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RESEARCH ARTICLE

COMPOSITE CULTURE OF MEDIEVAL BENGAL

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Abstract

The conquest of Bengal by Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1200 AD was a significant event in the history of Medieval India. 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 culture in Bengal. Thus, Bengal became the centre of Indo- Islamic culture. In course of time, both the Hindu and the Muslim Community came to contact with each other. In spite of two different cultures in Bengal both they could work secularly to give a beautiful creations of the Bengali society, a good harmony of the two different religious believes - the Hindus and the Muslims which may be called as an inter communal literature as inter communal culture integration of the Muslims and the Hindus in Medieval Bengal. It is known as composite form of culture.

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Introduction

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.¹ This event is significant as well as such event is. Most of the people of Banladesh were compelled to convert into Islamic religion and the entire nation, culture and civilization was transferred by this influence of Muslim invassion.² 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 Bakhtiar'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 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.

To the attempt to furnish a probable answer remains the academic intimacy of this exercise.

What is central to the present investigation is that which is known a "Composite Cultural" relation between the Hindus and the Muslims in the Medieval Bangali society. That Islam had been brought into Bengal by person such as *Ulema*, *Pir- Fakir*, *Gazi- shahid*, *Murshid* etc whose ethnic and environmental background were different from

those of the autochthones, is indisputable fact.³ But for its perpetuation here, in the subsequent stages Islam relied more on its functionaries from amongst the members who came from the erstwhile society than on the non Bengali ruling elite or the theologians. One consequence, deposited Islam survival in Bengal and of its dependence on the local converts is that Islam assumed some local characteristics which would distinguish it from its philogenetic roots. If not in theology but the change is undeniably noticeable in the local Islamic culture, which perhaps would partly explain why a composite culture could involved in Bengali literature.

The over whelming influence of the generative forces which have originated from the functional structural semiotics, affected the Hindus in such as the Muslims. So much so that when each was prepared to accept the other within a perimeter of culture tolerance, a homogenisation process too had started to operate without interruption towards mutual integration in a composite cultural system. Bengali is the language, had emerged in the process as the premier symbol of cultural homogeneity.

Theological literature – *Chaitanya Bhagabat* or *Chaitanya- Mangal*, *Mangal Kavyas*, *Vaisnav Kavyas*, romantic literature (*vidya- sundar*) *kavyas*, translations and some Muslim writings are the major literary prop of Medieval Bengal. The theme, language and social concern address suitability to the demands of our proposition.

The Bengali literature, during Medieval Bengal under reviewed was profoundly influenced by the Neo- Vaishnava Movement initiated by Chaitanya (1486-1533) whose life and doctrine have been reflected on Bengali society.⁴ In the late 15th and the early 16th century, *Vaishnava Kavyas*, composed by Hindu poets, and claimed to have proceeded only the basis of revelation from the local deities with love of human character. One of them was composed by Brindavan Das, a classmate of Chaitanya in Bengali is *Chaitanya- Mangala*. It is certainly the most authentic and perhaps the most popular biography of the great religious leader. It has two historical importances; Istly, though the author regarded Chaitanya as an incarnation of God, he presents Chaitanya as a human being, rather than divine being. Secondly, it gives us interesting details of the social life in Bengal at that time. There are ‘Lyrical tablets’ in the narrative of Brindavan Das and “his sincere devotion and enthusiastic admiration have often imparted a glad to his diction which rescues his expression of sectarian dogma from triviality”.⁵ Another important biography is the *Chaitanya- Charitamrita* of Krishnadas Kaviraj. He looked upon Chaitanya not as an incarnation of Krishna alone, but of Krishna and Radha, in the same person and his treatment of the life of master who from this view points. Here we can find a composition of intermingle relations between Hindu and the Muslims.⁶ A classical example is furnished by his account of the quarrel between Chaitanya and the Muslim Qazi of Navadwipa who forbade the singing *Kirtana* in public. But ultimately, being defeated in the debate Qazi was charmed by the incarnation of Chaitanya and follows him.⁷ *Chaitanya Charitamrita* is regarded by many as the most important work in *Vaishnava* literature. It is “as a biography and as a work of thought it is a landmark in new Indian literature”.⁸ Among other biography of Chaitanya are *Chaitanya- Mangal* of Jyandas and *Gauranga Vijoy* of Chudamaindas. Another creation of *Vaishnava- Kavyas* in Bengali literature deals almost exclusively with *Parakiya- Prem* (love outside wed lock) of Radha and Krishna.

