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Transformation of Bengal after Arrival of Muslims

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Abstract

The study explores the transformation of medieval Bengal with the arrival of Muslims, marking the dawn of a Golden Age. Bengali Muslims, now the second-largest Muslim ethnic group globally, integrated into the region's social fabric through immigration starting from the 8th century, accelerating after 1204. Immigrant Muslims and Muslim rulers, after 1204, connected Bengal with the benefits of the Islamic Golden Age of the medieval period. These immigrants, driven by religious, political, and economic motivations, established a substantial Muslim community and introduced Islamic principles that reshaped governance, justice, education, socio-economic conditions, trade, literature, and architecture in Bengal. The peaceful coexistence of immigrant Muslims, converted Muslims, and local Bengalis under Muslim rule fostered a multiethnic society enriched by Islamic cultural elements. The research delves into the gradual Islamization process in Bengal, characterized by the integration of Islamic customs and values into the existing social fabric. In addition, it examines the existing socio-economic condition of Bengal before the establishment of Muslim rule in Bengal. It also highlights the pivotal role of mosques and educational institutions in promoting Islamic teachings and fostering cultural exchanges. By analyzing primary and secondary sources, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of Bengal's evolution during this period, emphasizing the motivations behind Muslim territorial control and the defining characteristics of the era. Despite the scarcity of precise historical records, the findings contribute to the broader scholarship on Bengal's history, illustrating how the integration of Islamic elements led to a period of prosperity and cultural richness in medieval Bengal.

Key words: Muslim Bengal, Transformation, Islamization, Medieval Bengal, Golden Age, Identity, Culture, Socioeconomic Development.

Introduction

Bengali Muslims constitute the second-largest Muslim ethnic population in the world after the Arabs.[1] During the medieval period, Muslims who migrated to Bengal became integrated into the existing social fabric of the Bengali nation. People from

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[1] Richard V. Weekes(ed.), *Muslim Peoples: A World Ethnographic Survey*, 2nd ed., Vol. 1 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1984). p. 137.

diverse backgrounds, such as Arabs, Turks, Afghans, Mughals, Syrians, Persians, and others, flocked to Bengal with varied expectations and a strong sense of religious mission. Consequently, the activities of the immigrants were deeply influenced by their Muslim identity, where they actively worked to propagate their religion along with their other economic efforts. From 1204 onwards, over five centuries of Muslim rule significantly contributed to the formation of a substantial Muslim community in Bengal and the establishment of Islam's dominance within the public sphere. Throughout this period, Bengal experienced the rule of various Muslim rulers from different dynasties, including the rulers of the Delhi Sultanate[2], the independent Bengal Sultanate, the Mughal Empire, and others. Despite fluctuations, the Muslim Bengal is intricately tied to the enduring Muslim governance of the region, marked by noteworthy advancements across governance, justice, knowledge, socio-economic development, trade and commerce, art, literature, and architecture.

In a short span of time, Prophet Mohammad (s.) succeeded in establishing a society that revered and believed in Allah, upheld moral values, prioritized justice and equity, emphasized education and learning, and was marked by compassion, love, brotherhood, solidarity, and cooperation.[3] This exemplary role of the model of Prophet Mohammad (s.) provided all the essential components for the subsequent nations of the world who accepted the principles of the Prophet, which was the foundation of the Golden Age of the Muslims in the world. Muslims are religiously encouraged to exert their utmost effort to improve living conditions and resolve any challenge they face.[4] Nevertheless, the degree of success is intrinsically tied to the value placed on human beings, a pivotal factor in every decision-making. The principles were employed to foster an honorable and inclusive social existence that welcomed valuable contributions regardless of era and situation in the world. It is widely acknowledged that the period spanning from 750 AD to the late 16th century represents the Golden Age of the Muslim Empire. As the Muslim rulers conquered Bengal and began implementing Islamic principles in the region from the thirteenth century onward, it is evident that their presence and rule became a significant link connecting Bengal to the Muslim Empire's prosperity, ushering in the benefits of this Golden Age to the land.

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[2] Delhi Sultanate was a principal Muslim sultanate in north India from the 13th to the 16th century, Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia,"Delhi sultanate", Encyclopedia Britannica, March 28, 2024.

[3] Mansouri Abdelhak, "The Muslim Society During the Life of the Prophet Mohammed and After His Death", in *The State of Social Progress of Islamic Societies*, Ed. Habib Tiliouine and Richard J. Estes (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), pp. 3-23.

[4] Ibid.

Different authors offer varying interpretations to illustrate the concept of a 'Golden Age'. According to the Britannica Dictionary, it denotes a period marked by significant happiness, success, and accomplishments.[5] Meanwhile, the Cambridge Dictionary defines it as a period in the past, sometimes imaginary, of great happiness and success.[6] The era commonly referred to as the "golden age" of Islam spanned from the 9th to the 10th century, marked by the assimilation of the Greek scientific heritage; this period extended through the 13th to the 14th century, witnessing the full blossoming of genuine Islamic science.[7] The period is notably associated with the reign of the Abbasid caliphs until 1258 and the subsequent Timurid Renaissance, which were essential within the context of the Muslim Golden Age. Modern historians have extended this period's boundaries to the late 16th century, coinciding with the expansion of Muslim territories through the use of gunpowder.[8] The term 'Golden Age' often encompasses various dynasties and empires, primarily referring to the Abbasid Caliphs, the Ottoman Empire, the Safavid Empire of Iran, and the Mughal Empire of South Asia. Muslim Golden Age has been marked as a source of significant pride for Muslims globally. Even today, Muslims anticipate the revival of this Golden Age with the hope that it will bring about a resurgence of Islam, re-establishing it as a prominent cultural and religious force in the world.[9]

It is important to note that the transformation of Bengal to the process of Islamization was gradual and complex, and it involved interactions and coexistence between different religious and cultural groups. The spiritual status of Bengal before the advent of Islam was marked by the rich tapestry of indigenous beliefs, Hinduism, and remnants of Buddhism with a diverse array of practices and traditions. The arrival of Muslims in Bengal introduced a new dimension to the existing religious landscape and culture. The eastward expansion of Islam from Arabia was facilitated by the prevailing perception of Arab Muslims regarding India as the land of dreams, legends, and forsaken deities mentioned by the Greek Traveler and Geographer

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5 "Golden Age," in *The Britannica Dictionary*, August 30, 2022, https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/golden-age.

6 "Golden Age," in *Cambridge Dictionary*, August 30, 2022, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/golden-age.

7 George Saliba, *A History of Arabic Astronomy: Planetary Theories During the Golden Age of Islam* (New York University Press, 1994). p. 65.

8 David A. King, "The Astronomy of the Mamluks", *Isis,* Vol. 74, No. 4 (December 1983), pp. 531–55.

9 Ahmed Renima, Habib *et al.*, "The Islamic Golden Age: A Story of the Triumph of the Islamic Civilization," in *The State of Social Progress of Islamic Societies*, Habib Tiliouine and Richard J. Estes (ed.), (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2016), pp. 25-52.

Megasthenes (290 B.C).[10] This perception was carried by Arab tribes traveling along the traditional trade routes through the Arabian Peninsula, facilitating trans-regional commerce. This was made possible by the complex relationships among nomads, farmers, and trading communities on the peninsula, which maintained connections among the neighboring regions.[11]

The historical roots of Muslim influence in Bengal can be traced back to the establishment of commercial and religious ties by Arab Muslims with the region. Renowned for their maritime expertise, Arabs played a pivotal role in shaping the maritime landscape. The historical narrative unfolds in the 8th century when the illicit seizure of an Arab mercantile vessel off the coast of Sind triggered a retaliatory expedition led by Muhammad Bin Qasim. This campaign resulted in the conquest of Sind and adjacent territories in 712 AC. Following the Muslim Arab conquest of Sindh, the Indus River functioned as the natural eastern boundary for approximately three centuries. This juncture marked a transformative epoch for Islam and the Arabs, laying the groundwork for the gradual expansion of Islam and the establishment of Muslim political authority in the Indian subcontinent. Over time, these endeavors extended across the entire South Asian coast, encompassing regions such as Bengal, Burma, Malaysia, and Indonesia and stretching as far as China.

