Chapter VII

Conclusion

From the foregoing chapters it is crystal clear to us that since the advent of the Islam in Bengal, there developed a folk tradition and culture in the Bengali Muslim Society. The aforesaid syncretistic folk culture can be noticeable in the various aspects of the culture traits like folk songs, Pirism, contributions of the Muslims in the Bengali folk literature and last but not the least in the symbiosis of culture, mutual influences on culture manifold in various folk beliefs, social customs and rituals, and superstitious.

It has been mentioned before that folklore denotes a particular kind of the way of life, culture, manners, customs, rituals, traditions art and literature of undeveloped group of people named common folk and in our discourse it is the Bengali Muslim folk society. The nature and character of the folk life is noticeable in the folk literature and in one of its organs, folk songs. We have identified in the light of Hindu Muslim social context similarities of the folk mind as reflected in Bengal’s agrarian life in the main currents of the Bengali folk songs. We have seen that the Vaishnavism and Sufism by generating widespread impact crystalised the syncretistic life consciousness which find expressions in various spheres like asceticism, music and songs, spiritualism and aestheticism of the Bengalis irrespective of the Hindus and the Muslims.

While discussing pirism or the pir-cult we have observed that certain salient features have been remarkably noticeable in the pir ballads which were as follows:
Firstly, in all the pir-ballads and poetic verses the jehad or the crusade had been declared against the social and official or state sponsored injustices such as the human sacrifices, casteism, religious bigotry etc.

Secondly always the untouchable/ subaltern or the oppressed classes supported the aforesaid declaration of jehad of the pirs. Thirdly, while in the Mangal Kavyas or the auspicious poetic verses, for obtaining the worship of the high society the poets had taken recourse to the support of the persons belonging to the higher classes like the saintly merchants like Dhanapati or Chand Saudagar or the princes like Lausen by inciting the fear psychosis among them regarding the cruelty of the gods and goddesses and establishing their greatness. But the subaltern or the oppressed classes were the medium for expression and establishment of greatness of the pirs. As the symbol of the oppressed we get Dukhia of the Manik Pir Gatha (ballad) and Dukhe of the Banbibi’s tale (Kahini). By gaining the mind of the all sorrowful persons, the Pirs had done their jahura(or the expression of the secret spiritual power). From this perspective the Pir ballads are much more expressive of mass consciousness. Above all the ideal of understanding and synthesis between the different kinds of society and culture of the Hindus and the Muslims had been portrayed in powerful sketches in all the Pir ballads. Besides that to sing pir-mangal songs resembling Brata Katha (story of undertaking vow or ascetical austerities in order to attain something) to visit the majar of the pirs for praying for the fulfillment of any kind of desire, to sing the divine grace and power of Banbibi and Gazibaba before entering into the forest, to make noise of ovation or huzza(jaydhwani) in the name of the Panch Pir or five Pirs and ‘badar badar’ in the dariya (sea/bay or a large river) while in a boat journey, in the time of pestilence of the cow (‘go-marak’) to sing the song of Manik Pir, Satya Pir aand Sona Pir and offering of Shirni(Sinni) to them,
propitiation of planets (graha shanti) in the new year (Naba Barsha) and to sing ‘mangan’ (song for any desire or longing), desiring a year free from dangers and offering Shirni for Satya/ Manik Pir and their worship – all these rituals are widespread in the Bengali Hindu and Muslim folk society till now.

While discussing contributions of the Muslims in the Bengali folk literature we have observed that literature carries the most great identification of culture. (In the life of an ethnic community the culture which encircles the total gait from the inner place to upward place, may be defined in whatsoever way either as the structure or the superstructure, the literature especially expresses the mobility of culture). Literature simultaneously embalmed distant traditions of culture as well as recent states of acculturation. The Bengali literature too is carrying on its heart the great identity of the Bengali culture. Although containing outwardly various kinds of differentiation its intimate identity being that this literature is assimilative. It can be noticeable here that this assimilative desires of the Bengalis have been grown up by sheltering the folk mind. The identification of the poets of Charyapadas, poet Chandidas, the follower/worshipper of Basuli (goddess), Ramai Pandit, the writer of Sunyapurana- which was born out of Islamic ideas, or Shaikh Faezullah, the writer of Gorakshavijay – all of them were more or less representatives of folk life. The anthropological origin of the Bengalis also supports this folk based assimilative ideas. As the Bengali literature obtained the aforesaid form either before coming into the contact with the Islam or during the period of its contact with the Islam, likewise it had nurtured that folk based assimilative character throughout the Muslim period. Moreover a kind of assimilative desire had been expressed by the arrival of the Hindu gods and goddesses in the form of pir-paigambars. This folk-based assimilative desire had been added in the proverbs, rhymes, riddles, ballads, songs, panchali, punthis (or a
kind of Bengali unrefined poetic tale celebrating the story of a deity/ pir-paigambers) of the later period. By accepting the aforesaid characteristic features, the Bengali literature written by the Muslims (at the folk level) had moved forward, therefore this literature was the most fortunately blessed with the identification of the Hindu Muslim cultural assimilation. The Bengali literature created by the Muslims is also the literature of the Bengali as a whole.