In the late 14th and early 15th century, *Mangal Kavyas*, were composed only by the Hindu poets, and claimed to have proceeded on the basis of revelations from the local deities, the reference to communities other than the Hindus was hostile. It consists of a series of poetical works describing the glories of many popular gods and goddesses, such as *Manasas* (Snake- goddess), *Chandi* (a form of Durga), *Dharma-Thakur*, Shiva and others. In the 14th century, Bijoygupta, Biprodas Pipilai, Narayandev, and Ketakadas Kshemananda were the writers of full length literary texts called *Manasa Mangal*, introduced in their compositions, stories of interaction with the iconoclasts as metathesis.⁹ But this posture of hostility appears to have been replaced by author in the 16th century that was comparatively tolerant. Understanding, realism some authors of *Mangal Kavyas*, namely Manikdutta, Mukundaram Chakrabarty, Madhab Acharya and Ketakadas Kshemananda took the entire Bengali society into their folds. The Muslims, as a community featured of their stories, which is fast they did, even more than it was necessary for the development of the story. Moreover, in their hands Bengali language underwent momentous changes, unhesitant use of Arabic and Persian words, appropriately reduced to vocal harmony, was an instance of the receptivity of the society, gradually it also became reformative and finally it partially smoothened the way towards inter-communal understanding.

The apocalyptic literatures of the Hindus, in the 17th century, lock inter- community questions again. Firstly, Bijay Gupta and then Mukundaram Chakraborty admitted the begin disposition of some Muslim rulers and accepted the Muslims as an important and integral element in the Bengali society. The Kalaketu became a King through the favour of the Goddess *Chandi*. The composition of the *Chandi Mangal Kavyas* may be traced to Manik Dutta, Dvija

Madhab and Kabikankan Mukundaram Chakraborty. In favour of *Devi Chandi* Kalaketu founded a new city in Gujrat. In his *Chandi Mangal* Kabi Kankan described the Muslim settlement in Kalaketu's newly city. He was a keen observer of the Muslim social formation and described them in details with remarkable authenticity.¹⁰

*Kalinga nagar chhari praja laya ghar-bari/ nanajati birer nagar /
Birer paiya pan basila musalman/ paschim dik dila tare||
Aise chhariya taji-sayed mogul kaji/ khirate bir dila badi/
Purer paschim pati balaia Hassan hati/ ekatra sabar ghar- badi||*

[Free Translation: Leaving the city of Kalinga the citizens rushed with their movables and immovable into the city of the Hero. Having revised the pan leaf (an indication of hospitality) from the ruler the Muslims settled down in the western part of the city which was given to them. Mounting their horses the *sayads*, *Mughals* and *Qazis* came to the city where houses were given to them as gifts. In the western side, came to be known as *Hasanhati*, the Muslim live together]

Krishnaram Das introduced in the *Raya-Mangala*,¹¹ which glorifies Dakshina Ray, the god of tiger, the story of a quarrel between a Hindu Dakshina Ray and a Muslim Barakhan Gazi, his purpose however, became clear as soon as a syncretistic deity appeared on the scene with on half as Hindu *Narayana* and the other half in the *Payagambara* (Muslim Divinity) to effect a compromise between the warring personalities. Apocalypses, revelations in dreams and millenarianism, all of which were the products of acute social concern in Bengal had at this stage transcended religious and community closets.

Several texts of *Kalika- Mangal* glorifying the Goddess *Kali*, were written during the Medieval Bengal. The main theme is the secrete love of princess *vidya* and *sundar* and Goddess *Kali* appears in these texts at the very and when the life of *Sundar*, condemned to death is saved by her intercession. The stories of the exploits of different deities, whose final objection was beneficitation, were sung to rouse the community of passion in Bengal for survival. Krishnaram Das's *Sitala* was as angrier with the apostate *Madandas* as with the different Muslim *Qazis*, and both of them were forced to submission in the larger interest of the society. For, their ignoble offences would cause the entire community of in offensive denizens to suffer from a dreadful disease. Poet Konk confessed to have had revelations from the Muslim saint, *Satyapir* and in his *Vidya Sundar Kavya* he also eulogised *Satyapir* instead of *Kali*, as was wont for the fast that his hero. But for the blessings of *Satyapir* could not have won the heroine.

