

# The Political History of Muslim Bengal



# The Political History of Muslim Bengal:

*An Unfinished Battle of Faith*

By

Mahmudur Rahman

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This book is dedicated to the memory of the ascetic Sufis who travelled to  
a distant and alien Bengal to preach the monotheist and egalitarian  
message of Islam to the people of the delta.



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## PROLOGUE

The first draft of this book was written in a prison cell at Kashimpur Central Jail during a ten-month period from December 2015 to October 2016. Why I was interned there will be narrated a little later. I wish to start my story by giving a short geographic, demographic and cultural description of Bangladesh.

The country gained independence in 1971 after a nine-month liberation war aided by neighbouring India against brutal Pakistani forces. As the eastern wing of Pakistan, this land of 54,000 square miles was known as East Pakistan. Under British colonial occupation, East Pakistan was called East Bengal. The English word ‘Bengal’ was derived from the word ‘Bangalah’ used during the Muslim Sultanate and Mughal period. In ancient times, a few south-eastern districts in India at the mouth of the great river Ganges were called ‘Banga’ or, in Sanskrit, ‘Vanga’. Historians generally accept that Bengal in English originated from Persian ‘Bangalah’ through Portuguese ‘Bengalah’ or ‘Pengala’. The land boundary of modern Bangladesh is much longer than that of ancient Banga. Other parts of eastern India prior to the Muslim conquest in 1203 AD were known as Barendra or Pundra, Samatata, Chandradwip, Harikel, and so forth. All those regions in addition to the original ‘Banga’ constitute the present geographical boundary of Bangladesh. I am generally leaving out the ancient names of Radha, Gaud, Lakhnawati, Satgaon, Tamralipti and Hougli from the subject of this book as those parts presently constitute neighbouring West Bengal, an Indian state.

Although the Turkish general Ikhtiyar al-Din defeated the last Sena ruler, Lakshmana Sena, in 1203 AD and established Muslim rule in Bengal, it took nearly another hundred and fifty years to bring the whole of Bengal under a single command. Sultan Shams-al-Din Ilyas Shah brought all of Bengal – north, south, east and west – under unified administration for the first time in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The independent Muslim Sultanate in Bengal survived for nearly two centuries until Afghan general Sher Shah Suri became the ruler for a brief period in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Emperor Akbar of the great Mughal dynasty later made the region, Subah Bangalah, a province of the Mughal-Indian kingdom after defeating the last independent Afghan ruler in Bengal in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. Dhaka was

made the capital of Bengal in 1611 by the Mughal general Islam Khan Chishti during the reign of Emperor Jahangir, son of Akbar.

Dr. Nihar Ranjan Roy, a leading Hindu Bengali historian concedes the above facts with a touch of sadness in his well-respected work, *Bangalir Itihas: Adiparba* (History of the Bengali: Early period, first published in 1949). He writes:

“Attempts of Sasanka, Pala and Sena kings to unite all the regions of Bengal under the name Gaud did not succeed. That good fortune went to the name Banga, the same Banga that was viewed with contempt and remained largely obscured in Aryan civilization and culture; and even to the Pala and Sena kings, association and identity of Banga was considered less noble and therefore, unacceptable. Land boundaries of Bengal in its entirety could not be united under the name Banga during Hindu reign, it was achieved by the so-called Pathan (Afghan) rule and culminated to its final shape at the time of Akbar when the entire Bengal was given the status of Subah Bangalah. Thereafter, Bengal got proper recognition and identity under British rule although Bangladesh of today is smaller in size than Akbar’s Subah Bangalah.” (Roy, 1949: 124)

We find the oldest official reference to ‘Bang’ on a coin minted in 1291 bearing the legend: “This silver coin has been minted at Lakhnawati out of the land revenue of ‘Bang’ in the year six hundred ninety.” The year mentioned here is that of Hijra, i.e. the Muslim calendar year. Sultan Rukn-al-Din Kaikaus was the ruler of Lakhnawati (present-day West Bengal) at the time the coin was minted. The inscription on the coin clearly indicates that the incorporation of ‘Bang’ or eastern Bengal was completed before the coin was minted. Sultan Rukn-al-Din was the grandson of Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Balban, the powerful ruler of Delhi. Bengal remained under Muslim rule until 1757, when Robert Clive of the the East India Company defeated Nawab Siraj al-Doulah at the fateful battle of Plassey. The subjugation of Bengal by the British forces paved the way for the ultimate colonization of the Indian subcontinent. India regained independence in 1947 with the birth of the two separate nations, India and Pakistan.