During the early days, Muslim immigrants settled in major Bengal cities such as Gaur, Satgaon, Pandua, and Sonargaon. They were mainly comprised of traders, travelers, and Muslim preachers. As time passed, the demographics expanded to include individuals from various professions, including soldiers, administrators, and scholars. During the period of the independent Sultanate (1338-1538), Bengal's ties with northern India became more distant. However, following the Mughal conquest in 1576, a renewed wave of immigrants from north India settled in the deltaic region of Bengal.[12] The infusion of Islam and the arrival of Muslims into Bengal had a transformative and favorable influence, leading to a period of socio-economic development, educational advancements, architectural and literary progress, the establishment of advanced legal and administrative systems, and the flourishing of

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[10] Arrian *et al.*, *Ancient India as Described by Megasthenês and Arrian; Being a Translation of the Fragments of the Indika of Megasthenês Collected by Dr. Schwanbeck, and of the First Part of the Indika of Arrian* (Calcutta: Tancker, Spink, 1877).

[11] Jamal Malik, "Chapter 1 Muslim Expansion: Trade, Military & the Quest for Political Authority in South Asia (Approx. 700–1300)," in *Islam in South Asia* (BRILL, 2020), pp. 29–75.

[12] Richard M. Eaton, "Who Are the Bengal Muslims? Conversion and Islamization in Bengal," in *Understanding the Bengal Muslims* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 26–52.

cultural diversity. Consequently, the study identifies the arrival of Muslims as the onset of Bengal's Golden Age within the Islamic world.

This qualitative research delves into the historical transformation of Muslim Bengal, drawing from both primary and secondary sources. The study primarily relies on the writings of contemporary chroniclers and travelers to form a conceptual framework. These sources, originally documented in Arabic and Persian, have been translated into English by different scholars, forming the cornerstone of the study's historical investigation. Additionally, a comprehensive review of relevant secondary literature complements the primary sources, enriching the analysis and interpretation. The principal objective of this research is to provide a nuanced understanding of the evolution of Muslim Bengal within the context of the medieval Muslim Golden Age. Specifically, it aims to unravel the motivations driving Muslim territorial control in Bengal during this transformative period and to elucidate the prominent characteristics defining the era. By shedding light on these historical dynamics, the study endeavors to offer valuable insights into the socio-economic, political and cultural landscape of medieval Bengal. The study acknowledges the limitation due to the scarcity of historical sources, which often do not precisely describe the activities and functions of Muslim rulers and Muslim immigrants or the socio-economic conditions in Bengal. Additionally, the discussion on the transformation of Muslim Bengal in light of the Islamic Golden Age is brief and may not fully meet the expectations of all readers. Despite these constraints, the research has been conducted with the hope that its findings will make a significant contribution to the existing scholarship on Bengal's history.

Bengal before the Conquest by the Muslims

The arrival of Muslims in Bengal had a significant impact on its socio-political and racial landscape. Therefore, to comprehend the transformation of Bengal under Muslim rule, it is essential first to examine the pre-existing conditions on the eve of their arrival. Bengal region was one of the very early centers of Aryan settlement in India. The pre-historic kingdom of Pragjyotish, stretching from present-day Jalpaiguri to the hinterland of Assam in India, represented one of the ancient Aryan colonies in the region.[13] Since early times, the Bengal region has been the cradle of significant religious movements. Buddhists and Jains successfully converted a substantial portion of Bengal’s population to their respective beliefs, while

[13] Dinesh Chandra Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature* (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1911). p. 1.

Brahminic influence remained comparatively subdued for centuries.[14] Even the country was in open rebellion against Hindu orthodoxy. Likely, Bengal was largely inhabited by the descendants of the early citizens of *Magadah* (a township of ancient India). Consequently, Brahminism struggled to sustain itself for many centuries among a population at the forefront of Buddhism.[15] Conversely, among the twenty-four Tirthankaras (divine men) of the Jains, an impressive twenty-three achieved Moksha (salvation) in the region of Bengal.[16] Throughout its extensive history, Bengal has proven to be fertile ground for growing new religions. Despite the presence of major religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, as well as various minor beliefs like animism, the region remained open to embracing the new faith of Islam in the early Middle Ages.

Apart from the Aryans, the indigenous people of Bengal possessed distinct racial and cultural characteristics that distinguished them from the Aryan population. Anthropological evidence and linguistic traits highlight the diverse elements that contribute to the makeup of the Bengali people and their language.[17] Different races settled in Bengal during the ancient period, which shaped the anthropology of the Bengali populace. Two primary origins can be identified in the formation of the Bengali race: the first group comprised primitive tribes like the Kols, Pulindas, Dom, Hadi, Sabaras, Chandala, and Mlechchhas. These early settlers, often referred to as non-Aryan people in Vedic literature, are recognized as the Nishadas and are associated with the Austro-Asiatic or Austric linguistic traditions. They represent most of the Bengali race and have inhabited Bengal since its earliest recorded history. The second wave of people, Aryans, consisted of the higher social classes within the caste system. These groups contributed to the development of Bengali society and civilization.[18]It is well-recognized that the Brahmanas belong to the Aryan race, which itself migrated to India from outside. The Brahmanas, who were outsiders, had a significant influence in shaping the social structure.

Specifically, the smaller yet influential upper caste Brahmans played a pivotal role at the periphery of Bengal's society and formed the very foundation of its social structure in ancient period. Professor Mahalanobis conducted research on the origins of this upper caste and observed a remarkable homogeneity between the upper castes

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[14] Ibid, p. 2.
[15] Ibid, p. 4.
[16] Ibid, p. 3
[17] R. C. Majumdar *et al.*, "Society," in *The History of Bengal, Hindu Period*, R. C. Majumdar (ed.) (Dhaka: The University of Dhaka, 1943). pp. 557-623.
[18] Ibid, p. 557

in Bengal and those in other regions of India. Ramaprashada Chanda noted that the Brahmanas of Bengal had closer ties to the Brahmanas in the heartland of India, suggesting a migration from northern India.[19] Alongside the general *Nishada* population, understanding the role of this Brahman class is crucial for comprehending the social and political dynamics of ancient Bengal. The upper caste set themselves apart from the *Nishada* population through religious sanctions and social customs, which led to a situation where the upper caste ruled the *Nishada* population and even often denied their rightful privileges.[20]

Referring to Brhihad Dhormo Purana, Niharranjan Roy enumerated forty-one distinct castes among the early inhabitants of Bengal, with certain castes delineating specific professions while others denoted racial distinctions. Notably, when castes were tied to professions, it allowed for the blending of races. Consequently, his conclusion posited that every Bengali race exhibited characteristics of hybridity.[21] Professor H. C. Raychaudhury analyzed various ancient sources concerning the races of Bengali people and the early state system in Bengal. His conclusions can be summarized in four key points: firstly, the initial settlers in Bengal and Orissa were closely related to non-Aryan tribes, but from the first millennium B.C., there was a gradual influx of Aryan influence. Secondly, organized governance existed in Bengal well before the advent of the historical era. Thirdly, the region was typically segmented into multiple states, some periodically attaining significant power. Lastly, the kingdoms of Bengal maintained close and reciprocal connections with their immediate Western neighbors.[22]

According to Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Misra, the Sena dynasty governed Bengal for just over a century before the Muslims, during which their rule evolved into a substantial empire, enabling them to assert paramountcy over the entire region for the first time in its history. The process of integrating sub-regions, which maintained their existence throughout, commenced by the Sena rulers and eventually culminated in forming a unified regional state in the later part of the 14th century CE under Muslim rule.[23] Hence, it becomes evident that the Senas were not originally

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[19] Ramaprasad Chanda, "The Indo-Aryan Races," *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, January 1917, pp. 167-75.

[20] Majumdar *et al*., "Society", pp. 557-623.

[21] Niharranjan Roy, "Itihasher Gorar Kotha", in *Bangaleer Itihas: Aadi Parba* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1993), pp. 23-66.

