

# **Racial Origin of the Muslim Population and their Social Stratification under Bengal Sultanate**

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Many know that chiefly Hindus, including Buddhists and Animists, lived in Bengal before 1200 A. D. The ruling power was in the hands of Brahman Sena dynasty. While an adventurer and ambitious Turk Muslim named Bakhtiyar Khalji defeated Lakshmana Sena, the fate of the population of this region as though started to change. With that, change also came in their religious identity. Muslims, increasing with a slow, but steady figure, were replacing Hindu population. With this increase, the then Bengal, which is now Bangladesh, contains Muslims as the majority of her population and today the Hindus are the minority. Some say, Muslims living here are all no doubt converts from Hindus, though it seems not logical. Some say, all Muslims living here must have had their foreign origins, since some foreign titles, like Shah, Sayyid, Khan belong still to some families and these titles, as we know, belonged once too to some Sultans, Wazirs and high officers. Others say, we are the descendants of Sufi-saints, since they hold the titles, as Pir, Faqir etc. Discourse on this issue also exists among the researchers. To know the truth, we should analyze the racial origins of Bengal Muslims of Sultanate period. Muslims of that period were of two kinds----immigrants from different Muslim countries and local converts. Now, discussion on these two types will continue in the following.

## **Muslim Out-comers**

Historians count the years from 1200 to 1576 as Sultanate period in Bengal. In that time, uncountable Muslim out-comers rushed to this green land. Nationally, most of them were Arabs, Persians, Turks, Abyssinians and Afghans. Generally, three kinds of people came here---conquerors, preachers and traders.

**Conquerors and Rulers:** Either at the end of 1204 or in the beginning of 1205, Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji, originally who was a Turk, invaded Nadia<sup>1</sup> and defeated King Lakshmana Sen. Later he established his rule in Lakhnawati (Gaud). From that time till 1338, various tribes of Turks sat on the throne of this rich land.

Sultan Ilyas Shah and his descendants, who remained in power as independent Sultans of Bengal with great credit and success, were Iranians. From 1487-1493, four Habshis, i.e. Abyssinians reigned this region for 6 years. Though there was a controversy on their lineage, Sultan Ala-al-Din Husain Shah and his dynasty were identified as Arabs.<sup>2</sup> Lastly, Afghans held the power of Bengal for 38 years until Akbar conquered Bengal.

The descendants of all these sultans settled themselves around Sonargaon, Satgaon and Lakhnawati. Also, their *wazirs* (ministers), *amirs* (nobles), other high officers and

soldiers were mostly from their followers, who accompanied them at the time of the invasion of Bengal, and later settled themselves in this land.

Among these Sultans, some, who were apt warriors, swelled with high ambition, conquered new areas besides their own regions and appointed new governors, high officers and soldiers from their own people in newly captured land. All these foreigners populated vast areas from the far villages to the capital cities. Sultan Mughith al-Din Yuzbak, (1251-1257) the brave and good ruler of Lakhnawati, conquered the whole Radha and Firuj Shah (1301-1322) occupied Banga, Satgaon, Mymensingh, and Sylhet. In the ruling period of Fakhr-al-Din Mubarak Shah (1338-1349), Chittagong came under the Muslims' hands for the first time. Faridpur was conquered by Jalal-al-Din Muhammad Shah, Khulna-Jessore, by Khan Jahan, the commander of the Army of Sultan Nasir-al-din Mahmud Shah and Kamrup-Kamta by Husain Shah. The reign of Kamrup was extended from the river Karatoa to the river Mansha and Kamrup was on the east to the river Brahmaputra.<sup>3</sup> All these areas, later distinguishably populated by Muslims, prove one thing that the foreign Muslims and their next generations started to inhabit this land as locals.

**Preachers:** Now it is clear that even before the advent of Bakhtiyar Khalji in Bengal, Arab and Persian preachers with their own racial traders came to this land by sea-route.<sup>4</sup> Later, in lieu of ever going back to homeland, they started to live generations after generations around coastal areas and, to some extent, here and there of Bengal.