Then coming to the issue of mutual influences on culture in the Bengali Society or influence of other culture on another society / symbiosis of culture, one can see that mutual influence of each other and the social activities of the Hindus and the Muslims can be called as the impact of other culture or another culture or symbiosis of culture. It can be said that their aforesaid mutual give and take aspect had been effective not from the then theoretical perspective but from the social perspective as the part of way of life.

There are two spheres of influences of the symbiosis of culture-

i) Day to day way of life and ii) Festivals and ceremony/rituals. In both the cases applied form of symbiosis or mutual give and take can be noticed. Here different types of activities and practices in the day to day life of admixtured culture had been narrated along with mentions of the Hindu customs and rituals.

From the aforesaid discussion it can be summarized that at the folk level due to the prevalence of the little tradition a kind of synthesis had been accomplished in the Bengali Muslim society. However that synthesis had been disturbed for the first time as mentioned before, during the religious revivalism of the Wahabi-Faraizi movements of the nineteenth century.
As already noted, the reformists’ success was at best partial. Secondly, the inherited beliefs and practices which derived from the folk tradition of rural Bengal rather than orthodox Hinduism had a powerful hold on the Muslim masses.

Now let us analyse the changes brought forward by the reform the Bengali Muslim Society. In the first place, the reform movements brought new awareness among the ordinary villages and as an inevitable result, helped to transform a people into community.

The contribution, both direct and indirect of reform and revivalism led to the growth of a community consciousness among the non-elite Muslim population in Bengal. Moreover another significant result of the reform movements was that they were also instrumental in widening the social and cultural gap between the Hindu and Muslim poorer classes.

Then in the second place, the reformists’ crusade was directed against all alien accretions in Islam: the total destruction of a pantheon of confused beliefs was their declared goal. The reformists’ constant emphasis on the extra-territorial loyalty of the Muslims, and their attempted rejection of all local association, invited attention of the ordinary Muslims, at least to the mundane aspects of the indo-Islamic traditions, namely dress, language, names and nomenclature, and induced them to look beyond the borders of Bengal, and at times, beyond India for cultural inspiration. This was indeed a significant development in Bengali Islam.

Then coming to the twentieth century, one can see that there were many ups and downs in the identity crisis of the Bengali Muslims. One of the most vexed questions that stirred the Bengali Muslim mind was the language issue. What should be the mother-tongue of the Bengali Muslims – Urdu or Bengali? This controversy acquired a major dimension and was therefore responsible for their
identity crisis. Although the controversy continued unabated till the early thirties of the twentieth century, however by 1920 onwards Bengali was more or less established as the mother tongue of the Bengali Muslims. Still the question arose among the orthodox quarters about what exactly would be the yardstick off the Bengali language and literature for the Bengali Muslims – the standard Bengali literature that was in vogue or a particular kind of Muslim Bengali was to be developed? However the modernist section of the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia accepted standard Bengali as their literary medium but expressed the necessity to enrich that Bengali also with Islamic flavour and tradition as and when necessary, which they opined, would also help in building a common literature both for the Hindu and the Muslim alike. Therefore from the above discussion it would seem that the Bengali Muslim intelligentsia was virtually unanimous in feeling that by language and birthplace Bengali Muslims were Bengali and after 1917 they vigorously rejected attempts to make Urdu the mother tongue of the Bengali Muslims.\(^{380}\) However it should be admitted that the Bengali Muslims seemed caught between the two worlds. On the one hand, indifference to Bengali was alleged to be impeding their development as a community which they have acknowledged. On the other hand, they could not free themselves completely from their unrealistic dreams of either Pan-Islamism or All-India nationhood for the Muslims alone. That is why they have supported, barring a few exceptions, the cause of Bengali as well as Urdu at the same time in order to maintain their separate Islamic identity and thereby jeopardizing their own Bengali identity. This dilemma continued throughout the preparation period of the study and after the creation of Pakistan the question of Bengali temporarily receded into the background and again emerged in the shape of the famous language

movement (Bhasha Andolan) of 1952 in East Pakistan and the issue of Bengali identity was beginning to gather strength and ultimately culminated into the unique Bengali language and culture based secular national liberation movement from which born out a new state – Bangladesh.

