

The Scope of Studying Social History of Sultanate Bengal

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Abstract: In this article an attempt has been made to identify misinterpretation of some leading modern works on social history of Sultanate Bengal (1204-1574 A.D), which will, hopefully, help us – the new research scholar in history – portray more accurately the socio-economic developments of the period in question. For this purpose, a number of pioneering as well as authentic works in the field have briefly been reviewed and some of their important shortcomings related to our treatment have been pointed out. It shows that none of these leading works contains any information appropriate to the study of a unified social history of Bengal and all of them utterly fail to present a picture of changing socio-economic circumstances that took place simply due to the advent of a new ruling elite of foreign origin in the thirteenth century.

Aim and Importance

The importance of writing such an article lies mainly in providing the young research scholars with information on loopholes in modern works, including the untapped fields of inquiry to be examined in the light of fresh evidence. Such a work, if truly meant, needs a critical analysis of three distinct aspects: a review of modern works, exploration of new source materials, and the identification of some new topics yet to be drawn up. Admittingly, the present article is only a modest attempt to serve the purpose of the problem related to the first

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cause. In a word, an honest effort has been made here to indicate the lacking pertaining to social complexities occurred in the leading modern works on social history of Sultanate Bengal (1204 - 1576 A.D) - a study which, hopefully, will help us, the students of history to choose the arena of research project.

Writings on Social History of Bengal

It should, very significantly, be noted that at a time when either attracted by their magnificence or impelled by the desire to condemn them, historians have devoted their entire attention to the rulers and their military exploits and none to the people, then one of the fruitful products of Dhaka University's *The History of Bengal* (Hindu period, vol.1)¹ and Nihar Ranjan Ray's *Bangalir Itihas* (Adiparva)² - which provide a picture of the society and people of ancient and early medieval times, deserve to be highly commended. But no works, even what to say about the *History of Bengal* (Muslim period, vol. II)³ published by the said University, containing socio-economic history of the Sultanate period has come to light till the advent of K.M Ashraf's monumental work *Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan*⁴ and Abdul Karim's *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal* (Down to 1538 A.D)⁵. It then goes without saying that both the works broke in fresh ground for historical studies and thereby set a pattern and gave a new dimension of research - while the former represents South Asia in general, the latter Bengal in particular. However, this new trend in history writing particularly in the context of Bengal, was then followed in some other pioneering works, of whose Muhammad Abdur Rahim's *Social and Cultural History of Bengal* (1201-1576 A.D)⁶, M. R. Tarafdar's *Husain Shahi Bengal* (1494-1538 A.D.): *A Socio-Political Study*⁷ and Richard M. Eaton's *The Rise of Islam and the*

Bengal Frontier (1204-1760 A.D)⁸ are leading as well as authentic. Besides, some other works, such as Muhammad Enamul Haq's *Bange Sufi Probhabe*⁹, Asim Roy's *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Benga*¹⁰, Sk. Abdul Latif's *The Muslim Mystic Movement in Bengal*, 1301-1550A.D.¹¹ and Akbar Ali Khan's *Discovery of Bangladesh: Explorations into Dynamics of a Hidden Nation*¹² deserve to be cited. Of these, the works of Muhammad Enamul Haq and SK. Abdul Latif fall in the same category and deal with a limited as well as specific aspect of social history, and the remaining two state some socio-economic complexities mainly belonging to the eighteenth and twentieth centuries with a meager reference to the period in question.

Review of Modern Works

1. K. M. Ashrafs *Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan*, no doubt, is still a classic work, but it not only throws insufficient light on social history of Bengal, the earliest rival geo-political unit of Delhi, it rarely contains any critical analysis of some social aspects, which the author has written in his introductory remarks of the book:

As a result of the Muslim impact, the ancient Hindu order was almost completely destroyed, political and social divisions were leveled, caste was modified, religious tendencies took a new direction and finally, the conception of India as a whole was made possible if very imperfectly intelligible. A study of the early Muslim period becomes particularly important in view of the fact that these formative forces of Indian culture came into play at the time.¹³

2. In his book *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal* (Down to A. D. 1538), Dr. Abdul Karim clearly identifies his central

problem as the origin and development of the Muslim society in Bengal. He writes in his preface that he has "gathered all the relevant materials which help in tracing the origin and gradual building up of the Muslim Society in Bengal from the earliest time down to 1538 AD," and he continues by saying:

Islam which came as a foreign religion was integrated into the socio-religious system of the people, and while it won over the general mass to its own ideals, many of the local customs, beliefs and practices stole into its fold and became recognized as the part and parcel of the local Muslim society; Islam became a national religion in Bengal mainly under the patronising spirit of independent Sultans¹⁴.

