantity of rice to a tenant's wife through a boy. It was brought to the notice of the Assembly, and the teacher being ashamed, retired from the monastery for ever. A Bhikshu named Rahulamitra never "spoke with women face to face, except when his mother or sister came to him, whom he saw outside his room".¹⁸ Keeping in view the general moral lapse of both

Buddhists and Brahmanical religions, it is gratifying to note that the monastic life as recorded by an eyewitness was of a high standard. The intense religiosity which characterized the people may also be emphasized. This is proved by the nature, scope and the volume of the extensive religious literature produced from the 10th to the 12th centuries A.D. both in Sanskrit and vernacular, particularly in the Sanskrit language.¹⁹ The period also saw the beginnings of many of those folk religions, which exercised considerable influence over the mass of the people during the medieval period.

Bengal was inhabited by Buddhists, Hindus and Jainas but social solidarity was totally absent in the Hindu period. Commenting on this question, R.C. Majumdar writes,

the facts known so far do not encourage the belief that there was enough social solidarity or cultural homogeneity to foster a feeling of national unity in ancient Bengal. Socially and culturally India, in ancient or medieval period, was divided horizontally rather than vertically, and a Brahman of Bengal felt and consciously maintained greater affinity with a Brahman of Upper India than with a member of lower caste in his own province. Besides, social solidarity was rendered difficult, if not impossible, by the elaborate evolution of caste, which made a permanent cleavage between the Brahmans and the remaining elements of people, almost all of which were degraded to the level of Sudras. Even the latter were divided into several isolated and rigid groups by the creation of innumerable castes and sub-castes.²⁰

Of the three religions, Jainism which was once flourishing, had already declined, Buddhism also degenerated through the influence of Vajrayana, Shahjayana and the Tantric orders. The Tantric forms of Buddhism were full of corrupt practices and thus lost the vigour and energy that Buddhism once possessed. Even so Buddhism lingered on for a long time but the rising power of the Brahmans under the Senas inflicted a death-blow on the Buddhists. The manifold social distinctions imposed by the Brahmans relegated both Buddhists and the lower class Hindus to a position of contempt and untouchability. When the latter two groups of people were being treated thus, Islam came into Bengal.

The first contact of Islam with Bengal was through the Arabs. The writings of Arab geographers reveal that Arab traders had frequented the Bengal coast during the 8th century A.D. The location bordering Bangladesh that finds prominence in the Arab accounts is 'Samandar' identified with Chittagong by modern writers.²¹ The Arab writers also knew about Kamrup and the Kingdom of

'Ruhmi', the latter being identified with the kingdom of Dharmapala of the Pala dynasty.²² It is not, however, certain, whether the Arab contact led to any Muslim settlement in Bangladesh.

Islam which completely changed the socio-religious pattern of Bengal, came in the wake of the Turkish conquest towards the beginning of the 13th century A.D. Bakhtyar Khalji's easy success in Bihar as well as Bengal is a fact of great significance. The Sena power was broken by a single stroke by only eighteen horsemen (whatever may be the reason and the size of Bakhtyar's army that followed him); the king Lakshmanasena did not think of offering resistance; he was not only defeated, but he fled to a distant and safer place, Vikrampur in Eastern Bengal. The people's resistance in those days cannot be conceived of, but historians cannot neglect the fact that the Brahmans and the wisemen of the capital had already vacated their homes and taken shelter in distant places even before the actual raid of Bakhtyar Khalji. The social pattern of the contemporary Bengal has to be discerned from this fact. It appears that the Hindu rulers formed a class by themselves being surrounded by Brahmanical aristocracy, and having no contact with the people. The prevailing caste distinction and the oppression of the low caste people by the higher class ones had sapped the vitality of the Hindu society. The people, therefore, had no interest in the change of masters. As if the idea was that the rulers must defend themselves or be replaced by others who could muster a superior force. It is on this hypothesis that we can understand the imposition of a new hierarchy of rulers (i.e. Muslims) on the existing socio-religious structure and how they were accepted so willingly by the local people.

Bakhtyar Khalji's capture of Nadia and establishment of a kingdom with Lakhnauti as its capital, inaugurated a new age for Bengal. Politically, it sowed the seeds of Muslim rule, but socially it planted a Muslim society, opening the gate of Bengal to numerous immigrants from the then Muslim world, which enormously affected the existing society and culture. The founders of the Muslim kingdom, Bakhtyar and his successor Khalji Malik had their own problems. Besides the problem of their own adjustment to the new surroundings, coupled with their strained relations with the sultans of Delhi, they were constantly at war with the neighbouring Hindu kings. Their existence was guaranteed only by their recurring

raiding expeditions into the Hindu dominions, their wealth increased by the capturing of booty and imposition of taxes on the subdued Hindu princes, and their prosperity was assured by gradual expansion of territory in different divisions. After the initial shock of Turkish conquest was over, the Hindus of the neighbouring areas plucked up courage to fight the foreigners for the sake of their own existence and hence we find that the Muslims had to fight incessantly against the Hindus. Initially, the Turkish cavalry was no doubt the deciding factor in the wars and the Muslim conquest in the early stages followed those directions where the horse could easily move, but the river-girt eastern and southern Bengal remained immune from Muslim rule for a long time.