For instances, Bayazid Bustami (874 A.D.) in Chittagong, Sultan Mahmud Mahisawar (1047 A.D.) at Mahasthan in Bogra, Muhammad Sultan Rumi (1053A.D.) at Madanpur in Mymensingh and Baba Adam (1158-1189 A.D.) at Bikrampur in Dhaka.<sup>5</sup> All these saints left enough traces of their coming to the above mentioned places in pre-Islamic Bengal.

Most of the Sultans patronized sufi-saints-ulama as well as took their advice in administration. Their positions were high in the society as the symbols of purity and guardians of Sharia (The laws of Islam).<sup>6</sup> For this, many sufi-saints came to this land during Sultanic period and started to live here permanently.

In the period of Sultan Firuj Shah, Sufi Hajrat Shah Jalal with his 313 followers came from Turkey at first to Satgaon, then went to Sylhet. From that time till his demise, he stayed in Sylhet with his great influence on people. While Fakhr-al-Din Mubarak Shah was on the throne of Sonargaon, 12 Aulias (saints) came to Chittagong for the preaching of Islam. The names of three famous Sufis, contemporary of Sultan Ilyas Shah, whom he revered heartily, were found as Shaikh Akhi Siraj-al-Din Usman, his disciple Shaikh Ala-al-Haq and Shaikh Raja Biabani.<sup>7</sup> Ala-al-haq with his family settled himself here. His son Shaikh Nur Qutb-al-Alam was an influential person in his time. It proves that other sufi-saints also must have found this place safe for their permanent inhabitation.

**Traders:** Even before the adventurous foot-step of Bakhtiyar Khalji in this country, Arab and Persian traders came by sea-route in the coastal areas of Chittagong.<sup>8</sup>

The rich surplus agricultural and industrial products paved the way for flourishing trade and commerce in Bengal attracting traders from outside. A great number of Arab, Persian and Turk merchants came to Bengal immediately after the conquest of Nadia by Bakhtiyar Khalji and later settled themselves keeping the bridle of trade and commerce in their hands strongly.<sup>9</sup>

From 1338 to 1538, in these two centuries, Sultans of Bengal were no more under the authority of Delhi's. Those days, being enthusiastic by the warm welcome of these independent immigrant Sultans, flocks of many Muslim out-comers of all kinds, such as, merchants, traders, preachers, soldiers, ulama-mashaikhs, adventurers etc. gathered in this country<sup>10</sup> and started to inhabit from one generation to another.

### **Instances of Converts**

Converted Muslims came from Hindus, Buddhists and Animists. Hindus were of generally two classes---Upper and Lower.

#### **Upper Class Hindus**

A few Brahmans accepted Islam either willingly, which probably didn't occur frequently, or by the pressure of any kind, which was apparently dominant. For instance, King Ganesh was compelled to convert his son 'Jodu' to Muslim only being afraid of losing power. He was in the threat of attack by the Sultan of Jaunpur, named Ibrahim Sharki. Then, Nur Qutb-Alam, a powerful saint, who had high contact with Sultan Ibrahim Sharki, gave him an ultimatum either to take Islam or to take dreadful fate of being overthrown from the throne. So, in lieu of taking Islam by himself, he helped his son to be converted.<sup>11</sup>

Another person named Kalapahar was the famous general of Afghan Sultan Sulayman Karrani (1565-1572). He was before a Kayastha and later a converted Muslim.<sup>12</sup>

#### **Lower Class Hindus**

Lower class people outnumbered the upper class in conversion, which occurred in a few cases by coercion, but in many cases by influence and willingly.