Ignoring the questionable accuracy of the last sentence, all other sentences tend to suggest that Dr. Karim has chosen "an integrated developing social unit" as the core of his study. It is also supported by the remarks of A. H. Dani in the foreword, where he says, "it is pleasing to go over to the peoples' history and view in broad perspective, the interactions of different civilizations, the mingling of the peoples of diverse races and qualities and the social adjustments that accrue from the complexities of human life." But the approach to social history suggested by the 'preface' and the 'foreword' is never developed in the body of Dr. Karim's book. He offers instead an analysis of agencies through which members were recruited for Muslim community in Bengal,¹⁵ and a discussion of modification which occurred in Islamic practices.¹⁶ There is no historical study of the growth and development of the Muslim society, nor is there any systematic history of the interactions of different civilization. Further, there is no discussion of the value or institutional structure either of the groups who were resident in Bengal or of

the Muslim migrants, nor is there any explicit comparison of the events in Bengal with those occurred in other areas at the same time.

3. Due to the absence of any preliminary discussion of the scope and conceptual framework in Mohammad Abdur Rahim's *Social and Cultural History of Bengal* (1201-1576 A. D.), the reader is just left to piece together the author's view from the organization of his book and from his incidental remarks. Remarks such as the period between 1201 to 1576 (i.e. the Sultanate period) was "the time of the development of the Muslim society,"¹⁷ suggest that at least Dr. Rahim shares Dr. Karim's view of Muslim society as an appropriate social unit for study, despite the fact that the title of the book encompasses the fact of Bengal cultural history for three and a half centuries. That the author has particularised his field of study becomes more confirmed when he writes in the preface, "although this work is mainly on the Muslims, sufficient references have, however, been made to the development of the Hindus"¹⁸ His incidental remarks: "it (i. e. 1201-1576 A. D.) was the formative age of the political and socio-cultural life of the province.... vital forces and ideas were in operation and new institutions were in the process of development,"¹⁹ which, of course, is the true picture of the society, but unfortunately the contents of his remark did not come up to his discussion. Moreover, it appears that Dr. Abdur Rahim has become more sectarian in approach and outlook than a historian. Thus, he emphatically discusses the impact of the immigrant Muslim upon the Hindu community,²⁰ but not that of the latter on the former.

4. In his work *Husain Shahi Bengal* (1494-1538 A.D.): *A Socio-political Study*, Professor Momtazur Rahman Tarafdar rightly

claims that before his work, "no attempt has so far been made to write a book on the diverse aspects of Husain Shahi Bengal, such as administrative structure, economic life, religious movements, cultural activities and all that significantly counted in the history of the country."²¹ From his writings, it seems that all sorts of socio-economic developments taken place in the history of Bengal, happened during the period of its forty four years, i.e. from 1494 to 1538 A. D. The learned scholar writes, "It was the period which witnessed the beginning of significant forces deeply affecting the political and economic history of Bengal."²² Further, he maintains that, "Husain Shahi rule represents thus a formative period of Bengal History".²³ It is important to note that Dr. Tarafdar did not fail to bring to his notice the significant socio-economic changes that took place immediately with the advent of the Muslims in the early thirteenth century. In chapter-I, entitled 'The Background' the scholar rightly observes that the Muslim rule presents a significant contrast with the preceding Sena rule.²⁴ He again records, "in the initial period of Muslim rule, coins were circulated not only as a symbol of the rulers' sovereignty but perhaps as a medium of exchange as well."²⁵ But, interestingly, the contents of his work hardly bear any testimony to the statements outlined in the background.

5. A few words may be said about Richard M. Eaton's *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (1204-1760), of which some pages are dedicated to the study of economy, society and culture of Bengal.²⁶ In dealing with the Sultanate phase, the scholar has devoted most of his energy and time to the revival of the traditional debates on the arrival and settlements of the early sufis,²⁷ and the nature of mass conversion to Islam.²⁸ But, so far, society, economy and culture are concerned, keeping all evidence

of socio-economic developments in suppression, the learned scholar observes that, Islamic devotionism became force in its own right in Bengal Delta.²⁹ The socio-cultural transformations, however, according to the author, "took place between the late sixteenth and mid-eighteenth centuries."³⁰