The Muslims took more than two hundred years to bring the whole of Bengal under their control. The breakup of the Khalji monopoly in Bengal by Iltutmish opened the way for fresh migration of Muslims—especially of the uprooted Turks from Central Asia—into Bengal. This was further facilitated by the appointment of new governors and other officers from Delhi, who on their part took up their posts at Lakhnauti with all their adherents, loyal troops and followers, in order to assert their authority over a heterogeneous population. Delhi Sultan's name was announced from the pulpit, and occasionally coins in their names were also issued from the Lakhnauti mint. From time to time presents of elephants and treasures passed from Bengal to Delhi and the Sultans conferred upon their governors titles, *khil'at*, privileges of drumbeating, umbrella and flags. The wealth and the special status of Lakhnauti became proverbial in Delhi and every ambitious servant of the state aspired to occupy the governorship of Lakhnauti. It was this position that earned for them the title of Malik al-Sharq²³ in actual name, fame and wealth. After the death of Iltutmish, the central government of Delhi became weak and this led the nobles and provincial governors to raise their heads and assert their power over others on the basis of their strength. Lakhnauti was the worst sufferer in this respect, as the ambitious nobles had a covetous eye on her and fought among themselves for its possession.²⁴ This state of affairs was put to an end by the strong hand of Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Balban. Even during the rule of Balban, his governor of Lakhnauti Mughith al-Din Tughril had revolted and assumed independence, but Balban had ruthlessly suppressed him and appointed in

his place his younger son Prince Bughra Khan. After Balban's death when the throne of Delhi was occupied by the Khaljis, the Balbani rulers became independent in Bengal.

During this time, the position of the Khalji oligarchy in Bengal was reversed. Prior to this, the Ilbari Turks were supreme in Delhi as the Khaljis were in Bengal, but now throughout the period when the Khaljis were ruling in Delhi, the Ilbari Turks of the House of Balban and their supporters like Shams al-Din Firuz Shah and his children maintained their independence in Bengal and Bihar. The sultanate of Bengal stood rival to that of Delhi and it was during this period that the neighbouring regions of Satgaon, Mymensingh and Sylhet were conquered and integrated into the kingdom of Lakhnauti. The Gangeto-Brahmaputra delta except the coastal belt of southern Bengal was united under one king; even the mighty king Ala' al-Din Khalji did not think of conquering Lakhnauti. In fact, the independence of Bengal was started with Bughra Khan. Only a short interlude set in with the quarrel among the sons of Shams al-Din Firuz Shah, as a result of which the Tughluq intervention once again established the authority of Delhi, and demarcated three clear cut administrative divisions, Lakhnauti, Sonargaon and Satgaon.²⁵ The administrative divisions could hardly work for a decade, when political chaos and disintegration towards the later half of the reign of Muhammad bin Tughluq led local aspirants to try their luck who established the rule of their own dynasty. Sultan Fakhr al-Din Mubarak Shah established an independent government at Sonargaon in 1338 A.D. Fourteen years later, in 1352 A.D. the whole of Bengal was united by Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah who became the first sultan of the independent Bengal. Even the name Bangalah as it connoted the geographical unit during pre-1947 days, had its origin in the Muslim period and the credit for it goes to Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah.

For two hundred years from 1338 to 1538 A.D. Bengal was independent and during this long period, kings of the following dynasties ruled over Bengal.

- (i) The House of Fakhr al-Din Mubarak Shah at Sonargaon 1338-1352 A.D.
- (ii) The House of Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah 1342-1414 A.D.
- (iii) The House of Raja Ganesh 1414-1433 A.D.
- (iv) The restored Ilyas Shahi dynasty 1433-1486 A.D.

(v) The Habshi rulers 1486-1493 A.D.

(vi) The House of Ala' al-Din Husayn Shah 1493-1538 A.D.

During the period of independent sultans, the outlying parts of Bengal yet unconquered by the Muslims were brought under their control. Chittagong was conquered by Fakhr al-Din Mubarak Shah; Faridpur was conquered by Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah (1415-1432) and was given the name of Fathabad; the Khulna-Jessore region was conquered in the time of Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (1433-1459), and Bakerganj was brought under Muslim control by Sultan Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah (1459-1474). The expansion of Muslim power in Bengal was now complete, and the Muslim kingdom of Lakhnauti founded by Muhammad Bakhtyar Khalji was turned into the Muslim kingdom of Bangalah.

The independence of Bengal was an eyesore to the sultan of Delhi. Firuz Shah Tughluq twice invaded Bengal in the time of Ilyas Shah and his son Sikandar Shah but the sultan of Delhi had to go back without achieving any territorial gain in Bengal on both the occasions. Ilyas Shahi rulers were tolerant towards the Hindus who were appointed to the high positions of the state. One of these occupants of high position, Raja Ganesh proved faithless and tried to establish his dynasty after overthrowing his masters. But his own son accepted Islam and the Hindu dynasty was turned into a dynasty of Muslim rulers. Soon this renegade Hindu dynasty was removed and Mahmud Shah, said to be the scion of the overthrown Ilyas Shahi dynasty, was called upon to occupy the throne. The rulers of the family of Mahmud Shah proved to be exceptionally brilliant. Like their forefathers, they were also tolerant and they not only appointed Hindu officials in large numbers, but also patronized local language and literature. They introduced a new element in the Muslim society of Bengal by importing a large number of Habshis who were given positions of influence and trust. These Abyssinians also betrayed their masters as Ganesh did half a century before, and established the Habshi rule in Bengal. The Habshi rule brought in its train anarchy and lawlessness; five kings ruled for six years and only one of them died a natural death. Ala' al-Din Husayn Shah, who was elected king by the rebels against the last Habshi ruler Muzaffar Shah brought this anarchy and lawlessness to an end. The Husayn Shahi period saw the introduction of Afghan element from northern India into Bengal. During the period, Babur occu-

pied Delhi and laid the foundation of Mughal empire. Being driven out of their kingdom, the Afghans were now taking shelter in Eastern India—Bihar and Bengal. The Husayn Shahi period also saw the rise of Sri Chaitanya Deva, the great Vaishnava reformer of Bengal. The period also saw the settlement of European traders in Bengal. The Husayn Shahi rulers were enlightened and tolerant; they patronized Bengali literature, they appointed Hindu officers and ministers in large numbers and during their rule the various religious communities developed in perfect peace and harmony. The country prospered with the opening of European trade and coming of foreign silver with the overseas trade. The Husayn Shahis' was an age of peace at home, expansion over neighbouring territories and prosperity in overseas trade.