After the emergence of Bangladesh on 16\textsuperscript{th} December, 1971, that country has gone through several phases. The first phase was that of Mujib era which lasted from January 1972 till 15\textsuperscript{th} August, 1975 when Shaikh Mujibur Rahaman took over the reins of the governmental authority as the Prime Minister of a secular democratic Bangladesh led by the Awami League. The new constitution promulgated in 1972 had four main pillars like secularism, nationalism, democracy and socialism. It was a cabinet form of parliamentary democracy like the British or the Indian ones. However that experiment continued for around three years after which Shaikh Mujib facing tremendous domestic and external pressure, suddenly resorted to a kind of party rule under the banner of BAKSAL or Bangladesh Krishak Shramik Awami league. Then on 15\textsuperscript{th} August, 1975, Shaikh Mujibur Rahaman, the architect of secular nationalism in Bangladesh had been assassinated along with his trusted lieutenants like Tajuddin Ahmed and some other major leaders of the Awami League by a naked conspiracy. The leader of the conspiracy led by Khandakar Mustaq Ahmed took over the reins of power temporarily. Then Major General Ziaur Rahaman, himself a hero of the liberation struggle in Bangladesh became the President of Bangladesh led by his creation the Bangladesh National Party or the B.N.P. The B.N.P led government has revised the constitution of Bangladesh and cancelled secularism from the constitution. Although not a fundamentalist party the B.N.P opposed Awami league’s secular nationalism on the ground that Bangladesh is a predominantly Muslim country (85\% of the population of Bangladesh are Muslims). However B.N.P’s policies are
moderate, Then in 1981 President Zia-ur-Rahaman had been assassinated and in his place Lt.Genera l Hussain Muhammad Ershad became the President and he founded Jatiya Party, another moderate party. His rule had continued for some years. Then from 1990 onwards either the B.N.P led by Begam Khaleda Zia (wife of Zia-ur-Rahaman) or Awami League led by Shaikh Hasina (daughter of Shaikh Mujibur Rahaman) ruled in Bangladesh. Then in 2012-2013 there was the historic Shahbag movement, a great popular upsurge against the fundamentalist took place. Its demand was trial and punishment for the leader of the genocide committed by the pro-Pakistani elements during the Bangladesh liberation war. Moreover since then an intense struggle between the fundamentalists and the secularists is going on in Bangladesh. The resurgence of fundamentalism & fundamentalist politics is going on in Bangladesh just like in India for the last three decades. This rise of fundamentalists is certainly a great blow to the humanist folk-culture prevalent in Bangladesh and in this part of Bengal which we have analysed so far in the forgoing chapter. However inspite of the rise of fundamentalism, the vibrancy of folk-culture is quite strong in Bangladesh and the most recent Shahbag movement is a pointer to this which is nothing but a powerful assertion of Bengali identity. Moreover, the historic Martyr’s Day or Shahid Dibas of ‘52 language movement (Bhasha Andolaan) which is being observed every year on 21st February in Martyr’s memorial in Dhaka and also elsewhere in Bangladesh is certainly an assertion of Bengali identity. The present researcher had the good fortune to be present on one such occasion on 21st February 2011 in martyr’s memorial and had seen that thousands of people were paying homage to the martyrs and on that day there was such tremendous jam on the Dacca’s wide thoroughfares that the traffic could not move which is a proof enough of the emotionalism of the Bengalis irrespective of their religion and I also became emotional and felt proud to be a Bengali may be of this part of Bengal, beyond the other side of the border.
Therefore it will be no exaggeration to suggest that the folk-identity of the Bengalis irrespective of religions are still very powerful at least in Bangladesh and that is why they are feeling proud as the Bengalis.