6. The main theme of Dr. Muhammad Enamul Haq's *Bange Sufi Probhabe* (Influence of Sufism on Bengal), or *A History of Sufism in Bengal*³¹ is, according to the author himself, "to show how Islam under the grab of sufistic movements, which were in their full swing up to the sixteenth century A.D. in India, entered Bengal, and how it underwent many momentous changes in the hands of the Bengali Sufis and the Bengali Muslim affiliated to the different schools of Northern Indian Sufis thought."³² Thus he successfully explains that Islam as it was and as it is now prevalent in Bengal is, by no means, an Islam of the prophet's or his four lieutenants' time. It is rather a Sufistic interpretation of pristine Islam, on which the writer justifiably maintains "the whole cultural history of the Bengali Muslims rests."^{32a} But this leading work on sufism could have satisfied the students of social history more perfectly if it would have contained the role of the Sufi- Saints, their *Khanqahs*, Shrines, etc. in causing social mobility as well as cultural interactions. Further, it would have been more valuable if it would have encompassed some more diverse aspects such as the clarification of various religious groups, namely, the Ulama, Fakirs, Saints, etc. and their mutual relationship, impact of the Muslim Saints upon the non- Muslim Mystics of different heretical persuasions, etc.

7. In addition to the short-comings occurred in Dr. Muhammad Enamul Haq's work, Sk. Abdul Latif's *Mystic Movement in*

Bengal, 1301-1550, in regard to some of its topics, is the repetition of the former, which the latter has failed to consult. In this recent work of Dr. Latif, the author could, instead of listing the names of members of sufis responsible for the spread of Islam in Bengal, have explained the process of conversion with due emphasis on the socio-economic variables including the role of the Sufis, which initiated and accelerated it. In fact, we cannot have much disagreement with the comment of one of the learned reviewers of this book: "the book has failed to present a coherent account of the growth of the sufi movement in Bengal."³³

8. The sum and substance of Asim Ray's *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* is, in the language of the author himself, "the Islamic Syncretistic tradition,..... is a descriptive and analytical label for the religious tradition that the Muslim 'cultural mediators' in Bengal reconstructed rather consciously, urged by a deep sense of obligation towards the masses of the believers, with their specific needs and demands in the social and cultural milieus of Bengal."³⁴ And significantly, this hypothesis which, to some extent, tallies with that of Dr. Enamul Haq's work, has very aptly been substantiated in the context of eighteenth- twentieth centuries history of Bengal. But there is no exposition of the analysis of social phenomenon of Bengal right from the advent of the Muslims in the early thirteenth century as the very title of the work, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* demands. That the author could not have entered the social complexities of the early phase of the Muslim rule is attested by his confessional statement regarding the consultation of source materials. The learned scholar writes:

It did not take me very long to find out that the standard literary sources for the history of Islam in Bengal- consisting some meagre information in a few Persian chronicles focusing primarily on the political affairs of the Muslim rulers in Bengal in the 18th century, some much-used Sufi hagiological literature of either general or particular nature for Bengal, some correspondence (*makubāt*) and saying (*maḥfūzāt*) with bearings on Bengal, and some sundry travel reports and observations - were totally inadequate for the types of question I sought to raise and answer about the religiosity of the bulk of Muslim believers in Bengal.³⁵

And this is the reason that the author went through the "Bengali manuscripts"³⁶ to collect evidence to be set in support of his hypothesis. In fact, it is the main lacking in Asim Ray's work that the author could not explore many facts pertaining to social phenomenon contained in the Perso - Arabic sources, which have recently come to the kind notice of the scholars. So, it appears that many of the concluding remarks, now ascribed to the Bengal society of all the Muslim times, would be otherwise if the source materials of variegated character, specially those belonging to the medieval period are re-explored in the light of new considerations.

9. In his work *'Discovery of Bangladesh: Explorations into Dynamics of a Hidden Nation'*, Akbar Ali Khan rightly justifies the scope of treatment in two points: first, the historians are usually indifferent to the potentialities of comparative analysis, secondly, historians in South Asia are pre-occupied with the great unitary states and altogether overlook the grassroots institutions.³⁷ So, his 'study' according

to the author, "seeks to provide the missing perspective on Bangladesh history by comparing the micro and macro institutions which evolved in and around areas which now constitute Bangladesh with those of other regions in South Asia."³⁸ Regarding the core hypothesis of the book, our observations agree with those of Professor Sirajul Islam:

Akbar Ali Khan claims that unlike most other parts of South-Asia where corporate village communities thrived and strong-grassroots institutions developed, Bangladesh villages, which were characteristically small and dispersed, lacked corporateness and social cohesion and consequently the grass-root institutions here remained weak and feeble and that robust individualism, antagonistic to institutional development became the ethos of country life.³⁹

The author, admittedly inspired by the saying "Clearly history is too important to be left to professional historians alone,"⁴⁰ was expected much more than he has written in five chapters of his book of 180 pages, of which social complexities of ancient and medieval times are exclusively based on secondary sources. As a matter of fact, the duration of his field of study is so vast that the author had just to make a survey of outline of ancient and medieval Bengal's rural character and concentrate his attention on nineteenth and twentieth centuries' Bengal. It appears that if the changing courses of socio-political history of medieval India, let alone Bengal, is properly studied, the hypothesis of this book, which now seems to be an 'ambitious project' would be a quite different one.