The Husayn Shahi rule came to an end in 1538 A.D. with the conquest of Gaud by Sher Shah. This man, originally the son of a petty *Jagirdar*, was destined to occupy the throne of Delhi by ousting the Mughals. But his reign was short-lived; though he ushered in a new era in various fields of administration. Shortly after his death and that of his son Islam Shah, his empire was broken to pieces. The Mughals re-established themselves in Delhi and Bengal became independent first under the Sur and then under the Karrani Afghans. The last Afghan ruler Da'ud Karrani was defeated and killed in 1576 by the Mughal emperor Akbar. Though theoretically Bengal became a Mughal province from this date, Akbar could not consolidate his new possessions. The independent chiefs of Bengal, called Bara Bhuiyans, put up a stubborn resistance against the Mughals and Akbar closed his eyes in 1605 with his hopes of consolidation of Bengal remaining unfulfilled. In the reign of Jahangir, Subahdar Islam Khan Chishti completed the task of subjugating Bengal by transferring the capital to Dhaka and boldly facing the Bara Bhuiyans from the very centre of their power, and by organizing a naval force which enabled the Mughals to move in the river-girt Bangalah, the stronghold of the Bhuiyans. Shah Jahan and Aurangzib enjoyed more or less peaceful occupation; Feringi and Magh pirates infested some parts of lower Bengal. The sea pirates desolated village after village and kidnapped the peace-loving people to be sold as slaves. Chittagong was for a long time under the Arakanese rule but Sha'ista Khan in 1666 A.D. expelled the Arakanese and annexed Chittagong into the Mughal empire. During

the close of Aurangzib's reign Subha Singh of Midnapur and Rahim Khan Afghan created trouble in Burdwan, Hugli and Murshidabad, but they were suppressed without great difficulty. Thus the earlier Mughal emperors kept Bengal under their authority. During the later Mughal period, though it remained theoretically a province of the empire, Bengal, like other provinces, took full advantage of the weakness of the central authority and for all practical purposes behaved autonomously till the battle of Plassey in 1757 A.D. During this phase, called the *Nizamat* period from Murshid Quli Khan to Siraj al-Daulah, Hindus occupied important positions in the State. Thus in the time of Murshid Quli Khan, Ramjivan, Darpa Narayan, Manikchand Saha, etc., in the time of Shuja' al-Din, Rai Rayan Alamchand, and later Jagatseth, Omichand, Manickchand, Rajballabh and Raidurlabh etc, played very prominent part in the administration. When Mir Ja'far intrigued with the East India Company against Siraj al-Daulah the Hindu nobility sided with the intriguers and helped in bringing the Muslim rule to an end.

The building up of Muslim society in Bengal is a long process of gradual growth. The composition of society quite naturally differed from century to century. Two factors were mainly responsible for swelling the ranks of the Muslims in Bengal, the immigration of the foreign Muslim populace and the merging of the local populace into Muslim society after their conversion. The foreigners migrated into Bengal on several occasions. Some came in the wake of conquest, some joined later in the services, some followed the appointment of new governors from Delhi, some trekked in as peaceful settlers in search of livelihood, some came as traders and businessmen and some were fired with missionary zeal. The migration started with the devastating Mongol eruption in their homeland. Many uprooted families from Central Asia settled in the Subcontinent, many of the crowned heads thrown out of their *masnads* took the garb of mendicants; many craftsmen, architects, poets, scholars and painters, teachers and philosophers left their homeland and found shelter in the Indian Subcontinent including Bengal.

It is the Khaljis who formed the first Muslim nobility in Bengal. Later other groups of Turks came into this country till towards the late 13th century Bengal became refuge of the Ilbari Turks driven from Delhi. The Tughluqs who succeeded the Ilbaris opened the way for fresh migration. Their supporters from far off places found an

easy opening to Bengal. One of them, Hajji Ilyas, a Sijistani by origin, united the whole of Bengal under a single sovereign. In the later years, we hear of the importation of Habshi slaves who ultimately occupied the throne for several years. With the occupation of Delhi by the Mughals, the Afghans started coming to Bengal in larger number. The Afghan supremacy in Bengal continued for about half a century, after which with the supremacy of the Mughals, a fresh migration of foreign Muslims started. There came the Iranians and the Shi'a Muslims. The Mughal *Subahdars*, some of whom belonged to the royal blood were highly cultured. Many scholarly persons from Upper India and outside made their homes in this rich province. The increase of oceanic communications between Bengal and Western lands in the 17th century, tempted cultured Shi'as, Persian scholars, physicians, philosophers and traders to come and settle in Bengal. A voyage from Bandar Abbas or Basra to Hugli was much easier and cheaper than the land journey across Upper India, either through the Afghan passes or via the port of Surat. Local traditions also attach some significance to the migration of Arab traders in Chittagong and the growth of a Muslim population with Arab blood in that region. Chittagong, being an important port, the Arab, Persian and many other foreign merchants came there for commerce and trade. It is, therefore, clear that a great number of foreign Muslims migrated to Bengal during the five hundred years or more of Muslim rule. It is not known, how many of them settled in this country and made Bengal their homeland.

On the other hand, the local converts belonged to different ranks in society. The majority seems to have come from the masses, but the higher class people also gradually succumbed to growing force of Islam.²⁶ There were also the children by mixed marriages. Many immigrants, including the rulers, took local wives. The children of such marriages attained rank in society according to their father's status in life. The example of Muhammad Khan, a 17th century Bengali poet, may be cited. His ancestor, a certain Mahisawar, came to Bengal, married a Brahman girl and left behind a line of children who later became governors of Chittagong. Low origin did not offer any barrier in gaining position in society. Nor does there appear to have been any stigma attached to the children of mixed marriages who did not come to form any distinct society of

their own.