Now coming to the issue of the Bengali Muslims on this part of Bengal one can say they have also gone through several phases after the partition. In the first phase upto 1971 they have receded into the background and were somewhat frustrated and confused lot. But after the emergence of Bangladesh as a Bengali nation state and seeing their cultural progress, they are slowly coming out of their shell, taking to modern education and now-a-days many bright Bengali Muslim boys and girls are taking to higher education and many talented literateurs like Syed Mustafa Siraj, Abul Bashar, Nazrul Islam, Afsar Ahmed et al. have emerged on the cultural horizon on this part of Bengal. Syed Mustafa Siraj, who passed away just a year ago had written many things on the folk life of the Bengalis irrespective of the Muslims and the Hindus. In this respect his ‘Maya Mridanga’ is on the ‘Alkap’ – a kind of folk-theatre in Bengal. Besides his ‘Alik Manush’ which is on the mystic life of the pirs, have won many accolades such as the Sahitya Academy Award, Ananda Purashkar and other awards. He had also been invited to the U.S.A for literary seminars and stayed there for few months attending literary conferences. Besides one can also say about Abdul Jabbar who passed away a few years back. Hs ‘Banglar Chalchitra’ is a vivid manifestation of the folk life of Bengal.

However inspite of all these the influence of folk culture is slowly diminishing among the Bengalis irrespective of their religion due to the several factors. Firstly due to the growth of globalization there was the emergence of consumerism, electronic media , etc. As a result of which slowly the village life is also changing and urban-agrarian divide in culture is also diminishing. Owing to
that various mediums of folk culture like folk songs, patuas or a kind of folk-painters are losing their popularity even among the simple village folk. Besides that, the rise of fundamentalism everywhere in the world including India is also slowly destroying the folk elements among the Bengali Muslims which is also affecting the Hindus as well. There were persecutions and ostracism and social boycott on the Bauls and Fakirs by the neighbouring Hindu and Muslim communities. The present researcher has done field study on the Bauls and Fakirs in Nadia. He has met and interviewed Arman Fakir in December 2011 who is the resident of Gorbhanga village in Nadia. The Gorbhanga village is the abode of around 100-150 bauls and fakirs. Arman Fakir told the present researcher that his father embraced the fakiri path around forty years ago and at that time he had to encounter social boycott and persecution from the neighbouring Muslim community but gradually he overcame all these and initiated many to the baul-fakir fold. His son Arman Fakir who is of ‘Maner manush’ fame has built up an ‘akhra’ of the bauls and fakirs in Gorbhanga. Many foreigners usually visit this famous akhra or the habitat of the bauls and fakirs every year. Incidentally ‘Maner Manush’ is a famous film made by the renowned film director Gautam Ghosh on Lalan Fakir in which Prasenjit a reputed Bengali film actor played the role of Lalan Fakir. Arman Fakir has also acted and sung baul-fakiri songs in that film. ArmanFakir also told the present researcher that although his akhra is no longer facing social boycott but the neighbouring Muslim society is viewing fakirs as a ‘beshara’ or those who are opposing the Shariyat. Incidentally Gorbhanga is a predominantly Muslim village and inspite of the social isolation, around 150 bauls/ fakirs stay there.

Besides that the present researcher also met Samuel Mondal, a Christian baul staying in the Bengali Christian locality in Chapra, Nadia. Samuel Mondal
also narrated the same story of social boycott by the neighbouring Bengali Christian community. Incidentally Samuel Mondal and his sons became bauls by defying social ostracism.

Almost same is the story of Subhadra Sharma and her husband – a Hindu baul couple also of Chapra – who had to face social criticisms from the neighbouring Hindu community.

Then the present writer also has gone to the Brittihuda village in Chapra, Nadia, the centre of the ‘Sahebdhani’, a folk religious cult, founded in the eighteenth century by a Muslim fakir and then popularized and led by one Ram Sharan Paul. He has met Prabir Paul, a sixth generation descendant of Ramsharan Paul. Muslims are followers of this folk cult, besides them are many Hindu mostly belonging to the lower castes. There are also some high caste Hindus who are followers of this Sahebdhani cult. I have also attended the fair of Agradwip, a village on Bandel-Katwa line. In the month of Chaitra (March /April) every year a large fair of the Sahebdhani cult is being held where many bauls, fakirs and ‘jat vaishnavs’ are assembled.

However inspite of the popularity of the folk religious cults like the Sahebdhani, Balaraamis/ Balaharis and the Kartabhaja who believed in humanist philosophy irrespective of caste, creed and religion, it must be admitted that slowly their popularity is on the wane and there are many deviations from the original philosophy when these were founded earlier.

In the end it can be said that inspite of the various changes that have occurred in the twentieth century, the Bengali Muslim society are still following many folk customs and rituals and superstitions and pay tribute and observe vows
in the pir’s majaar at the folk level by which one may observe that one can change one’s religion but the culture is unchangeable.