Chapter I

Introduction

The Bengali Muslims constituted about half of the Muslim population of the Indian sub-continent. It has been pertinently remarked by Dr.A.F. Salahuddin Ahmed that the characteristic feature of the Muslims of Bengal has been their isolation. The Muslims of Bengal form a distinct community and in their social and cultural life they are closer to the non-Muslim population of this region than to the Muslims living elsewhere in the sub-continent. Although a considerable number of Muslim immigrants had come to Bengal at different times and from different parts of the Islamic world during about six centuries of Muslim rule (in Bengal), the bulk of the Muslim population of Bengal was of indigenous origin being converted from the Hindu and Buddhist elements.\(^1\) It is crystal clear to us that by the term ‘Muslims of Bengal’ he obviously meant about the Bengali speaking Muslims who were ethnically Bengali rather than about the immigrant Muslims living in Bengal.

Islamic contact with Bengal is as old as the role of the religion is significant in the historical development of this region. It is rather paradoxical that the phenomenon of Islamization in Bengal has drawn far less academic attention than what would seem warranted by its historical significance. Its importance does not simply consist in the fact that the undivided Bengal saw the largest concentration of Muslims (about 34 millions) in the Indian Subcontinent and that their present aggregate in divided Bengal (the Indian State of West Bengal, the Barak Valley of Assam that includes Silchar, Hailakandi and Karmimgunj, the Indian State of

\(^1\) Ahmed, A.F.Salahuddin – Bangladesh; Tradition and Transformation, pp.4-5, University Press Limited, Dacca, Bangladesh, 1987
Tripura, and Bangladesh) makes them the second largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia\(^2\).

One is vaguely aware of an undercurrent of tension and conflict involving the self-perception and identity of Bengali Muslims. Like other seminal historical developments, the roots of the problem of Bengali Muslims' self-image go deeper in to their historical past. This, in its turn, underlines the importance of the syncretistic tradition of Islam in Bengal, which remains almost totally unrecognized and unappreciated because of the lack of adequate knowledge and much systematic study.\(^3\)

Indian Islam has in general, been noted by scholars for its "exclusiveness" and unadaptability.\(^4\) Islam in traditional Bengal was, in contrast, marked by its tendency towards convergence with and assimilation to the local cultural milieu.\(^5\)

Islam in its simple and austere aspect, does not appear to have characterized the life of the people(of Bengal).... a careful study of the literature of the time(of the early sixteenth century Bengal) shows that there prevailed a sort of folk Islam having hardly any connection with the dogmas of religion.\(^6\)

The locally acculturated form of Islam in Bengal was, no doubt, noted by sundry observers, but it was perceived as a form of corrupt "folk" or "popular" Islam. This raises a very fundamental question about our approach and perspective

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\(^3\) Ibid, p.3


\(^5\) Roy, Asim, op.cit, p.4

\(^6\) Tarafdar, M.R, Hussain Shahi Bengal, 1494-1538 A.D, A Socio-Political Study, Dacca, Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1965, pp.163-64
bearing on the study of Islamization as a social and cultural process operating in Bengal, where Islam is not a primary but a secondary culture, that is, exogenous and not endogenous to the particular region, and also where Islam is not a single or the only great tradition since it entered a land which was not culturally virgin, and confronted the long-established endogenous Hindu great tradition. These factors, inter-alia, are significant considerations in a study of Islamic contact and communication with Bengal.  

However the aforesaid view cannot be wholly accepted by us since it has raised the issue of the confrontation between the long established endogenous Hindu great tradition and the exogenous great tradition of Islam, which cannot be applied in the context of Bengal. It is because, as we shall see later on in course of our deliberations that the great traditions of Hinduism could never have firmly entrenched itself upon the soil of Bengal unlike in the North and North Western India where there was a confrontation and collaboration between the great traditions of Hinduism and Islam. Rather herein the little tradition of Hinduism has developed which one may call it as the folk tradition. Therefore an acculturated form of non-Aryan and Aryan Culture was prevalent at the time of the advent of the Islam in Bengal which was responsible in the long run for the emergence of little tradition of Islam in Bengal ultimately. Moreover, the Aryanisation process in Bengal started rather late which being long and arduous and its impact on the indigenous population of Bengal even on the eve of the advent of Islam in Bengal was rudimentary and partial.

From the above discussion it is crystal clear to us that due to the prevalence of the non Aryan elements in the Bengali life, culture and population, there developed a distinctive Bengali folk culture unlike in other parts of India. Again

7 Roy Asim, op.cit, p.4
due to the distinctive character of the Bengali folk culture there also developed certain other features like the assimilative and syncretist character of the Bengalis. It is true that the assimilative character is applicable as a whole to the Indian civilization as well where numerous races and cultures came into contact with each other and developed unique Indian civilization whose primary message to mankind is unity in diversity. But nowhere in India that uniqueness of the Indian civilization is so markedly pronounced as it happened in Bengal which is again due to the prevalence of the non-Aryan elements in it and also due to the fact that nowhere in India in a particular region there was such a wide admixture of various races, creeds, castes and religions as was the case in Bengal. It is because in the North there is the predominance of either the great tradition of Hinduism which is developed out of the Aryan elements or by the Great tradition of Islam which is again developed by the external elements from Arab, Iran, other parts of the Middle East and from Central Asia. Again in the South there is the prevalence of Dravidian elements which though Aryanised still retained its particular character and there is less intermingling of a variety of cultures.