The Muslim society in Bengal developed on three important supports: the Muslim ruling class, the Muslim scholars and the Muslim *Sufis*. The latter two groups, including the *Ulama'*, *Ma-sha'ikh* and *Sadat*, constituted the learned class, the *ahl-i-qalam*, as against the *ahl-i-tegh* or the ruling class. All these groups helped the growth of Muslim society in their own way. The most important contribution of the ruling class was that they expanded the Muslim power and consolidated their position and kept Bengal under continuous Muslim rule. The ruling class also encouraged the *Ulama'* and the *Sufis*, built religious institutions and helped the Muslims to keep contact with outside religious centres. The *ahl-i-qalam* group of Muslims contributed even more to the growth of Muslim society. The *Ulama'* or theologians wrote books on Islamic sciences and literature. They paid attention, particularly to *Fiqh*, *Hadith* and *Tasawwuf*, and to Arabic, Persian and Bengali languages. But their main contribution was in teaching the people in Islamic sciences, particularly the *Shari'ah*. The contribution of the *Sufis* covered a wider range. They were not indifferent to political matters but sometimes influenced the rulers in moulding the state policy on Islamic lines. They sometimes even helped in the expansion of political power. But the most important contribution of the *Sufis* was that they educated the people in Islamic principles, helped the poor and destitutes, attracted the local people around them by their religious disposition and strength of character and converted many to Islam. Based on these three supports, the Muslim society developed to such an extent that the Muslims came to occupy a prominent position in the socio-religious life of the Bengal.

It is generally believed that the *Sufis* were instrumental in converting the local people to Islam. Our records, however, supply very little information about conversion.²⁷ The absence of sufficient records evidence should not, however, be interpreted to mean that there were no conversions. Whereas in Northern India, the place under Imperial domination for centuries, Islam was confined to urban centres, in the deltaic Bengal, it captured the rural society. As a result the deltaic Bengal was turned into Muslim majority area. Obviously, the increase in the number of Muslims was largely due to conversions. However, it remains to be seen as to how these

conversions took place and what were the agencies that worked for them. In the context of Northern India, Prof. Muhammad Habib says, "that the acceptance of Islam by the city workers was a decision of local professional groups, and that in making their decisions they were naturally more concerned with mundane affairs and their position in the social order than with abstract theological truths".²⁸

Durate Barbosa says that the heathens daily became Moors to gain royal favour.²⁹ Though the question cannot be answered with certainty, due to want of requisite data, it seems that it is not only the mundane reason that prompted the local people to accept Islam; the social inequalities and caste restrictions, the oppression of the superior castes over the low castes and the Buddhists, then prevailing in the society, must have been the main reasons for conversion. An example of this nature has been preserved in the chapter "Niranjaner Rashma" of the *Sunya Purana*. The chapter depicts the oppression of the superior caste of the Hindus, i.e. Brahmins over the Dharma worshippers, identified with the Buddhists. The oppressed Buddhists invoked Dharma and Dharma in turn retaliated by transforming himself into Yavana or Muslims. The Hindu gods and goddesses have been given Muslim names. The story does not relate to a Muslim conquest nor does it refer to any king or noble. Instead, the reference is made to *Khuda, Payghambar, Bihisht, Muhammad, Adam, Ghazi, Faqir* and *Maulana*. The name of a *pir*, Madar, is also mentioned. It may be assumed, therefore, that the conversion was made by the *Ulama'* and the *Sufis*; it also refers to a mass conversion, conversion of a community; in certain places, Jaipur and Malda being mentioned specially. In those days, society, particularly its lower strata, was not individualistic, rather it was group-based or community-based. The leader controlled his group and the conversion of the leader had a great effect on the group as a whole.

The reasons for conversion could be mundane as well as genuine love for the faith and desire to free themselves from social inequalities and caste restrictions. The last one seems to have played a great part in the case of deltaic Bengal. Islam with its social justice, principles of equality and fraternity, came to the oppressed people as a saviour. And who were their models in the Muslim society to show them the good of social justice, certainly not the kings and

nobles, but the *Ulama*' and the *Sufis*, whose unostentatious simple life in their *khanqahs* attracted the common people. So even if there is not much recorded evidence of conversion, there is enough circumstantial evidence to prove the point and it is in this way only that the large majority of Muslims in the deltaic Bengal can be appropriately explained.

The advent of Islam gave the Brahmanical ascendancy or the caste domination a rude shock and the importance of the superior castes in both political and social life was greatly reduced. Faced with the impending attack of the Turks, the Brahmans and wise men fled from Nadia and took shelter in the outlying parts. They even advised the king Lakshman Sena to leave Nadia, but the king refused to do so. But when they found that the Turks had founded a kingdom and were settling in the country, the Brahmans had no alternative but to return home from their retreats. They could clearly feel that their hold over the society was on the decline. They engaged themselves in reorganizing themselves. It was not only Islam but several other anti-Brahmanical forces, such as Manasa, Chandi and Dharma cults, which were also opposed to the Brahmanical system. These forces were also more amenable to the proselytizing influence of Islam. In their attempt to face these challenges, the Brahmans further tightened their caste rules. "The Brahminical attitude is exemplified by the foundation of the Navadvip school of Nyaya, the composition, of a number of smriti texts by Raghunandan and his contemporaries and general revival of classical culture embodied in the Sanskrit works composed in the Husain Shahi period and the period immediately following".³⁰ This was, however, a negative approach of the Brahmans to the situation which they were called to face. Instead of liberalizing the rules and thus keeping the lower class Hindus away from the influence of Islam, they tightened the caste restrictions and consequently made themselves further isolated from the people. Having lost their pre-eminent position in both politics and society, all that the Brahmans could do or chose to do was to put emphasis on their intellectual superiority. At the advent of Chaitanya Deva, Nadia became a strong centre of Brahmanical culture. It was here that Raghunath Siromani founded the school of Navya and Raghunandan wrote his famous works. But Islamic influence penetrated even into Nadia; Vaishnava poet Jayananda says that the Brah-

mans grew beard, put on socks, carried sticks, handled guns and recited the *Masnawi* in imitation of the Muslims.³¹ How much the influence of the Brahmans over the society declined may be understood from the fact that southern and eastern parts of Bengal remained free from Brahmanical influence. In these regions local cults, Manasa, Chandi and Natha flourished and their followers far outnumbered others. Later the Brahmans might have immigrated into these regions, but Brahmanical influence was always limited due to great popularity of local cults.³²