[22] H. C. Raychaudhuri, "The Legendary Period," in *The History of Bengal, Hindu Period*, R. C. Majumdar (ed.), Vol. 1 (Dhaka: The Universiy of Dhaka, 1943), pp. 35-40.

[23] Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Chitta Ranjan Misra, "The Sena Rule: Towards the Integration of Sub-Regions," in *History of Bangladesh: Early Bengal in Regional*

Bengali but outsiders from south India. Motivated by the prospect of improved opportunities, they ventured into the Bengal region. Seizing the opportunity amid the upheaval of the Pala kingdom, they began ruling autonomously in the smaller area of Radha (present-day Burdwan division) in the latter part of the 11th century. Over time, their influence expanded, eventually encompassing most parts of the Bengal region. Supplanting the Buddhist Pala kingdom, the Sena rulers actively sought to establish the sway. They spread the Indo-Aryan culture in the Bengal Delta before the Muslim conquest of Bengal in the early 13th century.

Notably, the Sena dynasty established itself in Bengal in the early 12th century after supplanting the Pala rulers and Buddhism as a religion. D. C. Ganguly analyzed the origin of the Sena rulers. Historical records from the Pala dynasty indicate that kings, starting from Devapala, appointed numerous foreign officers, including the Karnatas. So, it is conceivable that a distant ancestor of the Senas in Bengal originated from the Deccan and initially served under the Palas. Another plausible scenario is that the founder of the Senas accompanied one of the Chalukya rulers during their Bengal invasion, ultimately deciding to settle in the region. Therefore, one could argue that the Senas originated in the Kannada-speaking region in the South of India.[24]As per Britannica, the Sena dynasty, an Indian ruling dynasty in Bengal during the 11th and 12th centuries CE, had its roots in the southern regions of India. Their forebears migrated from the south and assumed leadership as chieftains in southwestern Bengal at the beginning of the 11th century.[25] R. C. Majumdar, through examination of early inscriptions and historical records, pinpointed the origin of the Senas. His analysis concluded that the Sena family hailed from Karnata in South India. There is no doubt that the original homeland of the Sena family was in Karnata, a region encompassing modern Mysore and Hyderabad States where Kanarese is the predominant language. Additionally, Majumdar noted that the Senas belonged to the esteemed Brahman-Kshatri caste.[26]The arrival of Muslims in Bengal significantly influenced the governance and demographics of the region within these diverse socio-political and religious contexts.

Perspectives (up to c.1200 CE), Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (ed.), Vol. 1, 2 vols. (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018), pp. 833-56.

24 D. C. Ganguly, "Northern India during the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries," in *The Struggle for Empire*, R. C. Majumdar (ed.), 1st ed., Vol. V, The History and Culture of the Indian People (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhaban, 1957), pp. 24-101.

25 Britannica, the Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Sena dynasty". Encyclopedia Britannica, 26 Nov. 2013, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sena-dynasty. Accessed 7 December 2023.

26 R. C Majumdar, (ed.), *The History of Bengal (Hindu Period)*, Vol. I (Delhi: Reprinted by B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2004). p. 205.

Expansion of Islam and the Conquest of Bengal by the Muslims

In the seventh century, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) laid the foundation for the Islamic state modeled on Medina. Following his demise, the establishment of caliphates marked a pivotal era in expanding Islam beyond Arab lands. The impetus for conversion to Islam was multifaceted, fueled by the eloquence of Muslim preachers, the endeavors of traders, and the strategic advantage afforded by military prowess, enabling Muslim conquerors to assert dominance over vast regions of the world. Subsequently, after the four successor caliphates of the Prophet, influential Muslim dynasties such as the Umayyads, Abbasids, Mamluks, Seljuks, and Ayyubids emerged, ushering in dominant empires that left an indelible mark on global history. Clearly, within a century of the Prophet's passing, Islam triumphed over contemporary great empires like the Byzantine and Persian, supplanting deeply entrenched world religions and effecting substantial conversions.[27] This rapid and transformative spread underscores the historical significance of Islam's early centuries and its enduring impact on the geopolitical landscape.

Subsequently, the army swiftly seized control of most of North Africa, Spain, Anatolia, and Sindh (the northwestern corner of the Indian subcontinent). By 711, the Arab Empire spanned from Toledo (Spain) to Multan (Pakistan).[28] The final eastward expansion occurred as the ‘Umayyads relinquished control of their Empire to the Abbasids (750–1258). As the Abbasid Empire expanded, its central authority weakened, resulting in a decentralized imperial structure and the rise of local dynasties throughout Asia. From the ninth to the tenth centuries, regional rulers acknowledged the Abbasid Caliph by delivering the Friday congregational prayer sermon (khutba), minting coins for the Empire, and presenting enslaved people acquired in raids on Turkic territories as tribute to Baghdad.[29] These captives were then converted to Islam and integrated into the Abbasid army as soldiers, with some managing to ascend the ranks and attain political-military influence. While maintaining allegiance to the Abbasids, these emerging dynasties concurrently pursued territorial conquests to secure additional resources.

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[27] Bashar Bakkour, *The Spread of Islam: Perceptions and Misperceptions*, (Damascus, Al-Fatih Islamic Institute, 2011), http://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=3359247.

[28] “Islam across the Oxus (Seventh to Seventeenth Centuries),” in *Islam and Asia: A History*, by Chiara Formichi, New Approaches to Asian History (Cambridge New York, NY Port Melbourne New Delhi Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 10-42.

[29] “Islam across the Oxus (Seventh to Seventeenth Centuries).”

During the 9th and 10th centuries, the Iranian people showed dissatisfaction with the Abbasid caliphate and Arabic influence.[30] The Samanids[31] became influential in the Abbasid Caliphate's territory in the 9th century, creating a Persianate Sunni Muslim empire from 819 to 999 AD. This empire included Khorasan, Transoxiana[32], and parts of modern-day Afghanistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. Transoxania was a significant hub of Muslim civilization in the European Middle Ages and was the focal point of the Timurid Empire during the 15th century. Its cities, such as Bukhara and Samarkand, gained global recognition. However, in the 19th century, the region fell under Russian control through occupation.[33] The decline of the Samanids by the end of the 10th century led to the rise of two Turkish dynasties, the Ghaznavids and the Seljuk Turks. Sultan Mahmud, a prominent ruler of the Ghaznavids, played a significant role in molding the fate of the region. The 12th century saw the succession of the Khwarazm Shahs and the Ghorids after the Seljuks and Ghaznavids. The rivalry between these powers marked a new phase of Islamic expansion into the South Asian subcontinent.[34]

During the 11th to 13th centuries, Turkic dynasties with Islamic influence descended from the slave soldiers governed northern regions of the Indian subcontinent and extensive portions of Central Asia and Western China.[35] The rivalry between two rising powers, the Khawarism Shahs and the Ghorids, accounted for the new phase of Islamic expansion in South Asia. The Khwarazm Shahs expelled the Ghorids from Khurasan, Ghazni, and Afghanistan in the early 13th century. Before that happened,

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30 Robert L. Canfield ed., "Introduction: The Turko Persian Tradition," in *Turko-Persia in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 1-34.

31 The Samanids were a Persian dynasty that ruled in Central Asia from the 9th to the early 11th century. Established by Ismail ibn Ahmad in the early 9th century, the Samanid state centered around Bukhara in Transoxiana. The dynasty played a key role in the cultural and intellectual history of the region. Under the Samanids, Central Asia experienced a cultural renaissance, marked by patronage of the arts, literature, and sciences. The Samanid rulers were notable for their support of Persian language and culture, contributing to the flourishing of Persian literature during their reign. Bukhara, the Samanid capital, became a prominent center for scholarship and cultural exchange.

32 Transoxania ("That Which Lies Beyond the River") is ahistorical region of Turkistan in Central Asia east of the Amu Darya (Oxus River) and west of the Syr Darya (Jaxartes River), roughly corresponding to present-day Uzbekistan and parts of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Transoxania". Encyclopedia Britannica, 7 Feb. 2023, https://www.britannica.com/place/Transoxania. Accessed 26 November 2023.)

33 Ibid.

34 "Islam across the Oxus (Seventh to Seventeenth Centuries)".