#### **Animists**

Tribal people, who believed in animism, also changed their religion in a considerable number. For instance, on the way of his Tibet expedition, Bakhtiyar Khalji captured a man of Mech tribe and converted him giving a Muslim name 'Ali'. Then, three tribes, such as, Koch, Mech and Tharu, lived in the foot of Himalayas towards the north of Bengal.<sup>13</sup> They were animists, but turned into Muslims, as thought to be, by the influence of Ali Mech.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Buddhists**

Sena dynasty, which started its journey from 1095, began to eradicate Buddhists from Bengal persecuting them in a great number.<sup>15</sup> This is why, while Muslims came to power

bringing the end in the Sena rule, Buddhists too accepted Islam willingly, wishing to survive being free from the oppression of Brahmins.

### **Arguments for converts**

Hindu caste system took shape on the basis of a Law book, written by Aryan priests between 200 bc and 100 ad, named Manu Smriti. This caste system, rigorously obeyed before, divided Hindu society into 4 classes, at the top of which were Brahmins, i.e. the priests, who were considered as earthly Gods. Second position was for Kayasthas, the warriors. Vaisyas, third in rank, were farmers and merchants. Sudras, the fourth, were laborers, mainly servants of Brahmins. There was another group out of these four, considered as classless and called formerly untouchables, now Harijans, who did and do the worse work of the society. Untouchables were aborigines of India.<sup>16</sup>

In Sultanic period, Hindu society was tormented under this caste-system. From the historical study, it seems that low-born Hindus and untouchables embraced Islam much more in number hastily than the upper class. Also, Many Buddhists accepted Islam,<sup>17</sup> since they were under the torture of the society and probably outnumbered the Brahmins in conversion. Arguments in favor of this statement are much strong.

1. History says that in every age, priests of all religions stood against any kind of conversion since they considered themselves as the shields of their sacred religions. So, it is the duty of a priest to keep an eye on the matter that no body can slip out from his own religion, which is of course a treachery with God. Brahmins used to lead the ceremonies of worship, having the top position in the society with economic solvency. In this case, while Muslims were snatching their positions, they must have been filled with anger, which, in turn, made them rigid and impenetrable to Islam. So, usually they were a few in number in regard to resignation to Islam and so were the Kayasthas. Even in British period, when a large number of Brahmins and Kayasthas, being highly educated, got the higher posts in administration, even in that fertile time, they didn't convert themselves to Christians as much as were expected. But their doing so was much more reasonable in those days than in Sultanic period.

2. Vaisyas, who were by heredity farmers and traders, usually came in contact with Muslim Sufis and traders. This contact influenced greatly upon their conversion. The same was true for Sudras, the laborers, who had to serve for all class Muslims ranging from Sultans to soldiers.

3. People, living in intolerable social torture, extreme economic misery and deep darkness of illiteracy, have tendency to be converted the most. So many untouchables took Islam as blessings.

\*Two factors were responsible behind conversion:

**Preachers' Activities:** Christians have built missionaries worldwide for the purpose of the increase of their own people. In such case, they are very successful, since the major

religious people in the world are now they and still they have continued the process. In Bangladesh, a remarkable numbers of the tribal people are now Christians, which has been possible only by the activities of Christian Missionaries in those areas.

In Pre-Islamic and Sultanic period, many Sufi-saints with their disciples came to Bengal as well as in the whole India. Their honest life-leading, immaculate countenances and refined manners, some with the ability of performing miracles, easily attracted ordinary people. For instances, a great number of common people in Bengal accepted Islam at the hands of Sufi Shaikh Jalaluddin Tabrezi (d.1225), Shah Abdullah Kirmani in the thirteenth century, Akhi Sirajuddin (d.1357) and Shah Jalal in the period of Sultan Firuj shah. <sup>18</sup> It is assumed that most of those converts were from low caste Hindus and Buddhists.