It was not possible for the Brahmans to keep themselves aloof for long. Living in the same country, contact with the Muslims and the lower class Hindus or Buddhists, whom they treated as 'mlechhas' (untouchable) was inevitable. But the caste rules were so rigid that even association with them and some other social evils injured their caste-purity. Association with Muslims was called *Yavana-dosha* (*dosh* meaning defects), besides *Yavanadosha*, being childless, going to brothel, marrying within one's community, marrying wicked girls, killing Brahmans, committing adultery or fornication, could touch the social life of the Brahmans and entitled them to lose their caste sanctity. Soon there was a reaction among the Brahmans themselves against this negative and suicidal policy. The idea gained ground in some sections that unless the Brahmans could keep pace with the march of time and unless they liberalized their caste restrictions, they would not be able to resist the tide of Islam. This group represented the progressive school and the chief exponent of this school was Sri Chaitanya Deva (1486—1533 A.D.), the founder of the Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Chaitanya Deva was a great reformer, his movement aimed at checking the growing influence of Islam on Hinduism and he put stress on casteless society. On the other hand, some local elements also entered into the fold of Islam. The most important influence of Islam in Bengal, is to be found in the diminishing of superiority of Brahmans, the social revolution within Brahmanism itself, coming to prominence of the local cults like Manasa, Chandi and Natha, and finally the rise of Gaudiya Vaishnavism as a means of saving Hinduism, chiefly with its casteless appeal.

It has been pointed out above that in the Hindu period, the territory now covered by Bangladesh, or by the Subah Bangalah of the Mughals or by Bengal of the British days, did not have a com-

mon name. It was divided into a number of geographical units — Varendra, Radha, Vanga, or later Gauda and Vanga. R.C. Majumdar writes,

The geographical unity of Bengal, too, was not evidently fully realised in ancient times. No common name for the whole province was evolved, although the number of old regional names was gradually being reduced. Even upto the very end of the Hindu rule, Gauda and Vanga denoted not only two distinct geographical divisions but, to a certain extent, also two political entities.³³

We have also stated earlier that the task of uniting the whole of Bengal under one sovereign and evolving a common name was left to a Muslim ruler, Shams-al-Din Ilyas Shah, who first established himself at Lakhnauti and Satgaon. Sonargaon was then being ruled by Fakhr-al-Din Mubarak Shah. But in 1352 A.D. Ilyas Shah occupied Sonargaon also, and thus he became the king of the United Kingdom of Lakhnauti, Satgaon and Sonargaon.³⁴ The Delhi historian Shams-i Siraj Afif calls Ilyas Shah, *Shah-i Bangalah*, and *Shah-i-Bangaliyan* and speaks of his army as *Lashkar-i-Bangalah*.³⁵ Henceforth, the Muslim kingdom of Bengal came to be known as the kingdom of Bangalah and the term 'kingdom of Lakhnauti' came to an end. To the Muslims and foreigners, the kingdom came to be known as Bangalah, whence the Mughal *Subah-i-Bangalah* and the British province of Bengal. Shaikh Nur Qutb Alam, the famous saint of Pandua was called Bangali.³⁶ Bangalah, in this sense also occurs in the well-known couplet of the Iranian poet Hafiz.³⁷ The Arab historians, Ibn Hajar Asqalani and Al-Sakhawi call the country Manjalah (Bangalah). Abd al-Razzaq uses the name Bangalah in connection with exchange of ambassador between Shah Rukh and Bengali Sultan Shams-al-Din Ahmad Shah.³⁸ Babur refers to Husayn Shah and his son Nusrat Shah as rulers of Bangalah,³⁹ the Chinese accounts refer to Pang-ko-la (Bangalah)⁴⁰ and the European writers give the same name Bangala or Bengala. A.H Dani remarks,

Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah was the first sultan who, by his sagacity and political acumen, founded the united kingdom of Bengal and earned for himself the name of Shah-i-Bangalah. It was from his time that the connotation of the word Bangalah changed, and it was thenceforward applied to the whole country of Bengal.⁴¹

The growth of Bengali literature in the Muslim period is a significant event in the cultural history of Bengal. The *caryapadas*, the earliest form of Bengali verses are dated from the 10th to the

12th centuries A.D. Since then no Bengali work is traceable until we come to the period of the Independent Sultans of Bengal. In those days books were written on religious subjects only. The Brahmins considered it sacrilegious to write religious books in a language other than that of the Vedas. The *sudras* has no access to the religious texts. The Brahmanical ascendancy in the Hindu period was, therefore, a strong barrier in the growth of Bengali literature. Secondly, in the Hindu period, the court language was Sanskrit and the rulers and the educated classes were interested in the Sanskrit language only. After the Muslim conquest the court language was changed from Sanskrit to Persian. Persian served as medium for obtaining state services. Muslims found no distinction between a Brahmin and a person having no claim to high birth; all were outside the pale of Islam and were 'heathens'. The lower class people were as much eligible for state services as the Brahmins were, if they were found otherwise qualified. The Brahmins, therefore, lost their position of pre-eminence and could not keep as much control over the society as they used to keep in former days. They could no longer keep the religious texts beyond the reach of the common people. On the other hand, the Muslim rulers, who founded a parallel sultanate, as against Delhi, had to depend largely on the cooperation of the local non-Muslim population. It is, therefore, in the fitness of things that they encouraged the local aspirations. Secondly, Islam does not prohibit learning of any language. The Prophet enjoined his followers to seek knowledge even if it be in China (In China the language is the Chinese, foreign to the Islamic world). By the time the Muslims came to Bengal, their chief languages were Arabic and Persian; so they had no problem of language. In spite of this they encouraged the growth of Bengali language and literature. D.C. Sen writes,