Therefore Bengal remained basically different from the rest of India due to its wide intermingling of various races, caste, creed, religion and cultures and due to the prevalence of the non-Aryan elements in it. It is again true that although Brahmanical Hinduism borrowed many things from the non-Aryan elements in India as a whole but nowhere again it is so much dominated by the non-Aryan/ pre-Aryan elements as it is the case with Bengal. Therefore both the little traditions of Hinduism and Islam got fertile grounds in Bengal unlike in the rest of the subcontinent. Again it would not be of much exaggeration to suggest that if we explore these non-Aryan/ pre-Aryan elements in the uniqueness of the Bengali folk-culture, it could be a path-finder to the issue of India’s unity as a whole which
is of late getting disturbed both by the Great traditions of Hinduism and Islam in the North. It can be suggested both to the proponents of Great traditions of Hinduism dominated by the myth of Aryan influences and to the Great traditions of Islam dominated by the myth of Arabic/ Middle Eastern influences that let us search for the roots of Indian heritage from the pre-historic Indus Valley civilization. It is because although the Aryans did build up a highly developed civilization in India later on but it was only when they did come into contact either with the highly developed Indus Valley civilisation or with the other less developed non-Aryan cultures that they have done so. Because before coming to India the Aryans were basically nomadic/ pastoral people. Likewise it can also be said that much of the splendours of the Great Islamic civilisations of the world were developed not by the nomadic Arabs of the Arabia proper, but when they came into contact with the highly developed ancient civilization of Mesopotemia(Iraq) and with the highly developed ancient civilization of Persia(Iran). Two great gifts of the Islamic civilization to the mankind like its Mutazilla school of rationalist philosophy was developed mainly in Iraq when there was a great development of science and technology in Baghdad and the great syncretist philosophy of Sufism was developed in Iran.

Strangely enough, Bengali Islam feels itself more at home with the syncretist philosophy of Sufism which have a similarity with the Mutazilla rationalist philosophy, than with the orthodoxy of the Wahabis of Arab and India. It is of course true that in course of Islam's long existence in Bengal there were often periods of religious intolerance, communal antagonism and in the British period there were even recurrence of communal riots, but inspite of all these aberrations, the tradition of folk culture in rural Bengal still remained almost unchanged and at the folk level there is hardly any difference between the Bengali Hindus, Muslims,
Buddhists and even the Bengali Christians living in the rural areas which proves that one can change one’s religion but culture is unchangeable.

Now I must add a few words regarding the valuable works in the field related to my study. Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis’ (Lahore 1946) must rank as the pioneering work on studying the Indian Muslim in a socio-political plane, following the multidisciplinary approach of studying social science incorporating history, sociology of religion and political science, the work is a masterpiece. Then the first historical –sociological – anthropological study on the Bengali Muslim society and politics was done by Amalendu De’s two pioneering works of this genre – 1) Bangali Buddhijibi ‘O’ Bichchinnatabad’ (Bengali Intelligentsia and separatism, Calcutta – 1974) in Bengali and ‘Roots of Separatism in Nineteenth century Bengal (Calcutta – 1974) in English, which were the two valuable contributions in understanding the complexities of the Bengali Muslim mentalité. Hossainur Rahaman’s Hindu Muslim Relations in Bengal 1904-1947: Study in Cultural confrontation (Bombay, 1974) although mainly emphasized in the political plane, nonetheless is an important contribution in this regard. Then Asim Roy’s ‘The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal’, Princeton University press, 1983 is a significant contribution in this sphere. Asim Roy’s work is a multidisciplinary one based on history, social and cultural anthropology and sociology and for evaluating Bengali Muslim mind, the work is indispensable. All the books mentioned so far are works of the Indian historians, excepting Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s.