In the late fifteenth century and the early sixteenth century many great epic were translated into Bengali. Reference may be made such as the *Ramayana* by Krittivasa, the *Mahabharata* by Kavindra Parameswara, the court poet of Paragal Khan, the Governor of Chitangong during the reign of Hussain Shah (1493-1519). Similarly, Nusrat Khan, alias Chhuti Khan, son of Pargal Khan, had the *Asvamedha-Parva* of Jaminis Mahabharata translated by his court – poet Srikara Nandi.¹² But the best and the most well –known translation of the *Mahabharata* is the one attributed to Kasiram Das(Deb) which is still the most popular Bengali version. The fact is that during the medieval Bengal in the reign of Islamic ruler both the Hindu and the Muslim poets had arrested their talent forgetting their communal rivalry and their purpose is already reflected as composite culture in society.

Many Muslim poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries after initial hesitation in the preceding centuries, the response framed was reciprocal to the more talented amongst them religious prejudice was not the main concern in their literary preoccupation. They opted out to be secular in trying to introduce secular in their composition. Further, when they tried to contribute to religious literature including the *Vaisnava Padas* their principle motivation was to articulate Bengali spiritual passion, instead of the liturgical needs of one community or the others. In the fifteenth century there was no dearth of reliable literary outputs, though the Muslim posts generally addressed themselves to the need of their community. Shah Muhammad Sagir, Jainuddin and Mojamle treatment of purely Muslim religious theme made them same what sect oral.¹³ But in the sixteenth century experience was different; Shah Birid Khan, Donagaji, Shaikh Faizullah, Daulat Qazi, Muhammad Kabir etc. initiated a new tradition.¹⁴ Under the influence of Sufism, which taught them to be liberal in religious matters, and partly realising the necessity of cultural accommodation with the Hindus they used allegorical themes bordering on romanticism in addition to purely secular romantic, theme in their *Vidya Sundar*, *Layala Majnu* and *Madhumalati* groups of stories. So, a literary tradition was gradually introduced and brought to a position of stability. We may refer the feeling of the Sufis as follows-
“If I worship Thee from fear to hell, burn me in it; if I worship Thee from hope or Paradise exclude me from it , if I worship Thee for Thy own sake, withhold not from me Thy eternal beauty”.^{14(a)}

Realizing the Bhagabat Love, the Sufi poet Yahya Muaadha says-
 ‘About God’s love I Hover,
 While I have breath
 To be His perfect lover
 Until my death’.^{14(b)}

Saiyad Sultan was one of the greatest poets of medieval period. The sixteenth century Muslim society of Chattagram who reflected on their composition. In his *Nabibansh*, Saiyad Sultan described about the inhabitants of the world.¹⁵

The seventeenth century Muslim poets, of whom Daulat Qazi and Saiyad Alwal were the most renowned, had advances the sixteenth century tradition by a few paces towards further secularization of literature. In their treatment of form and content unlike their predecessors, a rare degree of maturity, which had organized from their concern for a cultural integrity, lent to their compositions the quality of classics. Md. Daulat Qazi composed in verse the story namely, *Lorchandrani* or *Satimayna* (1638) with Hindi Characters the story was woven around a fable in which romance and classical tradition of fidelity and devotion of wife were brought to bear in full significance. But he passed away surviving his composition incomplete. The remaining part of his composition was completed by Saiyad Alwal in 1646.¹⁶ The *Padmabati*, the best work of Alwal was written at the instance of Magan Thakur who wanted to have a rendering of Jayasi’s *Padumavat* into Bengali verse. It was composed in 1650 A.D., is however, not a translation, but an abridge version embellished by additions of new episodes to make it more suitable in Bengali Literature. The episode of *Padmavati* is well-known that the conquest of Chitor by Alaud-din- Khalji, who was infatuated by the ‘beauty of Padmini, queen of Ratan Sen. Alwal also rendered into Bengali verse from the Persian romance like *Saiful-mulk Badiuj-jamal*(1658-70), *Sapte (Hapta) Parkar*(1660), *Tohafa* (1663-69), *Sekandarnamah*(1672).¹⁷