35 Ibid.

Muazz al-Din Muhammad Ghori and his lieutenant, Qutubuddin Eibek, established the foundation of a new Islamic state in northern India.[36]The conquest of Bengal by Muslims was an extension of Muhammad Ghori's northern Indian campaign and marked a significant chapter in history. Bakhtiyar Khalji, a Turko-Afghan military general, played a crucial role during this period and further shaped the course of Islamic history in Bengal.

In 1203 AD, Khalji executed a swift assault on Bihar, taking control of Odantapuri Bihar before returning with a substantial treasure. Upon meeting Qutbuddin Eibek, Bakhtiyar presented him with valuable gifts, which were reciprocated with great honor by Qutubuddin. According to Tarikh-i-Firishta, Qutubuddin Eibek appointed Bakhtiyar Khalji as the governor of Bihar, and initially, he was neglecting the royal directives. However, he came to visit Qutubuddin, aiming to mend relations and extend a gesture of reconciliation through the presentation of lavish gifts.[37]Tabaka-i-Akbari mentioned that upon learning of Bakhtiyar's acts of bravery and fearlessness, Qutubuddin sent him a prestigious robe of honor (*Khilat*[38]) and ceremonial standard. Empowered by the Sultan's support, Bakhtiyar seized control of the Bihar Fort, leading to widespread plundering and ravages in the region.[39] The conquest of Udantapuri and the subjugation of Bihar brought the entire region up to Bengal under Bakhtiyar Khalji's control. Following the capture of Udantapuri, Qutbuddin entrusted Bakhtiyar with the governance of Lakhnawati (Bengal) and tasked him with the mission of conquering the region.[40] At that juncture, Bengal was under the rule of Sena monarch Lakshmansena.

According to the historical account in Tarikh-i-Firishta, the initial Muslim commander to invade the kingdom of Bengal was Malik Mohammad Bakhtiyar during the reign of Qutubuddin, the ruler of Delhi.[41] In the winter of 1204 AD, Bakhtiyar embarked on his Bengal expedition through the lesser-traveled Jharkhand region. Advancing towards Nadia, Bakhtiyar's pace was so rapid that only eighteen

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[36] Muhammad Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*, 1st ed., Vol. I A (Islamic Foundation of Bangladesh, 1985). p. 47.

[37] Muhammad Qasim Firishta, *Tarikh i Firishta*, trans. John Briggs, Vol. I, IV (Delhi-110052: Low Price Publications, 1829), p. 112.

[38] Khilat, or robe of honor, was a symbolic gesture of distinction often conferred by Islamic rulers during medieval times.

[39] Nizamuddin Ahmad, *Tabaqat i Akbari*, trans. Brajendranath De (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1927). p. 50.

[40] Ahmad. p. 50.

[41] Muhammad Qasim Firishta, *Tarikh i Firishta*, trans. John Briggs, Vol. IV, IV (Delhi-110052: Low Price Publications, 1829). p. 195.

horsemen could keep up with him. The city residents initially mistook him for a horse dealer, allowing Bakhtiyar to enter, and then he captured the palace. Raja Lakshmansena fled through the back door of the palace. Minhaj described the whole event like this: suddenly, Bakhtiyar emerged before the city of Nadia with such speed that only eighteen horsemen could keep pace with him while the rest of the troops trailed behind. Upon reaching the city gate, Bakhtiyar refrained from disturbing anyone, proceeding calmly and composedly. The residents assumed that perhaps his group was mere merchants who had brought horses for sale, oblivious to the fact that it was Muhammad Bakhtiyar. It wasn't until he uncovered his sword and launched an attack on the non-believers that the truth became apparent. During this crucial moment, Laskhmansena sat at the head of his table, surrounded by dishes made of gold and silver, filled with food, following his usual routine. However, a commotion erupted from the gateway of his palace and throughout the city. Before Laskhmansena could grasp the situation, Bakhtiyar had stormed through the gateway, entering the palace and slaying several individuals. The King escaped barefoot through the backdoor of his palace, leaving behind all his treasures, wives, other women, servants, and attendants. The Muslims seized numerous elephants, and the amount of plunder amassed was so immense that it defied enumeration. As Bakhtiyar's army arrived and took control of the city and its surroundings, he established his headquarters there. Lakshmansena fled towards Sankanat and Bang, leaving behind a town in the hands of the conquerors.[42] Tabakat-i-Akbari stated that after the invasion of Muhammad Bakhtiyar, Lakshmansen, in great confusion, hastily fled by boat to escape. Therefore, Muhammad Bakhtiyar seized control of all the vast treasures and the extensive paraphernalia of the state, which were beyond quantification. Instead of Nadia, Bakhtiyar established a new city named Lakhnauti as the new capital.[43]

On the other hand, by the end of the 12th century, the Sena kingdom, which originated in South India, was on the brink of collapse due to persistent conflicts with neighboring rulers. D. C. Ganguly, in his analysis of the Sena kingdom's state before the Muslim invasion, offered insights into the challenges and vulnerabilities faced by Lakshmansena;

> The kingdom of the Sena began to disintegrate in the closing years of the twelfth century. *Khadi-mandala* was under the sway of Lakshmansena in the early part of his reign. But in

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[42] Minhaj al-Din Ibn Umar al-Usmani, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, trans. H. G. Raverty, vol. I (NJ, 08854, USA: Gorgias Press LLC (Reprinted from the 1881-1897 London edition), 2010, pp. 557-58

[43] Ahmad, *Tabaqat i Akbari*. p. 51.

> or before A.C. 1196 one Dommanapala set up an independent kingdom in this region. While the Sena power was weakened by disruption within, it had to face the invasion of the Muslims who had by this time overrun the greater part of Northern India.[44]

Adding to their woes, the invasion of northern India and Bihar by Muslims instilled fear and unrest among the Sena nobility and the residents of Nadia, the capital of Sena rulers. Even Lakshmansena was acquainted with the physical attributes of Bakhtiyar Khalji through the information of his trusted persons and was known about his courage, gallantry, and triumphant exploits.[45]

Parmatma Saran and R. C. Majumdar delved into the reasons behind the decline of Hindu rule, acknowledging natural limitations but also seeking to analyze the root causes based on available historical sources. A prominent factor identified was the unjust caste system and the lack of engagement with the external world. The former led to the segmentation of Indian society into exclusive classes, where a privileged minority safeguarded their interests by denying the masses various civic rights, particularly in education and in freely interacting and associating with their peers on equal terms. Furthermore, this exclusivity fostered a sense of isolationism and insularity, breeding an attitude of arrogance among the Indian populace. The notion of exclusive superiority was propagated and sustained through intellectual fraud, as a significant portion of the literature from that period was manipulated for this purpose. The masses were urged to adhere to it unquestioningly in the name of sacred texts, and challenging their authority was deemed a grave offense. Consequently, this mindset hindered the comprehension of the profound importance of frontier defense and the necessary measures, given the significant geopolitical shifts and evolving military strategies occurring beyond India's borders.[46]

The narratives mentioned above imply that Bakhtiyar Khalji opted for strategic measures instead of resorting to widespread violence and conflict to establish control over the Kingdom of Bengal. The internal disarray within the Sena kingdom and the existing societal structure, combined with Bakhtiyar Khalji's victorious reputation and the influence of his forces already permeating Bengal's ruling class, paved the way for a peaceful triumph of the Muslim force over Bengal. Subsequently, for a span of over five hundred years, Muslim rulers governed Bengal with a policy emphasizing the peaceful coexistence of immigrant Muslim and local Bengali

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44 Ganguly, "Northern India during the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries", p. 39.