Then, low castes, untouchables and Buddhists were going through social injustice, inequality and harassment, which provoked them to come out of Hinduism by their resignation to the new religion. Muslim saints pronounced the enchanting words that all human beings are equal in the eye of Islamic law and these words had a magical touch on the contemporary people's minds. In 1981, about five thousand untouchables in Tamil Nadu converted themselves to Islam, <sup>19</sup> because of being grilled under the caste system. It might happen in Bengal too in Sultanic period.

**The longing for administrative posts:** Those days, all the higher posts were occupied by Muslims, ranging from Sultans to soldiers. There was another meaning of being colored with Islam, i.e., the better chances in administrative posts, though Hindus also were given the higher posts in the period of some Sultans. But there are evidences that all Sultans patronized saints and Muslims as well. So, it can be inferred that they were not such liberal as we mean today, i.e., they loved to see their own religious people outnumber others everywhere. In this case, low class Hindus, of course, changed their religion for their better future.

### **Discourse on who the majority are**

Historical accounts regarding conversion in Bengal in Sultanic period are not enough. This is why, our conclusions always raised debates and doubts among the scholars, who tried to opine everything in their own ways. Though we can't claim our own opinions as indisputable, at least can hope that our arguments and reasons must have taken us near the truth.

According to H. Beverly, the conversion of the numerous low caste people to Islam, being resulted from the 'exclusive caste system of Hinduism', was the reason of the increase of Muslims in this territory. <sup>20</sup> That means, he thought, converts were the majority among the Muslims of Bengal.

On the basis of the measurement of nasal height, H.H. Risley opined in 1982 that Bengal Muslims were actually converts from the lowest classes of Hindus. <sup>21</sup> That is, he indicated the untouchables.

But Risley forgot that Abyssinians, with their many features similar to non-Aryans' including short nose, also came to Bengal numerous in Islamic period and made this place their safe habitations.

Rubbee refuted Beverly-Risley theory saying that the majority of Bengal Muslims is the new generations of foreigners. Muslim Rulers always transferred their capital from one city to another, namely Gaud, Rajmahal, Dacca, Murshidabad. Those cities have major Muslim population and those people are none but the descendants of those ruling races, once in power.<sup>22</sup>

R.C. Majumdar argued that conversion by coercion helped spread Islam among the people of this region. On the contrary, M.A. Rahim emphasized on both conversion of low-caste Hindus and migration of Muslims from outside.<sup>23</sup>

Muhammad Mohar Ali believed that Muslims of Bengal were largely immigrants and partly local converts. Converts were mostly from highest classes of Hindus including lowest classes too, as well as Buddhists and others.<sup>24</sup>

Analyzing all above arguments and historical accounts, it seems that in Sultanic period, immigrants outnumbered local converts. So, foreigners were the majority. And converts came mostly from low-class Hindus as well as Buddhists and others. But a few converts came from Brahmans and Kayasthas.

Instances of mass conversion were not found. Conversion occurred slowly. M. Mohar Ali estimated that the rate of conversion was 15% of total locals in more than five hundred years.<sup>25</sup> So, it can be inferred that less than 3% of the population embraced Islam in a century!

Many Muslim Families, bearing racial titles still living in many parts of Bangladesh, prove that they are descendants of their foreign forefathers, who came from different Muslim countries, such as Arabia, Yemen, Afghanistan, Asia Minor, Iran, Turkey etc. Examples of such titles are Khaja, Khan-panni, Mirza, Sayyid etc.<sup>26</sup>

### **What the truth is...**

It happened in many places of the world that immigrants, once the minority, became the majority occupying a land and, being pushed back, the aborigines either terminated or became pariahs. These examples are, in front of everyone's eyes, Red Indians in America and aborigines in Australia. In Sultanic period, it happened too in Bengal, though slight differently. Muslim migrants from different Muslim countries populated, not overpopulated, Bengal at the beginning of Islamic period. Gradually their number increased by their descendants and a little bit by converts. Yet, then, as hypothesized, half of the population was Muslims in India in the mid-eighteenth century. After 1947, by the migration of Muslims from west Bengal to the East and the reverse for Hindus reasoned the swelling of Muslim population in this country. But racial originality has already gone by this time by inter-racial marriage between local converts and immigrants. Also, in