However, it was in Bangladesh that a significant break-through had been made in this sphere since the emergence of the new country. As early as in 1973, Mustafa Nurul Islam’s Bengali Muslim Public opinion as reflected in the Bengali Press, 1901-1930’ (Dacca, 1973) was published which dealt with the
Bengali Muslim psyche by analyzing the Bengali Muslim periodicals and newspapers. It is a must for all the scholars who want to do any kind of research on the Bengali Muslim community’s socio-political and socio-cultural processes. Then Sufia Ahmed’s ‘The Muslim community in Bengal’ 1884-1912 (Dacca – 1974) was a welcome addition, in this regard. Besides these, ‘Reflections on the Bengal Renaissance’ jointly edited by David Kopf and Safiuddin Joardar (Institute of Bangladesh Studies, Rajshahi, 1977) was a significant contribution in so far as understanding the process of modernization of the Bengali Muslims is concerned. In the same year, Mustafa Nurul Islam’s ‘Samayik Patre Jiban ‘O’ Janamat’ 1901-1930’(Dacca, 1977) was published, which was similar in nature like the author’s previous work in English. However, the publication of the book ‘The Bengali Muslims, 1871-1906, A Quest for Identity’ by Rafiuddin Ahmed (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1981) was a major landmark in understanding Bengali Muslim mind. Applying multi-disciplinary approach of history, anthropology and sociology, the work had shown how even by studying punthi-literature (a kind of folk literature) the complexities of the identity crisis of the Bengali Muslims could be analysed. Then mention may be made of Latifa Akanda’s ‘Social History of Muslim Bengal’ (Dacca 1981). Moreover ‘Islam in Bangladesh: Society, Culture and Politics’ (Bangladesh Itihas Samity, Dhaka, 1983) edited by Rafiuddin Ahmed was indeed a major contribution in understanding different facets of the Islam in Bengal in a historical perspective. Then A.F.Salahuddin Ahmed’s ‘Bangladesh: Tradition and Transformation’ (Dhaka 1987) is another significant contribution in this field. Moreover, Muntasir Mamoon’s ‘Unish Shatake Bangladesher Sangbad Samayikpatra’ (published in several volumes, 1st volume, Dacca, 1985) was also an important contribution for understanding the social history of Bengal. Though the author mainly dealt with the Hindu-Brahmo periodicals and newspapers which were published from east Bengal in the nineteenth century, nevertheless it is useful
for knowing the Hindu—Brahmo outlook towards the Muslims. Apart from these works, A.R. Mallick’s ‘British policy and the Muslims in Bengal : 1757 – 1856’ (Dacca, 1961) although published during the Pakistan period, however it was remarkable for its clarity of thought and indeed an important contribution in this field. Then ‘Understanding the Bengal Muslims: Interpretative Essay’ edited by Rafiuddin Ahmed and published simultaneously by the Oxford university press, New Delhi, 2001 and the University Press, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 2001 is a welcome addition of the books of this genre wherein eminent historians from the Bangladesh and the West have contributed valuable articles. Last but not the least, ‘The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204 – 1760 by Richard M. Eaton, University of California, 1993 and Oxford University press, New Delhi’s Indian edition published in 1994, has brought new light and should be regarded as a major contribution which gives us by far the best account of the rise of Islam in Bengal and an original interpretation of Bengal’s social history.

The aim of the present study is to investigate and explore the folk elements in the Bengali culture and its impact on the Bengali Muslims. While exploring folk Islam or little tradition of Islam in Bengal along with its syncretistic traditions I have tried to use the theory of ‘Great Tradition’ and ‘Little Tradition’ propounded by Robert Redfield while studying Mexican peasant culture, which later on applied by Milton Singer and Mckim Marriott to the Indian society. It sought to unearth whether any syncretistic tradition existed in Bengal by exploring various elements of folk culture prevalent among the Bengali Muslims. It has tried to show how a symbiosis of culture has gradually grown up in Bengal by various types of culture changes like assimilation, accumulation, diffusion, syncretism and transculturation. Therefore it will be worthwhile to study and research on the Bengali Muslim society and culture from the hitherto almost unexplored points of view of
the Bengali folk culture and its relation with the Bengali Muslims along with a holistic approach. It will be worthwhile to study folk elements in the Bengali culture and it relation with the Bengali Muslims combining the interdisciplinary approach of history, folklore, sociology and anthropology. It will be of absorbing interest to note that professor Niharranjan Roy has emphasized on the needs to explore social history from the standpoint of multidisciplinary approach of history, sociology and anthropology nearly fifty years ago and the eminent British historian E.P Thompson has stressed the needs to combine the disciplines of folklore, anthropology and social history nearly 30 years ago. Moreover, our own universal poet-philosopher Rabindranath Tagore was the first among the Bengali intellectuals and thinkers to realize the importance of exploring the folk elements in the Bengali culture for reconstructing the social history of Bengal long time ago. Unfortunately, however, very few attempts have been made so far to study the folk elements in the Bengali culture from the multidisciplinary standpoint of history, folklore, sociology and anthropology and the present thesis is a humble attempt to explore that vital process.

For constructing the present thesis, I have tried to explore various Bengali literary sources written both by the elite or the 'reflective few' and folk poets and authors belonging both among the Bengali Hindus and the Muslims.

8 Roy, Niharranjan – Article entitled 'Itihas Rachanar Sampratik ekti paddhati (recent methodology for reconstructing history) in Ghosî, Benoy, 'Paschimbanger Sanskriti' (The Culture of West Bengal', Pustak Prakashak, First Edition, Calcutta, 1957
9 Thompson, E.P – Article entitled 'Folklore, Anthropology & Social History in the Indian Historical Review, New Delhi, Vol III. No.2, January, 1977
10 Tagore, Rabindranath – Chatra Sabhaer Rabindranather Abhishashan' (Rabindranath's Oration in the student's meeting) Banga Darshan nabaparjay, Nabam Barsha; 1316 B.S., pp. 427 - 431