"This elevation of Bengali to a literary status was brought about by several influences, of which the Mohammadan conquest was undoubtedly one of the foremost. If the Hindu kings had continued to enjoy independence, Bengali would scarcely have got an opportunity to find its way into the courts of kings".⁴²

Initially, the Muslim rulers patronized the Hindu poets; the names of Barbak Shah, Husayn Shah, Nusrat Shah, and Muslim officers Paragal Khan and Chuti Khan may be mentioned in this connection. From 16th century onwards, Muslim poets themselves wrote poems in Bengali language. Several hundred books produced

by the Muslim poets in the Muslim period have been discovered. Besides, as an impact of Muslim rule many Arabic and Persian words got mixed up with the Bengali language. The late Dr. S.G.M. Hilali in his *Perso-Arabic elements in Bengali* has shown that the loan words in Bengali from Persian and Arabic would be about ten thousand. Thus the Bengali vocabulary has been enriched under the influence of Muslim rule. The Muslim poets also introduced romantic literature in Bengali. Whereas the Hindu poets chiefly wrote on religious theme centring round gods and goddesses, the Muslims introduced the love-stories, such as Laili Majnun and Yusuf Zulaikha etc.

The Muslim rule influenced the Bengali culture in another direction also. Sir Jadhunath Sarkar elaborates this point in the following manner:

The direct action of the Government, however, fostered our education in another and quite unexpected direction. Todar Mal's organisation of the state revenue service had forced the Hindu clerks and accounts keepers to learn the Persian language, in which all records of this department had henceforth to be written. In Bengal, Todar Mal's elaborate land system (*zabti*) was never applied; but ambitious local Hindus and Muslims (of both of whom the mother tongue was Bengali) were now forced to learn the Persian language in order to get some share in the vastly extended secretariat work of the Mughal provincial administration. In Bengal, the state revenue was collected through middle men or zamindar in the lump (and not as in Upper India from the cultivators directly): hence the accounts were kept in Bengali (the sole language of the peasantry and of the army of local revenue underlings), and therefore before the Mughal conquest very few Bengalis had any occasion to learn Persian. Under Mughal rule the higher posts in the revenue, accounts and secretarial departments were reserved for Muslims and Hindus from Upper India, such as Khatri from the Punjab and Agra and Lalas from the U.P. It was only when Murshid Quli Khan established a local dynasty in Bengal that these high posts passed into the hands of Bengalis, many of whom were Hindus well-versed in Persian composition. Unlike the independent Sultans of Bengal, the constantly changing subahdars of the Mughal times had no occasion to learn Bengali, and hence the agents (*vakils*) of the local zamindars at their courts had to be masters of Persian. Gradually (and notably in the 18th century) Persian culture infiltrated from the subahdar's court to that of the great Hindu Rajahs such as those of Nadia and Burdwan. This is best illustrated by the varied learning of Brarat Chandra Ray Gunakar, the court poet of Nadia. But the Mughal provincial administration was so much more developed than that of the foregoing sultans and ramified into so many branches with the advance of civilisation, that an adequate number of hands could not be imported from upper India, and a large number of Bengalis had to be employed in its middle ranks, and these had to master the Persian language as a qualification for office. Thus

Persian literature and a special school of sufi poetry spread in Bengali Hindu society no less than in Muslim⁴³

Mughal rule also saw enormous growth of Bengal's overseas trade. The huge influx of silver effected a great change in Bengal's economy. During the early Muslim period, Bengal's products could be sold for money to a small extent. At that time the foreign purchasers were Chinese, Malayese, Arabs and Persians. Of the European traders, the Portuguese first came to Bengal. Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Mahmud Shah (1533-38) gave them leave to build factories in Chittagong and Satgaon and granted them some more concessions. In the Mughal period, the Dutch; the English, the French and the Ostend Company of merchants came in large number; they built factories on both sides of the river Bhagirathi and centring round the port of Hughli. These foreign companies brought in huge quantity of bullion, thus giving offers in the hands of Bengali producers and manufacturers. This had far-reaching effects in the country's economy. First, the money circulation rose to a great degree; formerly the Mughal emperor got tributes from Bengal in the form of elephants and rare objects manufactured in Bengal, but now the *subahdars* sent it in the form of cash. Secondly, from now on Bengal could purchase goods from other countries and other provinces of India to an extent inconceivable in former time. Thirdly, money prices and money wages rose sharply in Bengal. This, however, did not mean increase in the real wages of labour, although the upper class people certainly grew richer, possessed more articles of luxury, and Government officials and revenue collecting middle men made money on a larger scale. Fourthly, as a result of greater export of local goods, there was a tremendous rise in the industrial production. A vast market was opened for Bengal's cotton goods, silk yarn, rice, sugar etc. The buyers stood ready with a huge amount of cash in hand for almost any quantity that our producers and manufacturers could offer. The European exporters also organized industrial production in Bengal to make it more efficient and economical. They stationed agents at every mart; made advances (*dadan*) to workmen and artisans; set up workshop at their factories, where local labourers could work under European expert supervision; they imported dyers and "twist-throwers" from their home country to teach local artisans better methods and thus raised Bengal's industrial production both in quality and quantity.

The prosperity was a boon, no doubt, but at the end it proved to be a curse. The European settlements at Chinsura, Chandernagar and Calcutta began to be fortified by the end of the 17th century. Out of these fortified settlements, the English ultimately became the master of the country.