45 Ibn Umar al-Usmani, *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, pp. 554-57.

46 Paramatma Saran and R. C. Majumdar, "The Turkish Conquest of Northern India," in *The Struggle for Empire*, ed. R. C. Majumdar, 1st ed., Vol. V, The History and Culture of the Indian People (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhaban, 1957), 116-29, pp. 126-27.

populations. From Bakhtiyar Khalji's conquest in 1204 until 1765, when the East India Company assumed control of Bengal's Diwani (authorized power to collect revenue), Muslim rulers predominantly governed the region. This dominance extended beyond Bengal, encompassing various parts of the Indian subcontinent. Within this dynamic historical canvas of Muslim Bengal, it made relationships with the different hubs of Islamic world. These connections were seamlessly interwoven into extensive commercial networks, enriching the tapestry of Muslim Bengal with the threads of intellectual exchange and economic collaboration. According to Chiara Formichi, the ramifications of Islamic expansion in South and East Asia were profound, giving rise to diverse Muslim cultures characterized by multiethnic influences across the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and China.[47] This era marked a geopolitical transformation and a flourishing of knowledge, culture, and commerce that left an indelible imprint on the annals of Islamic history.

The Transformation of Muslim Bengal

The medieval metamorphosis of Muslim Bengal unfolded through an intricate interplay of socio-economic, cultural, and historical dynamics. Bengal's trajectory was significantly shaped by the profound influences of the Gupta and Pala Empires, fostering a rich tapestry of art, literature, and intellectual pursuits. The Indo-Aryan civilization of the Bengal region found its core in the upper and middle Gangatic zone of West Bengal, as it attracted a substantial influx of Brahman immigrants facilitated by geographical proximity. The decline of the Pala Empire marked a turning point, leading to the decline of Buddhism in Bengal and the subsequent resurgence of Hinduism under the patronage of the Sena rulers. This shift set the stage for a cultural clash, as Islamic influences confronted two deeply entrenched cultures in Bengal – the Buddhist and the Indo-Aryan. In this cultural tug-of-war, Eastern Bengal emerged as a distinct landscape, offering a more conducive environment for the assimilation of Islamic culture. Richard M. Eaton explained the spread of Bengali Hindu civilization, stating, “By the time of the Muslim conquest, then, the official cult of a cosmic overload, monumental state temples, and royal patronized Brahman priests had all emerged as central components of the Senas religious and political ideology.”[48] Nevertheless, it was not the case that the early

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[47] Chiara Formichi, *Islam and Asia: A History*, New Approaches to Asian History (Cambridge New York, NY Port Melbourne New Delhi Singapore: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[48] Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies 17 (Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 1996). p. 17.

Indo-Aryan civilization and its subsequent Hindu manifestation had uniformly permeated all parts of the Bengal delta by then. Instead, the available evidence suggests that the northwestern and western sub-regions of Bengal were significantly more influenced by Indo-Aryan and Hindu civilization compared to the eastern delta, which retained a relatively lower degree of peasantization and Hinduization.[49]

For attesting to the less peasantization of the eastern delta, Richard M. Eaton also analyzed the land grants of ancient times in both eastern and western Bengal. In the case of East Bengal, the grants were allocated to Brahman groups or Buddhist monasteries and typically involved uncultivated lands intended for colonization and cultivation. On the other hand, land grants in western Bengal were characterized by the allocation of arable land, accompanied by specifications regarding revenue collection.[50] Furthermore, animism held a predominant sway in rural Bengal, particularly in Eastern Bengal, contrasting with the prevalence of Hinduism in the western part of the region. This created a notable emptiness for the medieval Muslim conquerors to navigate, allowing them ample opportunity to foster agricultural development and propagate Islam in the absence of a prevailing dominant religious influence of the time. Consequently, this circumstance led to a substantial conversion of the Bengali population to Islam. Percival Spear stated the mass conversion in East Bengal in his writing. According to him, the most extensive instance of mass conversion took place in East Bengal, now Bangladesh. Over the 13th and 14th centuries, the entire rural landscape embraced Islam. The fading Buddhism of the Pala dynasty in Bengal was believed to have been layered onto their indigenous animistic beliefs. The substitution of the Brahminical Sena Kings for the Palas was seen as a decline in status and the imposition of caste restrictions. The Muslim conquest of Bengal, with its caste free religion, provided a welcomed opportunity for social liberation. Those who converted also brought their traditions with them, leading to the observation that the Islamization of India, to the extent it occurred, also involved the Hinduization of Indian Islam.[51]

Various scholars have explored the question of which class of Bengali inhabitants first embraced Islam. C. J. Lyall, Secretary to the Chief Commissioner of Assam in

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[49] Eaton. p. 17.

[50] "The Diffusion of Bengali Hindu Civilization," in *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, by Richard M. Eaton, pp. 17–21 (Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 1996).

[51] Percival Spear, "The Position of the Muslims, Before and After Partition", in *India and Ceylon: Unity and Diversity, A Symposium*, ed. Philip Mason (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 30–50.

1882, as quoted by Anil Seal, shed light on this matter. According to Lyall, during the legendary conquest of Bengal by a small group of Muslims, those Bengali peasants who opted for Islam were already socially disadvantaged. As a result, the Hindu segment of the population inherently represents a higher social stratum, while the Muslim element occupies a lower one.[52] Eileen Macfarlane conducted an anthropological study in 1938 within the Twenty-four Parganas District of Bengal. The study revealed a significant conversion of a large number of peasants to Islam. Despite this conversion, the invaders did not establish a substantial settlement in the region. Analysis of blood group data from the Muslim population in Budge Budge indicated a clear ancestral connection to lower-caste Hindu converts, as supported by local tradition. Notably, the proportions of blood groups among the Muslim population remained remarkably similar to those of their contemporary Hindu neighbors.[53] Richard M Eaton quoted the study of D. N. Majumder and C. R. Rao published in 1960, but the data was collected in 1945 from both West and East Bengal just before the partition and massive shift of population. The study suggested that the potential origin of the Muslim population in Bengal might be traced among tribal and scheduled caste non-Muslim groups. Serological data from the pre-partition Muslim population in Bengal supports this perspective, suggesting a distinct dissociation of Bengali Muslims not only from those outside India but also from the Shias and Sunnis of Uttar Pradesh. This underscores the likelihood of a local origin for Bengali Muslims, assuming blood group evidence holds significance. Additionally, the authors observed fundamental differences in key anthropometric indicators, such as head length and breadth, as well as nasal length and breadth, between East Bengal groups (comprising both Muslims and non-Muslims) and their West Bengali counterparts. This noteworthy discovery further diminishes the historical significance attributed to internal migration from western to eastern Bengal.[54] All these studies suggested that socially disadvantaged local Bengali people were more likely to embrace Islam and emphasized that the influx of Muslims from external regions did not contribute significantly to the number of Muslim settlements in eastern Bengal.

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[52] Anil Seal, "The Muslim Breakaway," in *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 298–340.

[53] Eileen W. Erlanson Macfarlane, "Blood-Group Distribution in India with Special Reference to Bengal," *Journal of Genetics*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (July 1938), pp. 225–37.

[54] "Theories of Islamization in Bengal," in *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, by Richard M. Eaton, 17 (Berkeley Los Angeles London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 119–34.

The Muslim conquest of Bengal, introducing a caste free religion, was seen as an attractive pathway for social advancement. The important thing is the individuals who converted to Islam did not abandon their cultural practices. Instead, they took these customs into their newly adopted religious identity, underscoring the dynamic nature of cultural and spiritual interactions. P. Spear explained that Indian Muslims had diverse origins, but their predominant ancestry was Indian. Socially, they tended to organize themselves based on their previous social standing. The ruling Turks, Afghans, and Persians constituted the aristocracy, supplemented by the well-born among the Indian converts. In addition, the impact on the culture came from various sources. The Quran and its theology brought Arabic influence, while Turkish influence was evident in action and administration. Also, a widespread Persian influence contributed to language, literature, and a set of manners, taste, and elegance.[55] Prominent Bengali historian Abdul Karim described the process of Islamization and the socialization of the Muslims in Bengal;

> The Muslim society in Bengal developed gradually so that after a lapse of more than three hundred years, it became a part and parcel of Bengal's body politic. The facts that the Muslims settled in this country, learnt the local language, lived in harmony with the local people, accepted local wives, adopted various professions suited to their genius, and that in their dietary system and dwelling houses, they depended on materials locally available, bear out that they considered Bengal as their homeland. Side by side, they adhered to Islamic religious principles and built religious institutions of their own. There is, therefore, good ground to suggest that a Bengali Muslim society already passed its formative stage, took a different shape, and breathed a new spirit of tolerance, equality, and universal love in the country so much so that large masses accepted Islam.[56]

In the context of medieval Bengal, referring to the period from the early thirteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries, various cultural and historical changes occurred in the region, and one of the notable transformations was the gradual adoption of Islam. Bengali society adopts Islam as its dominant religion, incorporating Islamic beliefs, practices, and cultural elements into its way of life. Both immigration and conversion theories were functional in the process of the expansion of Islam as the dominant religion in eastern Bengal. During the medieval era, Muslims who had migrated became integrated into the pre-existing social fabric of the Bengali nation. This amalgamation included diverse groups such as Arabs, Turks, Afghans, Mughals, Syrians, and Persians, who all migrated to Bengal. The Muslim immigrants, driven by religious and economic pursuits, actively endeavored to disseminate their beliefs and engage in commerce and the development of cultivation. They established social

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[55] Spear, "The Position of the Muslims, Before and After Partition".