British and Pakistani period, so many social and political events occurred resulting in illegal births that it is very difficult to search fresh racial origins for Bengali Muslims without including and analyzing those events. So, as we are now mixtures, how we can say, which race or races, we really belong to. This is why, A.A. Ghuznavi said that in 1901, 20% of Muslims were descendants of foreign settlers, 50% were mixtures of foreign blood and 30% converts. And he said rightly, 'perhaps the majority of the Mohamedans of the present day have the mixture of foreign blood in their veins though that might have undergone a great many dilutions'.<sup>27</sup>

## **Social Strata of the then Muslim Society**

Though, according to Islamic Law, all human beings as the creatures of one almighty Allah are equal, which the preachers propagated then, the real picture was different. The Muslim society was apparently divided into two classes, as, the upper and the lower. This could, in no way, be resembled with the caste system of Hinduism, rather took a unique form. Also, there presented the middle class, still undefined by other researchers. All these are being discussed below.

### **The Upper Class**

This class chiefly belonged to the Sultan and his high officials, given the most important and responsible charges of many departments. No doubt, the top position was reserved for the Sultan, who exercised unlimited power and enjoyed a pompous and luxurious life, as the symbol of both awe and respect before the common people.<sup>28</sup> The poet Krittivasa said that he had to cross nine halls to meet his contemporary Sultan, which indicates how away he lived from ordinary life. Among the high officers, his next position went to Wazirs (the ministers) of different departments, such as, revenue, finance, military, external affairs etc. The Sultan awarded some of them, analyzing their credibility and capability, by giving the posts of provincial governors. The nobility, known as Amirs, who always surrounded the Sultan as showy ornaments, had and could exert influence on the selection of Sultans for the throne. This is the reason they got high dignity in Sultan's court as well as in the society. Besides, the commanders of various contingents or campaigns, the principal revenue collector titled Sar-I-Gomastah, the Head Qadi as Chief Justice, appointed in the capital city, all these were highly dignified persons in Sultanic period.<sup>29</sup>

A large number of immigrant merchants, who lived in towns and cities then, were included in the upper class of Muslim Society. Some of them often held important governmental posts.

These wealthy people usually inhabited in towns and cities and enjoyed luxurious lives. They lived in brick-built houses, ate delicious food, in ceremonies special preparations like polau, biriani, kurma, kalia, kopta, kabab etc (all foreign Muslim food habits), wore garments of high quality and adorned them with jewelry. Generally, the rich kept at least 3-4 wives at the same time, though sometimes the number exceeded the usual.<sup>30</sup>

Not for wealth, but for their spiritual images, as the representatives of God, Sufi-saints, and Ulama were also reverend to all, though they also enjoyed economic solvency, being patronized by all, specially by the Sultan himself. But their life-style was quite simple with no grandeur in attires, and always stayed away from any earthly greed and sin. The ulama, which meant the learned men, were the interpreters of Sharia, i.e., the Islamic Law. Their work was not only to teach people and train the judges, but also to provide advice for the Sultan in his important administrative affairs, in which they played vital roles.<sup>31</sup>

\*While Delhi Sultan Firuz Shah Tughlaq was in his campaign against Bengal, he issued a proclamation in 1353, which witnessed that various categories of dignified persons were present in the contemporary Muslim society of Bengal. Those were, according to the order of precedence, as follows.

1. Sayyids (descendants of the Prophet's Family), ulama and mashaikhs (the Islamic doctors).
2. Khans, Maliks, umara, sadrs, akabir and Ma'arif and their suite.

The titles of Khan and Malik were often awarded to high officials, as ministers, generals etc. Umara is the plural form of the term 'Amir', which meant nobles. Sadrs, Akabir and ma'arif were also high officers in charge of different departments.