With the introduction of English rule in the country, the Muslims began to lose ground. The Hindu trading community who took advantage of Bengal's overseas trade, cooperated with the English ever since 1757, the year of the battle of Plassey. Mercantile capitalism came with the English, and with it a new social order began to emerge. The Hindus who were already in trade took full advantage of this growing economy of the country. Next came the Permanent Settlement of Lord Cornwallis in 1793 A.D. The Hindus who were already in trade, now became landlords too. These new *zamindars* were completely loyal to the English, and they were made responsible for maintenance of law and order and regular revenue collection. The Hindus, therefore, became the most privileged community in Bengal. They also accepted the English language. They, with their knowledge of English, occupied the government posts when the Muslims were still in a confused state of mind having lost their superiority. The Muslims, on the other hand, boycotted English and thus lost control over the society and became ultimately the backward class, having been thrown out of government employment, which they almost monopolised during the Muslim rule. The non-Aryan Hindus called scheduled caste also suffered equally. The position came to such a point that the Muslims had nothing to do except cultivating lands or weaving in the looms, and the scheduled caste, apart from cultivation, engaged themselves in sundry works, like carpenters, potters, weavers, fishermen, milkmen, barbers etc. The Hindus emerged as the intelligentsia, landlords and moneyed-men and automatically became the leaders in the society. As landlords, they sucked the blood of the tenants and labourers and as moneyed-men they became the bankers and creditors keeping the masses in permanent debt and realizing from the debtors a very high rate of compound interest. The Muslims and lower class Hindus suffered, because mostly they were the tenants, labourers and debtors.

There were reactions against the land system introduced by the English. The first reaction came in West Bengal, when the oppressed

people got a leader in Mir Nisar Ali, popularly known as Titu Mir. He stood against the oppressions of the *zamindars*, but the English government aided the *zamindars* and crushed Titu Mir and his followers. Titu Mir was surrounded in Narikeldanga near Calcutta, where he died fighting valiantly in 1831 A.D. Titu Mir had no army, and no knowledge of military strategy, his resistance symbolized the peasants' first revolt against the landlords, who were mostly Hindus. A few years later, the peasants rose again under the leadership of Hajji Shari'at Allah and his son Dudu Miyan, the Fara'idi leaders. Hajji Shari'at Allah first started the movement, at Faridpur and mobilized the disarrayed Muslims. He tried to eradicate evils from Muslim society, but his son, Dudu Miyan made the organization very militant. His followers, mostly peasants, were given military training. Dudu Miyan declared that the earth belonged to God and no one else had the right to levy tax on land. The peasants refused to pay taxes, and thus came to clash with the government. In the conflict, however, the peasants were ultimately humbled.

There was also reaction in the Hindu society. They thought that as religion in the existing state could not withstand the alien encroachment, they should strengthen their heritage by purifying it in the very sources of their faith. They also began to interpret religion in the context of western civilization. In 1828 Raja Ram Mohan Roy, a Bengali intellectual, founded the Brahmo Samaj. It was a Hindu reform movement denouncing idolatry, polygamy and female infanticide, some of the evils which caused immense harm to the Hindu society. The movement was intellectual rather than popular in its appeal. The group was small but its influence among the western educated middle class was considerably high. Ram Mohan advocated the cultivation of English language, the study of English literature and modern sciences, and replacement of Persian by English as the official language.

There were also other reactions. The indigo movement, the Faqir and Sanyasi rebellion may be mentioned. The indigo planters continued to force the local people to work for them. The peasants refused and were being oppressed, and the oppressions reached to such a climax that the intelligentsia also started agitation. Great writers like Dinabandhu Mitra wrote books depicting the oppressions of the indigo planters. The Faqir and Sanyasi movements of North Bengal created very great problems for the British Raj for

some time. But the most serious of the uprisings was the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857. The Mutiny started in Barackpur, near Calcutta; Dhaka, Chittagong, and some other parts of Bangladesh were also affected, Dhaka mutineers were betrayed and were all executed by fire squads at Bahadur Shah Park. The mutiny, however, did not affect Bengal to the extent it did Northern India. The mutiny gave rise to a political movement; some ousted ruling chiefs tried to take advantage of it and tried to restore their rights, the old Mughal emperor was brought to the scene; the Begum of Bhopal and the Rani of Jhansi joined with all their might, but it failed because there was no single national cause to which the mutineers could appeal. The mutiny could not create a nationwide interest. Sind was quiet, South India and Bengal were not much affected, Nepal rendered valuable service to the English. Sindhia, Patiala, Holker, Jhind and Hyderabad remained loyal to the English.

The English rule brought about some salutary changes. It encouraged commerce and trade and the administration had created an abundance of new professions with social status and influence. The new educational institutions, universities, colleges and schools required teachers, the new legal system required lawyers, the new medicine required physicians. All these gave rise to a middle class. The growth of English and vernacular press helped to organize and circulate thoughts, ideas, plans and programmes. The introduction of railways facilitated the easy and quick movements, the introduction of modern post and telegraphs shortened the distances and helped exchange of ideas. Economically, however, the country consisted mainly of millions of peasants living on subsistence on agriculture and socially it was divided into groups and communities based on different religions and cultures.