[56] Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal (Down to A. D. 1538)*, 1st ed. (Dhaka: The Asiatic Society of Pakistan, Dacca, 1959), pp. 210-11.

bonds and economic relations through marriage ties, socio-cultural contributions, and financial transactions, thereby weaving themselves into the societal fabric. The Muslims, upholding familial responsibilities, adhering to social contracts, and maintaining ethical business practices, garnered the acceptance of the local populace in Bengal. In this context, when Muslims eventually assumed positions of dominance in the socio-political structure of Bengal, their ascendency was generally accepted by the prevailing social system, except for the established ruling classes and their associates. Gradually, Islamic values and norms permeated the public sphere of Bengal in the medieval period. Over time, these influences became integral to the fabric of Bengal's society, contributing to the region's rich and diverse cultural heritage. This period signifies a transformational era for Muslim Bengal, marking the inception of a golden age in the region.

Dawn of the Golden Age in Medieval Bengal

While the golden age of Bengal is not extensively explored in contemporary academic discussions, a wealth of historical accounts by distinguished scholars, travelers, and experts corroborate this assertion. Abdul Karim notably highlights the widespread renown of the medieval Muslim kingdom and its populace in Bengal. Bengal's Sultans engaged in diplomatic exchanges with kingdoms as distant as China, Delhi, and Khurasan, illustrating the region's significance on the international stage. Moreover, instances where Bengal's rulers sought to arbitrate succession disputes in places like Arakan and Tippera underscore their authority and influence.[57] MA Rahim provides further insight into the transformative impact of Muslim rule on Bengal's political and socio-cultural landscape from 1342 to 1576. This era witnessed the emergence of new institutions and the initiation of pivotal socio-cultural trends, signifying a profound shift in Bengali society. The governance of the Muslim rulers facilitated progress and prosperity across various spheres of life, significantly benefiting the Bengali populace. It is evident that the establishment of Muslim rule in Bengal marked a seminal moment in the region's history, laying the foundation for the emergence of Bengal and the Bengali identity.[58]

According to Sushil Chaudhury, the conditions required for a prosperous economic life were present in Bengal. Its fertile soil was suitable for thriving agriculture. Bengal had a variety of natural products, which were abundant. This enabled the region to export its surplus agricultural products to different parts of India and

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[57] Ibid, p. 208.

[58] M.A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, Vol. 1, Pakistan Historical Society Publication (Pakistan Historical Society, 1959), pp. 413-14.

neighboring countries.[59]Akbar Ali Khan's examination of the 'Golden Bengal Hypothesis' is structured around three key dimensions. Initially, Bengal has sustained continuous economic prosperity throughout its history, highlighted by the absence of famines in pre-industrial societies. Secondly, there existed an extraordinary affordability of essential goods, resulting in a notably high standard of living for individuals with modest incomes. Lastly, the economic affluence experienced by Bengal contributed to the absence of native slavery.[60] Akbar Ali Khan explained the historical facts of Golden Bengal, characterized by economic prosperity, low price of commodities, and absence of slavery in the light of economic theory.

To discuss the beginning of the Golden Age in Bengal, it is important to first provide a brief overview of the socio-economic conditions that existed in Bengal before the Muslim rule. This will help us understand the context in which Muslims made their significant contributions. In the analysis of the economic conditions in India before 1200, Simon Digby noted the scarcity and complexity of materials available for reconstructing the medieval Indian economic history preceding the late twelfth-century Muslim conquests. He highlighted two key interpretations: firstly, landholding emerged as the primary determinant of social and political status during this era. Secondly, a growing share of agricultural products was extracted from the peasantry to sustain military vassals and beneficiaries of religious grants. Moreover, the issuance of gold coins significantly declined after the fall of the Guptas, and both silver and copper coinages became scarce and of inferior quality.[61] P. C. Chakravarti depicted the economic conditions of Bengal before the Muslim conquest. Relying on fragmentary information from archaeology, sporadic mentions, and accounts by foreign travelers and historians, Chakravarti painted a picture of an economy where people predominantly lived in villages, organizing their lands for agriculture, meadows, and woodlands to fulfill their essential needs. The rural population's livelihoods were primarily tied to the land, while urban dwellers engaged in diverse activities such as commerce, industry, politics, judiciary, and military functions. Paddy cultivation was central to sustenance, and cotton played a crucial role in

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[59] "General Economic Conditions under the Nawabs," in *Companies, Commerce and Merchants: Bengal in the Pre-Colonial Era*, by Sushil Chaudhury (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017), p. 264.

[60] Akbar Ali Khan, "The Golden Bengal Hypothesis: Facts and Fiction," in *History of Bangladesh: Sulatanate and Mughal Periods (c.1200 to 1800 CE)*, ed. Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti, Vol. 2 (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018), pp. 175–200.

[61] Simon Digby, "Economic Conditions before 1200", in *The Cambridge Economic History of India, C. 1200 - c. 1750*, Vol. 1, ed. Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib, Reprinted (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 45–48.

supporting a significant provincial industry. In addition to paddy and cotton, the cultivation of sugar cane and various fruits was widespread. Various crafts and industries flourished, including textiles, sugar production, metalwork, stonework, woodworking, and pottery. Notably, after the Gupta period, the use of metal coins, including gold, silver, and copper, became outmoded. During the reign of the Sena kings, cowrie shells served as the medium of exchange.[62]

John S. Deyell studied the economic landscape of medieval Bengal, meticulously delineating three distinct eras marked by evolving monetary exchange systems. In the early medieval period, from 590 to 1205 AD, gold and silver coinage was used only in the extreme southeast Bengal, coupled with the widespread use of cowry currency in Bengal. The subsequent Bengal Sultanate era, spanning from 1205 to 1576, was characterized by the circulation of silver coins and cowries across the entire region. From 1576 to 1757, the Mughal period saw the emergence of gold mohurs, silver rupees, and copper dams as dominant currencies throughout Bengal.[63]Deyell specifically referenced the present Chattagram division, encompassing Cumilla and Noakhali, as the southeastern extremity of Bengal.[64] Historians generally describe that Pala Bengal and Sena Bengal operated without coined money, relying instead on cowries as the predominant currency across the region. The kingdoms were built on agricultural revenue and operated with a coinless monetary system.

At the beginning of the 13th century, cowry was in vogue as currency in Bengal despite Muslim conquerors being accustomed to coins. Muslim rulers aimed to attract Muslim immigrants for governance and thus, they introduced coined money immediately. Deyell argues that Muslim rulers introduced two elements into Bengal polity: the maintenance of non-indigenous cavalry and the induction of Muslim immigrant nobility, officials, and religious jurors. To attract Muslim immigrants, they introduced a salary paid in coins.[65] In the sultanate period, both cowry and silver coins, namely *tankas*, were used in the monetary system. Another study by John S. Deyell titled 'Cowries and coins: the dual monetary System of the Bengal Sultanate' examined the operational part of cowry and silver coins. A heavy, high-quality silver

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62 P. C. Chakravarti, "Economic Conditions", in *The History of Bengal (Hindu Period)*, ed. R. C Majumdar, Vol. I (Delhi: Reprinted by B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2004), pp. 642–69.