Bengali culture consciousness of the Muslim poets further blossomed in another area which was over whelming Hindu i.e. in the composition of *Vaishnava Padas* and they applied their talent to this category of composition with success.¹⁸ In their language even being Muslalmans and having come from East Bengal, they refrained from using either their dialect or non-Sanskrit words which they considered far all practical purposes, as unsuitable and used the standard Bengali that was gradually emerging. The Muslims also wrote on religious themes such as the life of the prophet the tragedy of Hasan and Hussain at Karbala, the lives of the Ghazis, Nabis etc. Some Muslim poets also wrote on such subjects as the *sadhana* and *yogo* system of the Hindus and *Vaishnava* songs. One of them, Saiyad Sultan, who hailed some from Chittagong, in his *Rasulvijaya* included some Hindu gods and *Avatars* among the prophets.¹⁹

During early phase of Muslim rule in Bengal the iconoclasm of some rulers and the government functionaries hurt the Hindu ego and engendered a sense of insecurity in Hindu mind in religion matters. Therefore, in the early Sultanate period the Hindu religious literature in Bengal viewed the Muslim community as alien and approached them with a sense of total rejection, but this attitude had noticeably changed as soon as the Muslim rulers realised at some stage, that the immigrants were the minorities and the bulk of the members of their faith came from different ethnic backgrounds, kingship system and Hindu cultural heritage, and that a policy of tolerance rather than antagonism would enable them to obtain a support structure which would be very stable. The other reasons for this pragmatic official policy were the ambition to assert independence in Bengal and perpetuate dynamic rule. The regenerative forces that were released by such exceptional adjustments eventually pushed both to seek to homogenise society in terms of the immutable aspects of its structure. A major act of success to remove parallelism, caused by religious diversities, in the Bengali society is the propagation of a common language for ally by which it makes easy for the purpose of composite culture in Medieval Bengal.²⁰ Beside this, the distinctive characteristic of the Muslim poets mentioned above all as several others were their adoption of pure romantic love, not associated with any religious episode as the theme of their writings, which is almost absent in those of the Hindu poets.²¹

In this way we may come to the conclusion that in spite of two different cultures in Bengal both they could work secularly to give a beautiful creations of the Bengali society, from this point of view, it was a good harmony of the two kings of Bengalese- the Hindus and the Muslims which may be called as an inter communal literature as inter communal cultural integration of the Muslims and the Hindus in Medieval Bengal .This was the best element of 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 Samgeet*.²² This is certainly an output of the tradition of composite culture of Medieval Bengal. Therefore, we may stress on the point that literature is the medium through which the 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.²³

Notes And References:-

1. Sarkar, J.N,(ed) *History of Bengal*, Vol-II Dacca, 1948, rept. R.B.Publishing Corporation, Delhi,2003.
2. Bandopadhyaya, Asit Kumar, *Bangla Sahityer Sampurna Itibritta*, 1965, p. 19 ,rept., Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 1978.
3. From Nayanchand Fakir's *Balakanama*,
Dilse baithe Ram-Rahim dilse malik Sai
Dilse brindavana mokam manjil sthan vesta Pai
Ghare biathe choudha bhuban mujia alam tare
Chadyukta meghjati Indre baichhe dhare
 Karim, Abdul, *Prachin Puthir Bibaran*, Vol. I & II, p. 138, University of Dacca, 1920-21.
4. Majumder, R.C. (ed) *The Mughal Empire*, Vol. VII, Bombay,1974,p.555 ,third edition, 1994.
5. Sen, Sukumar, *History of Bengali Literature*, p. 96, Calcutta, 1940, Sixth edition, Ananda Publication, Kolkata,1978.
6. From *Chaitanya Charitamrita*,
 - a. *Gram-Samandha Chakrobarty hayamore chacha*
Deno-samandhe haite haya gram-samandhi Sacha
Nilambar Chakraborty haya tomar nana
Se Samndhe hayo tume amar bhagina
 - b. *Shribaser bastra siys daraji yavana*
Robhu tare nija rupa karailo darshan
7. From *Chaitanya Bhagabata*
Ai kripa kara ya tomate rahe bhakati
Anyer ki daya bhisnudrahi ya yavana
Taharo pada padme lailo sharana