Observation and Conclusion

The information of bureaucratic administration and coined money and the importation of various foreign institutions as well as devices and technology, contained in the contemporary sources, many of which are conspicuously absent in the aforesaid modern works, suggest that the society and culture of the period in question was quite contrary to what the learned scholars of the listed leading works on the field have recommended.

In fine, we can conclude by saying that, first, none of the above-mentioned works present a unified historical account of the developments of any social unit in eastern India, let alone the whole of Bengal society; secondly, in approach and methodology, they do not justify the terms of analysis by comparison with similar phenomena occurred elsewhere in time and space; thirdly, and perhaps it is the most important aspect in the history of India in general and Bengal in particular that has not received proper treatment of the scholars, is the socio-economic changes that took place mainly due to the process of urbanization along with its other concomitants -- a kind of new forces which began functioning with the arrival of the new ruling elite of foreign origin early in the thirteenth century.

Notes

1. R.C Majumdar (chief editor), *History of Bengal*, vol. I, (Hindu-period), Dhaka University, 1943 (reprint, 1976).
2. Nihar Ranjan Ray, *Bangalir Itihas* (Adiparva), (Calcutta University, 1994). Its English rendering under the title of *History of the Bengali People* (Ancient period) published by Orient Longman in 1994 is also available.
3. Jadunath Sarkar (chief editor), *History of Bengal*, vol. II, Muslim period, Dhaka University, 1948 (reprint, 1976).

4. K.M. Ashraf, *Life and Condition of the People of Hindustan*, (Jiwan Prakashan, Delhi, 1959), (reprint: Munshiram Monoharlal, 1970).
5. Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal* (Down to A.D. 1538), ASB, Dhaka, November, 1959.
6. Muhammad Abdur Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal* (1201-1576 A.D), Pakistan Historical Society Karachi, 1963.
7. Momtazur Rahman Tarafdar, *Husain Shahi Bengal: A Socio-Political Study*, ASB, Dhaka, 1965.
8. Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (1204 - 1760 A.D), University of California & Oxford University Press, 1993 & 1994.
9. Mohammad Enamul Haq. *Bange Sufi Probhabe* (Sufi Influence on Bengal), University of Calcutta, 1935. Its English version entitled *A History of Sufism in Bengal* has been published by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh in 1975.
10. Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, Princeton University Press, 1983.
11. S. K. Abdul Latif, *The Muslim Mystic Movement in Bengal*, 1301-1550, K.P. Bagchi and Co, Calcutta, 1993.
12. Akbar Ali Khan, *Discovery of Bangladesh: Explorations into Dynamics of a Hidden Nation*, University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1996.
13. K.M. Ashraf, *ibid.*, "Introduction", p.v.
14. Abdul Karim, *ibid.*, "preface", p.vii.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 39-140.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 158 - 173.
17. Mohammad Abdur Rahim, *ibid.*, p.413.
18. *Ibid.*, "preface", p.vii

19. *Ibid.*, p. 413.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 301-327.
21. M. R. Tarafdar, *ibid.*, "preface" p.i.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 350.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 351.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Richard M. Eaton, *ibid.*, pp. 1-134.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-94.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 113 - 134
29. *Ibid.*, p. 112
30. *Ibid.*, "Introduction", p. xxv.
31. The main corpus of *Bange Sufi Prabhabe* and *A History of Sufism in Bengal* is almost the same, see p.32.
32. Dr. Mohammad Enamul Haq, *A History of Sufism in Bengal*, ASB, Dhaka, 1975, "preface", p.v.
- 32a. *Ibid.*, p.v.
33. M. R. Tarafdar, "Review of Book", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* (Humanities), vol. 39, no.1, June, 1994, p.173.
34. Asim Roy, *ibid.*, 'preface', p. xii, for details, see Chapter-2.
35. *Ibid.*, "preface", pp.x - xi.
36. *Ibid.*, p. xi.
37. Akbar Ali Khan, *ibid.*, "Introduction", pp. 19 - 20.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 20.

39. Sirajul Islam, "Review of Book", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh*, vol. 42, no.2, December, 1997, p. 355.

40. Akbar Ali Khan, *ibid.*, p. 19.