63 John S. Deyell, "The Transition from Ancient to Medieval in Bengal's Monetary Realms," in *History of Bangladesh: Sulatanate and Mughal Periods (c.1200 to 1800 CE)*, ed. Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti, Vol. 2, (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018), pp. 129–40.

64 Deyell, p. 131.

65 Deyell, p. 134.

coin served the needs of government and trade, while cowry shells served the demands of low-value transactions of the population. The exchange between these two forms of currency was facilitated by a private financial sector. As time passed, there was a notable change in the significance of cowries and silver tankas, with metallic currency taking precedence by the sixteenth century. This shift mirrored the Sultanate's expansion, the increasing maturity of its state system, and the enhanced availability of bullion.[66]

Therefore, the trimetallic system of coin currency (gold, silver, and copper) became available in Bengal during the Mughal period. However, Muhammad Bin Tugloq minted voluminous trimetallic coins in Delhi in the 14th century. During this time, independent Bengal sultans used silver coins and cowry shells. Moroccan Traveler Ibn Battuta mentioned that the inhabitants of the Maldives Islands use cowrie shells as money. The people of Bengal also use cowrie as money, which they collect from the Maldives Islands. The people of the Maldives Islands sell cowries in exchange for rice to the people of Bengal.[67] The trimetallic system is basically an Islamic norm established by Ummaiyya Khalifa Abdul Malik in 696 CE.[68] This system allows for a range of denominations and facilitates transactions at various economic levels. The coins may have different values, with gold coins being the most valuable, followed by silver coins and copper coins being the least valuable. This approach provides flexibility in catering to diverse economic needs and contributes to the overall stability of the monetary system. From the Sultanate period, metal coins started with silver, and gradually, all metal coins were widely used in Bengal within the 16th century.

Mizanur Rahman conducted an archaeobotanical study in the Jaldhaka area of Nilfamari district, Bangladesh, unveiling medieval agricultural practices. This emerging field in archaeology uses scientific methods to uncover historical farming practices. The study delineated two phases: the Sultanate period (1266 to 1393 CE) and the subsequent Mughal and early British colonial period (1646 to 1806). Throughout both phases, rice served as the primary subsistence crop, accompanied by secondary crops such as wheat, barley, millets, pulses, and some wild fruits. The

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66 John S. Deyell, "Cowries and Coins: The Dual Monetary System of the Bengal Sultanate",*The Indian Economic & Social History Review,* Vol. 47, No. 1 (January 2010), pp. 63–106.

67 Ibn Battuta, *Ibn Battuta Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325-1354 (The Rihla)*, ed. E. Denison Ross and Eileen Power, trans. H. A. R. Gibb, First Indian edition (New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, 1986), p. 247.

68 Deyell, "The Transition from Ancient to Medieval in Bengal's Monetary Realms", p. 130.

later phase, characterized by the dominance of Indian little millet, the absence of barley, and a near disappearance of wheat, suggests a decline in winter cropping. This shift indicates a transition towards more summer cropping and a departure from double cropping.[69] Muslim rulers and their associates who migrated to Bengal from different parts of the contemporary Muslim world contributed to the development of agriculture and land reclamation through cleaning the forests. Richard M Eaton characterized these individuals as 'superhuman heroes,' possessing the ability to subdue the wilderness, expand cultivable regions, and establish novel religious practices.

> Typically, these heroes combined holy man piety with the organizational skills necessary for forest clearing and land reclamation; hence, they were remembered not only for establishing mosques and shrines but also for mobilizing communities to cut the forests and settle the land. As this happened, people gradually came to venerate these men, most of whom were Muslims.[70]

The 13th and 14th centuries witnessed a remarkable surge in agricultural and economic development in Bengal, attributable to the collaborative efforts of immigrant Muslims and local residents. Mizanur Rahman's research delves into this transformative period, shedding light on the prevalence of double cropping and diverse crop cultivation during the Sultanate era.[71] The prosperity of the region, particularly in the 14th century, is substantiated by the accounts of Ibn Battuta, a Moroccan traveler, who visited Bengal in about 1345. According to Ibn Battuta, Bengal, referred to as the Bengala, was an expansive region overflowing with rice production.Nowhere on earth have I seen any land where prices are lower than Bengal's. In this region, I have seen fat fowls sold at the rate of eight for just one dirham, young pigeons priced at fifteen per dirham, and a fat ram sold for just two dirhams. Additionally, I witnessed the sale of superior quality pieces of cotton cloth, measuring thirty cubits in length, for a mere two dinars.[72]Ibn Battuta traveled about 70000 miles and explored the diverse and relatively known worlds of his era. He attested to the unparalleled affordability of goods in Muslim Bengal.

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69 Mizanur Rahman, "Medieval Agriculture: An Archaeobotanical Study," in *History of Bangladesh: Sulatanate and Mughal Periods (c.1200 to 1800 CE)*, ed. Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti, Vol. 2, (Dhaka, Bangladesh: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018), pp. 87–108.

70 Richard M. Eaton, "Three Overlapping Frontiers in Early Modern Bengal: Religious, Agrarian, Imperial," in *History of Bangladesh: Sulatanate and Mughal Periods (c.1200 to 1800 CE)*, Abdul Momin Chowdhury and Ranabir Chakravarti (ed.), Vol. 2, (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2018), p. 226.

71 Rahman, "Medieval Agriculture: An Archaeobotanical Study".

72 Battuta, *Ibn Battuta Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325-1354 (The Rihla)*, p. 267.

Thus, the agricultural sector undeniably served as the cornerstone of the nation's economy, providing the foundation for its trade and commerce. Certain crops, such as sugar cane, cotton, and mulberry trees, were strategically cultivated to cater to the specific requirements of local industries. The surplus of food grains and industrial products derived from locally grown raw materials significantly boosted trade and commerce. The arrival of Muslims in Bengal marked its integration into the extensive international trade of that era, primarily dominated by the Arabs, Persians, and Turks.[73] Foreign traders, travelers, and visitors established connections with Bengal primarily through the prominent port towns of Chattagram (Sudkawan), Sonargaon, and the capital city of Pandua. Remarkably, Ibn Battuta, a renowned traveler, accessed Bengal through the port town of Sudkawan (Chattagram), describing it as a significant urban center situated on the coastline of the Great Sea.[74]

Under Muslim rule, Bengal experienced a notable surge in economic prosperity, particularly in the domains of trade and commerce. This era witnessed advancements in various industries and the establishment of trade connections with distant regions in both the East and the West. The concurrent growth of agriculture, trade, and industries captured the attention of foreign traders and observers. Despite the challenging weather conditions, Bengal's economic vitality was widely acknowledged. In reference to the inhabitants of Khorasan, Ibn Battuta characterized Bengal as a realm abundant with prosperity, stating it to be a "hell full of good things" (*dozak pur-i-ni'amat*)[75] or "inferno full of gifts"(*dozakh-i-pur n'imat*)[76]. Ma-Huan's account provides an insightful portrayal of the socio-economic landscape in Bengal during his visit in the early 15th century. He depicts Bengal as a vast region characterized by abundant production and a large population. According to his observations, the inhabitants of Bengal predominantly follow the Islamic faith, engaging in transparent and straightforward dealings. The affluent individuals in Bengal invested in building ships to facilitate trade with foreign nations. A substantial portion of the population is involved in commerce, while others dedicate themselves to agricultural pursuits or practice various crafts as artisans. Importantly, large economic transactions are conducted using silver coins, namely *Tangka*, while smaller purchases are made using seashells, namely cowrie.[77]

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73 Muhammad Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*, 1st ed., Vol. I B (Riyadh: Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1985), p. 936.

74 Battuta, *Ibn Battuta Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325-1354 (The Rihla)*, p. 267.

75 Battuta, p. 267.

76 Hossain, Mahdi, trans. *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta*. Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1976, p. 234.

77 Geo. Phillips, "Art. XIV.—Mahuan's Account of the Kingdom of Bengala (Bengal)", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society,* Vol. 27, No. 3 (July 1895), pp. 523–35.