Now to religion and language. Buddhism had remained the most dominant Aryan offshoot religion in East Bengal from the earliest days of its founding by Gautama Buddha till the ultimate absorption of the faith by Brahmanism across greater India. It is a great puzzle how a world religion which had enjoyed majority followings in the region for nearly two millennia could almost disappear. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Indian Prime Minister, in his famous book entitled, *The Discovery of India*, writing about the process of pushing the well-entrenched Buddhism out of India and into oblivion notes:

“Some degraded forms of Buddhism continued in East Bengal and in Sind in the North West. Otherwise Buddhism gradually vanished from India as a widespread religion.” (Nehru, 2002: 180)

Chinese Buddhist traveller monks Fa-Hien and Hsuan Tsang or Yuan-Chwang in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively found Pundra (present-day Bogra) and Samatata (present-day Comilla) to be full of Buddhist temples and monasteries. It is also claimed in some Buddhist mythological literature that Gautama Buddha himself travelled to Pundra in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and lived there for about six months. If this supposed myth is, in fact, true then we have to accept that the people of eastern Bengal were attracted to Buddhism long before the birth of Jesus Christ. On the other hand, the other dominant Aryan religion, Brahmanism, did not arrive in the region before the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century AD according to the historical evidence. Dr. Nihar Ranjan Roy says:

“Prior to the Gupta era, although some evidence of the spread of Jainism (faith founded by Mahavira, contemporary of Buddha), Ajibik (faith founded by Gosala, contemporary of Mahavira) and Buddhism are available, no reliable evidence of Brahmanism has been found. There is no mention of Bangladesh at all in Ved-Samhita. Although there is some reference in Oiteriyo Aranyaka literature, but that too in negative and critical terms.” (Roy, 1949:495).

However, at the time of the Muslim conquest of Bengal by Ikhtiyar Khalji, Buddhism was not only under severe persecution by the Khatriya-Brahman Sena ruler, but was also suffering from philosophical and moral decay. There were clear signs that Brahmanism had succeeded in giving a mortal and decisive blow to Buddhism in the long history of struggle between the two religions in Bengal.

Islam as a religion probably made its entry to south-eastern Bengal in the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century through Arab merchants and seafarers. Eminent Arab Muslim historians and geographers of the time, such as Abu-al-Qasim Ubaid Allah ibn Khurdadhbih (died 912 AD), Abu Abd Allah al-Idrisi (died 1164 AD) and the more famous Al-Musudi (died 956 AD), describe the coastal regions of ancient Noakhali, Chittagong and Arakan in their scholarly works. Some scholars believe that Arab Muslims settled somewhere near the coastal region of Chittagong during the very early period. There is a strong possibility that those settlements later became the nucleus for the gradual growth in the Muslim settler population. Commercial relations between early Arab Muslims and the people of Bengal are also corroborated by archaeological evidence. In excavations at Paharpur (Bogra) and Mainamati (Comilla) Abbasid coins were found

including those of the period of the famous Caliph Harun-al-Rashid (786–809 AD) to give credence to the theory that Muslim traders and preachers travelled to eastern Bengal during the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD or even earlier.