By the end of the 19th century, the political movements began to take shape. The western educated people began to feel that they should pay more active part in the country's administration; they were aspiring after constitutional and representative governments about which they had learnt through English education. Some tangible results were achieved before the century was out. Lord Ripon granted a greater and more real share to the local people in the management and superintendence of local and municipal bodies. These bodies were given charge of small public works, education in lower level and some other public duties. Election by rate-payers

was introduced. Though these bodies were under the control of District Magistrates, all Englishmen in those days, the local people got the taste of administration of their own country. About the same time the vernacular press also got some concessions, they could not publish on political and social problems. This middle class movement was a direct result of English education and through English, western knowledge. At last Bentinck's policy of introduction of English bore fruit. The establishment of universities accelerated the pace of middle class movement. India was being united through the English language; formerly the people of different provinces of the British Indian Empire could not understand each other, because there was no common language. Until then the people knew through only oriental languages about their kings, their conquests, religious injunctions and doctrines. But now they could know about Burke, Bentham, Mill and other radical philosophers which inspired them with new ideas. They came into contact with rational thoughts, scientific knowledge and a new concept of law which guaranteed individual freedom and fundamental rights. The climax of these movements was reached when in 1885 the Indian National Congress was formed. In 1906 the All India Muslim League was formed at Dhaka in the Shahbagh Garden. After manoeuvring for some time to collectively struggle for independence from a common platform, under an agreed formula, the parties, however, parted their ways. While the Congress thought that India constituted one nation and asked for Akhanda Bharat, the Muslim League was of the view that the Hindus and the Muslims were two nations and demanded a separate homeland for the Muslim. When in 1947, the British government transferred power, they created two dominions — India and Pakistan.

Bangladesh owes its present geographical entity to the partition of the Indian Subcontinent in 1947 A.D. The Hindu Members of the Bengal Legislative Assembly were given option to vote for partitioning West Bengal from the rest of Bengal and joining India or to merge with Pakistan. They voted for partition. Thus Bengal was partitioned and the present West Bengal province of India seceded from the rest of Bengal. In so doing the Hindu members decided to undo what their predecessors had achieved, after much agitation, the annulling of the partition of Bengal in 1905. The majority Muslim district of Sylhet was likewise given the choice

between India and Pakistan and in the referendum that followed, they voted for Pakistan.

Thus the present Bangladesh occupies the area which in early history was known as Varendra, Vanga and Samatata, or later as Gauda and Vanga. The area covered more or less by ancient Radha was thus cut off from Bangladesh, and this gave Bangladesh "social and cultural homogeneity" and "geographical entity".⁴⁴

NOTES

1. R.C. Majumdar (ed.), *History of Bengal*, vol. I, D.U. 2nd impression, 1963, hereinafter referred to as *HBI*, p. 7.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
3. *Annual Report of the Archaeological Survey of India*, 1930-34, pt. I, pp. 38-39.
4. *HBI*, p. 45.
5. *Indian Historical Quarterly*, vol. VI, 1930, pp. 40 ff.
6. Mandasor inscription in *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, vol. III.
7. T. Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*, vol. II, p. 115.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 188.
9. *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, no. 6, pp. 85-91; *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. X, pp. 375 ff.
10. See *HBI*, pp. 82-83.
11. *HBI*, p. 79.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 89.
13. R.C. Majumdar (ed.), *History and Culture of the Indian People*, vol. IV (*The age of Imperial Kanauj*), p. 44.
14. A.M. Chowdhury, *The Dynastic History of Bengal*, Dhaka, 1967, p. 12.
15. *HBI*, pp. 101-102.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 427-28, note.
19. *Ibid.*, chapters, XI—XII.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 620-21.
21. A. Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal*, 2nd edition, Chittagong, 1985, p. 33.
22. S.H. Hodivala, *Studies in Indo-Muslim History*, Bombay, 1939, p. 4.
23. A. Karim, *op. cit.*, p. 40.
24. Minhaj-i Siraj, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, Calcutta, 1864, pp. 245-46.
25. Barani, *Tarikh-i-Firuzshahi*, Calcutta, 1862, pp. 454, 461; *History of Bengal*, ed. J.N. Sarkar, Dacca, 1948, vol. II, p. 97.
26. A. Karim, *op. cit.*, pp. 190-91.
27. For some examples, see A. Karim, *op. cit.*, p. 181.
28. Introduction to Elliot and Dowson's *History of India*, vol. II, Revised edition, p. 59.
29. *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, tr. M.L. Dames, London, 1921, vol. II, p. 148.

30. M.R. Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal*, Dacca, 1965, p. 196.
31. *Chaitanya Bhagavata*, Adi., 14th.
32. M.R. Tarafdar, *op. cit.* pp. 193-96.
33. *HBI*, p. 621.
34. N.K. Bhattasali, *Coins and Chronology of the Early Independent Sultans of Bengal*, Cambridge, 1922, p. 28.
35. Shams-i Siraj Afif, *Tarikh-i Firuzshahi*, Calcutta, 1890, pp. 114-118.
36. *Bengal: Past and Present*, LXVII: 1948, pp. 32-39.
37. *Riaz-us-Salatin*, Eng. tr., Delhi repr., 1975, pp. 105-6.
38. *Matla' al-Sa'da'ir*. ed. M. Shafi, Lahore, 1940, vol. II, pt. II, pp. 782-83.
39. A.S. Beveridge, *Baburnamah*, vol. I, p. 482.
40. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1895, p. 529.
41. *Sir Jadunath Sarkar Commemoration Volume*, Hoshiarpur, India, vol. II.
42. D.C. Sen, *History of the Bengali Language and Literature*, Calcutta, 1911, p. 10.
43. *History of Bengal*, ed. J.N. Sarkar, vol. II, p. 224.
44. Kamruddin Ahmed, *The Social History of East Pakistan*, 2nd edition, p. XII. He writes "The gods of Rarh are different from those of East Bengal. Shiva, Dharmaraja and goddess Kali are the deities of Rarh. The inhabitants of Rarh worshipped the gods and goddesses of forests. It had a distinct culture which was akin to 'Nishad-Culture' of Chhotanagpur. Human skull dance and Shyama Sangeet are typical examples of the culture of Rarh. The people of Rarh have a tendency to maintain their own way of life, and even the most zealous Aryan Brahmins and Muslim preachers could not convert them to their philosophies and religions. They have a great capacity to absorb foreign ideas without giving up their own". (*Ibid.*, p. XIII).