Furthermore, Muslim rulers patronized centers of learning, fostering an environment conducive to intellectual pursuits. The establishment of madrasas and educational institutions promoted the dissemination of knowledge through Arabic, Persian, and vernacular languages. Dinesh Chandra Sen articulated that "the elevation of Bengali to a literary status was brought about by several influences, of which the Mohammedan conquest was undoubtedly one of the foremost. If the Hindu Kings had continued to enjoy independence, the Bengali language would scarcely have got an opportunity to find its way to the courts of Kings."[78] Dinesh Chandra noted that from the time of King Vikramaditya (1st century BCE), keeping a number of Sanskrit scholars attached was the fashion of the Hindu courts. However, the Brahmins were apprehensive about the gradual emergence and acknowledgment of Bengali as a written language. They aimed to confine all religious truths within the realm of Sanskrit texts.[79] Under these circumstances, Muslim conquerors settled themselves in the Bengal region, actively engaging with the local Hindu population. In an effort to foster understanding and communication, they took the initiative to learn the Bengali language. Driven by a commitment to disseminating knowledge, these rulers appointed scholars to translate the epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata into Bengali, the language they had come to speak and comprehend.

According to Ma-Huan, the rituals marking significant life events among the people of Bengal, such as coming of age, funerals, sacrifices, and marriages, closely resemble those practiced by the Muhammadans. Not having any tea, they offer betel-nuts to their guests. The streets are lined with diverse shops, also drinking and eating houses, and bathing facilities. Legal transgressions are met with punishments like beatings, the bastinado, and exile to both nearby and distant lands. Similar to our system, the region has officials of varying ranks with official residences, seals, and an established system of communication. Medical practitioners, astrologers, geomancy experts, skilled artisans, and craftsmen contribute to the societal fabric. A structured military force led by a commander-in-chief is maintained with regular remuneration.[80]

The Sultan bore the titles of Sultan al-Azam (The Greatest Sultan), Nasir al-Islam wa al-Muslimin (Helper of Islam and Muslims), and Al Mujahid fi Sabilillah (The Fighter in the Way of the Most Merciful). Operating within the confines of Islamic jurisprudence, the Sultan, by and large, had no power to change the fundamental laws

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78 Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, p. 10.
79 Sen, pp. 8-9.
80 Phillips, "Art. XIV.—Mahuan's Account of the Kingdom of Bengala (Bengal)".

of the society. Generally, people had the power to file a case against the sultan to the Qazi. A historical account chronicled in Riyazu-s-Salatin delineates an illustrative incident during the rule of Sultan Ghias Uddin Azam Shah. In the course of archery exercises, an accidental discharge of the Sultan's arrow resulted in the accidental demise of a widow's son. Seeking redress, the aggrieved widow invoked the jurisdiction of Qazi Siraj Uddin, accusing the Sultan of murder. The Qazi, in due course, served a summons upon the Sultan, prompting his appearance before the court in an ordinary capacity, thereby subjecting himself to adjudication. Upon the Sultan's presence in court, the Qazi implored, 'Consolate the heart of this elderly woman.' Within the bounds of his capacity, the Sultan offered solace to the grieving widow and expressed to the Qazi, 'Qazi, now the elderly woman is satisfied.' The widow herself attested to her contentment. Subsequently, the Qazi conveyed respect to the Sultan. In response, the Sultan issued a stern declaration: If today I found you deviating from strict adherence to the legal injunctions, I would have resorted to beheading with my sword. The Qazi responded, if I discover even the slightest transgression against the sacred laws of Allah today, I will employ this whip to administer punitive correction, turning your back red and black.[81]

The Muslim rulers brought the benefits of the Golden Age of Islam to Bengal through various advancements and contributions that significantly enriched the region. By proficiently integrating the esteemed principles of the contemporary Golden Age of Islam into the prevailing socio-economic structure of Bengal, the Muslim rulers took a proactive role in agricultural development and the expansion of trade and commerce—both inland and foreign. Motivated by a deep devotion to the Almighty and an unwavering spirit, Muslims cleared the jungles and forests of Bengal, rendering the land cultivable and suitable for settlements. The infusion of Islamic values brought by Muslim rulers and immigrant communities, coupled with the rich tapestry of native cultures, reshaped the social fabric of Bengal. Drawing parallels with the esteemed features of the Islamic Golden Age, four significant aspects interconnected the Islamic Golden Age with medieval Muslim Bengal. Firstly, under Muslim leadership, there was a concerted effort in land reclamation and agricultural development. Secondly, trade and commerce flourished, accompanied by establishing trade routes, hubs, and necessary facilities. Thirdly, a vibrant exchange transpired between Islamic and native Bengali cultures, fostering the promotion of vernacular languages. Lastly, a commitment to social justice

[81] Ghulam Husain Salim, *Riyazu-s-Salatin*, trans. Maulavi Abdus Salam (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1902). pp. 110-111

protected the Bengali population from the aggression of the upper class or external forces. These features, directly or indirectly derived from the principles of the Islamic Golden Age, found application in medieval Bengal through the efforts of Muslim rulers and benevolent Muslim community members. Consequently, the values, norms, and culture of Islam gradually integrated into the mainstream of Bengal's socioeconomic and political landscape.

Conclusion

Indeed, Islam became the dominant religion in medieval Bengal. Muslim immigrants assimilated into Bengali society and established social bonds and economic relations. They adhered to social contracts, maintained ethical business practices, and eventually assumed positions of dominance in the socio-political structure of Bengal. Islamic values and norms permeated the public sphere, contributing to the region's diverse cultural heritage. The rise of Muslim rulers and elites in Bengal resulted in the widespread adoption of Islamic cultural elements throughout the region. This integration of Islamic customs into the societal fabric of Bengal had a profound impact on language, culture, and social customs. The construction of mosques and educational institutions played a critical role in the public visibility of Islam. Mosques were not simply places of worship but also served as centers for community gatherings, education, and dissemination of Islamic teachings. Bengal's location along maritime trade routes facilitated cultural exchanges with other Islamic regions, contributing to the spread of Islamic influence. Trade networks connected Bengal with the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and other areas, fostering a multiethnic atmosphere heavily influenced by Islamic culture. In summary, the pervasive presence of Islamic elements in various facets of public life in Bengal during this historical period was the result of a complex interplay of historical events, political developments, social transformations, and institutional influences that firmly established Islam's dominance in the public sphere of the region.

Ikhtiauddin Muhammad Bin Bakhtiyar Khalji (1204 AD) used strategic measures to establish control over the Kingdom of Bengal instead of resorting to widespread violence. Muslim rulers governed Bengal for over five hundred years, emphasizing the peaceful coexistence of immigrant Muslims, converted Muslims, and local Bengali populations. The dominance of Islam in the public sphere of medieval Bengal can be attributed to a combination of historical, political, and social factors. The establishment of Muslim political entities and dynasties played a crucial role. The Delhi Sultanate and, later, the Bengal Sultanate were instrumental in consolidating Muslim dominance in the region. The Bengal Sultanate, founded in the

14th century, contributed significantly to the Islamization of Bengal. The conversion of local populations to Islam was a gradual but pervasive process. Indeed, the majority of the present Muslim population is of native origin. Additionally, a section of the Muslim population of the land are descendants of Muslim immigrants from different parts of the world. Therefore, the foundation of the Muslim population in Bengal is composed mainly of indigenous converted Muslims and partly of immigrant Muslims of extra-Indian origin.

During the medieval period in Bengal, which roughly spanned from the early 13th to the mid18th century, Muslim rulers and their associates played a significant role in introducing the benefits of the Golden Age of Islam to the region. They incorporated the principles of the Golden Age into the socioeconomic structure of Bengal, resulting in agricultural development and expansion of inland and foreign trade and commerce. This led to four significant aspects that enriched and enlightened Bengal and its population: concentrated efforts in land reclamation and agrarian development, flourishing trade and commerce, vibrant cultural exchange and accommodation, and a commitment to social justice. Muslim rulers and communities implemented these features, gradually integrating Islamic values into Bengal's socio-economic and political landscape.