3. Zamindars, muqadims, mafruzman, malkan and the like  
These people were engaged in the administration and the collection of land revenue.
4. Hermits and saints.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Middle Class**

All subordinate officers with less important duties under the high officials could be sided to this class, such as, the ordinary soldiers including the cavalry, the infantry (called as Paiks), the navy and the elephant corps, the local and village revenue collecting agents and the Qadis under the head Qadi. Dihidar was the village revenue collector and Poddar worked as both the revenue collecting agent and the money-lender, both subordinate officers to Sar-I-Gomastah (Principal revenue collector). But during Husain Shahi period, the revenue collecting agents changed to Talukdars and Majmuadars.<sup>33</sup> These are the few instances and anyone can find as many as possible.

### **The Lower class**

Farmers, weavers, laborers, etc. all gathered in this group. Also, people of various occupations, who lived mostly in rural areas, grew up to the fullest at the end of the sixteenth century. These professionals were pithari (cake-seller), Kabadi (Fish-seller), Kagazi (the maker of paper), rangrej (the cloth-dyer), goala (milk-seller), jola (weaver),

mukeri (cart-puller), kasai (butcher), sanakar (the maker of looms), darzi (tailor), hajjam (those who circumcised the male-children) etc.<sup>34</sup>

According to M. Mohar Ali, immigrant Muslims used to do these jobs, which later went on from father to son by heredity.<sup>35</sup> But most of these occupations were very old typed and prevalent in this region for a long time. A very few of them might have been introduced by the foreigners, such as, the work of hajjam. Analyzing the above professions, it can be correct to conclude that, the lower class Muslims were mostly from converts, though some foreigners were involved in agriculture too, since there are instances in the history.

But their social life was as ordinary as before, though the economic condition of people was rather good, but no splendor touched their thatched hut, usually made of bamboo and wood in rural areas and covered with two or four slanting roofs.<sup>36</sup>

### **What is the New?**

From the above study, the new what are found are as follows----

\*Both Hindu caste system and Muslim class-system, though then undeclared, but still present, were formed on the basis of occupations.

\*Social mobilization was impossible in the then Hindu society, i.e., while an untouchable could never be a Brahman, there were reports about Muslims that once an Abyssinian slave, later he became the Sultan of Bengal. Also, a lower caste Hindu could never marry a Brahman, but Muslim Sufis often married converted girls.

\*The regional governors had sometimes, if not often, direct touch with ordinary locals,<sup>37</sup> which indicates that the upper class was not absolutely out of the reach of the common.

\*The lower class, who lived in towns and cities, used to imitate the upper class in their all affairs, even in the styles of dress,<sup>38</sup> which means that the rich were the symbols of grandeur to the ordinary. That means, these two classes were distant from each other on the basis of economic and political status.

\*Since no distinction on the basis of race, color, or country was allowed to Islam, this didn't exist; rather another kind of distinction in respect of merits and qualifications was clearly found in administration, i.e., in the upper class.

\*None of the common, either local converts or immigrants, treated each other as inferiors, rather kept good relation to themselves, though there was a distance between the government and the mass.

\*The high ranking Muslims, such as qadis, muftis, ulama, religious faqirs etc., who merged themselves in the common people living in village, had direct contact not only with the villagers, but also with Sultans and his officials. One of Ulama, appointed as

Imam for the supervision of regular prayers in Mosques, but called as Mulla, played the head role in a village in important ceremonies.<sup>39</sup> He was the part of the villagers, yet enjoyed the high respects. So, these respectable persons had different position in Muslim society.

\*Ordinary people said five times prayers in the same mosques, sent their children to the same makhtabs for education and put on the dresses of the similar Islamic styles.<sup>40</sup> All these Islamic customs took those people closer to each other eliminating any kind of distinction among them.

Therefore, Muslim class system never reached that stage, where it could become the means of exploitation in Sultanic Bengal that we found in the present society of Bangladesh.

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