 Brindavandas, (ed) Sukumar Sen, Sahitya Academy, New Delhi, 1982, 5th edition, 2015.Cited in Shrif, Ahmad, *Madhyayuger Sahitya Samaj o Sanskritir Rupa*, c1977, p. 103
8. Cited in Sukumar Sen, *History of Bengali Literature*, *op. cit.*, p. 98.
9. Bijay Gupta, *Manasamangal* (ed) Jayanta Das Gupta and Surendra Mohan Ghose, Culcutta, 1931, p. 19.
 Bijay Gupta ,*Manasamangal*, (1481-85) :
Tar bhaye bindusakal Palay
Tarase jahar mathasi dekhe tulair pat
Hate gale bandhi neya Kajir sakkhat
 [Free translation: On account of his (Kaji's) fear the Hindus too to flight. Whoever is found to have had a tulsi leaf on his head in tied hand and throat and is dragged before the Kaji.]
10. Kabi Kankan, *Chandimangal*, Basumati edition, Calcutta, 1963, p.68.
11. Krishnaram, *Raimangal* (ed) Satyanarayan Bhattacharjee, Calcutta, 1958, p.68.
12. Majumder, R.C. *op. cit*, p.560
13. Sen, Sukumar, *Bangla Sahityer Itihas*, Calcutta, 1926, Bandopadhyaya, Asit, *Bangla Sahityer Itibritta*, Calcutta, 1980, pp. 683-803.
14. Sharif, Ahmad, *op.cit*, p.228.
 - a. Bandopadhyaya ,Asit Kumar, *Bangla Sahityer Itihas*, Vol. II (*Chaityanay Yuga*), 1962, rept. 2012-13, Modern Book Private Ltd. Kolkata, p. 338.
 - b. *Ibid*, p.339
15. Sharif, Ahmad, *op.cit*, p.229
Chhari majahan sthane paila chadiveda/
Samveda bramhata pathailo nairakar
Taba jadi vishnur hailo utpan

Zazu veda tahare pathailo nirnjan /
 Tritiya Mahesh jadi Srijan hailo
 Rikveda tan sthane pathaiya dilo
 Chaturtha jadi se hari hailo srijan
 Atharva veda tehane pathaila niranjan
 Ai chadi vedat sakahya dichhe kartar
 Abashya abashya Muhammad vyakta haibar/

[Poet accepted *Brahma*, *Vishnu* and *Maheshwara* and *Vishnu* and *Hari* to be admitted separate personalities.]

16. Bandopadhyaya, Asit Kumar, *Bangla Sahityer Sampurna Itibritta*, Calcutta, 1966, p. 201.

17. Ibid, p.201

18. Extract from some *Vaishnava padas-*

a. Lal Muhamud:

Jamma niye musalmane bancchita haba sricharana
Ami mane bhabina ekbar
Abar lal Mahamude hare Krishna karichhe sar//

[Not even one did I ever consider that being born as a Muslim I am deprived of the blessings of his sacred feet. Now Lal Muhamud has decided and for all to accept Hare- Krishna as his sole religious pre- occupation]

b. Sayad Murtuja:

Sayad Murtuja bhane Kanur Charane
Nibedan shuna Hari
Sakali chariya rahila tua paye
Jiban maran bhari

[Free Translation: Sayad Murtuja prays before kanu's sacred feet; please listen to his prayers. Having renounced everything he remained devoted to you in his life and death].

c. Akbar:-

Jiu Jiu mera manchora gora
Apahi nache apan rase bhora
Oichhana Pahuke yahu balihari
Saha Akbar tare prem- bhikari

[Free Translation: Gora (Krishna) ,you steal my love for centuries and keep on dancing in your own pleasure. If I can reach there I would be blessed. So, Shah Akbar is begging you of your love.]

d. *Ratri pohaiya jaya kokil panchame gaya*

Nidrate paiyachhe bara sukha/
Abhagini baliyare nishi gongailam
Otha ebe dekhi chanda mukha//
Amar mathati khao otha ebe ghare jao
Kakati kariya bali tore/
Ratri protsa haile loke dekhibe tore
Kalakini karibe amare//

[Here poet expresses polite prayer of Radha to Krishna to go home to avoid her naughty/ confession]

19. Majumder, R.C. *op.cit.*, P.562.

20. Ibid, p.562.

21. Ibid ,p. 563.

22. Badopadhyaya, Asit Kumar, *op.cit.* p.209.

23. Ray Chaoudhury, Tapas Kumar, *Inter Communal Culture- Integration in Medieval Bengal: A Study of Congruence between the System of Vocabulary and the System of Attitude,1995.*