The arrival of political Islam at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century paved the way for the arrival of large numbers of Muslim immigrants including mystic Sufis from Persia, Central Asia and Arab countries. Dr. Abdul Karim, eminent Bangladeshi historian comments in his Social History of the Muslims in Bengal:

“Bakhtiyar Khalji’s capture of Nadia and establishment of a kingdom, with Lakhnauti as capital, inaugurated a new age for Bengal. Politically it sowed the seeds of Muslim rule but socially it planted a Muslim society, opening the gates of Bengal to numerous immigrant foreigners from the Muslim world which enormously affected the existing society and culture.” (Karim, 2007: 48).

The epic rise of Islam that took place in East Bengal thereafter has always baffled historians and scholars around the world. Richard M. Eaton, Professor of History at the University of Arizona, USA has correctly raised the following questions in his widely read book, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*:

“How can one explain this development? More particularly why did such a large population emerge in Bengal ... so distant from the Middle East, from which Islam historically expanded ... and not in other regions of India? And within Bengal, why did Islamization occur at so much greater a rate in the east than west? Who converted and why? At what time? What, if anything, did “conversion” mean to contemporary Bengalis? And finally, between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, in what ways did different generations and different social classes of Muslims in Bengal understand, construe, or even construct, Islamic civilization?” (Eaton, 2013: Introduction-xxiii)

Prior to the Muslim victory, the Bengali language had been totally neglected by the Brahman ruling class as it was considered a language of ordinary peasants and fishermen. Only Sanskrit was venerated as the pure Aryan Vedic language and awarded all sorts of royal patronage. According to Dr. Nihar Ranjan Roy, 12<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, under the Sena dynasty, witnessed the golden era of Sanskrit literature. Buddhist monks used to write verses in some spoken dialects of ancient Bengali in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries in their attempt to communicate more effectively with the masses in an attempt to propagate the faith. But, in the hostile environment of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, even those monasteries were forced to encourage study in

Sanskrit only. It was the later Muslim rulers who provided the necessary support and royal patronage for the development of Bengali language and literature. Dr. Muhammad Mohar Ali, Professor of History of Islam at Ibn Saud Islamic University in Saudi Arabia writes in his extensive research work, ‘History of the Muslims of Bengal’:

“Properly speaking, literary activities in Bengali started with the Muslim period. The language was evolved, according to the latest view, not out of Sanskrit but of a spoken dialect called Magadha Prakrit or Gaudiya Apabhramsa. Nonetheless it is generally classed with the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European languages. No written specimen of early Bengali is, however available prior to the 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century, that is almost till the coming of the Muslims to Bengal. In 1907, the late Haraprasad Sastri discovered in Nepal a collection of 47 Buddhist mystical and didactic poems composed by 24 persons and entitled Charya-Charya-Binischaya, now generally referred to as the Charya Padas...

These poems were published for the first time by their discoverer in 1916 under caption Hajar Bachorer Purana Bangla Bhasar Gan O Doha (Buddhist song in thousand-year-old Bengali). Since then, scholars of Bengali language have regarded these poems as the earliest available specimen of Bengali language and have generally assigned them a period between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 12<sup>th</sup> century. No other writing in Bengali till the 15<sup>th</sup> century has, however, come to light. Whatever might be the exact date of the Charya Padas it is generally recognized by scholars that no vernacular language could have found a scope for free literary expression under the Brahmanical system which preceded the coming of the Muslims and which interdicted the study of any but the Sanskrit Language.” (Ali, 1985: 854–855)

Another Bengali journalist and researcher, Ghulam Murshid, in his book, *Hajar Bachorer Bangla Samskriti* (One thousand years of Bengali culture) notes:

“We can find from the above discussion that Bengali language in true form did not develop before 13<sup>th</sup>–14<sup>th</sup> century. United Bengal was also not formed until the 14<sup>th</sup> century. And the people of this region were not even identified as ‘Bangali’ before the 18<sup>th</sup> century.” (Murshid, 2016: 26)

Unfortunately, the great contributions made by the Muslim rulers in shaping the political identity of Bangladesh and in the development of the Bengali language remain mostly unrecognized in a country of 90 per cent Bengali Muslims. Why this apathy towards such rich heritage? Is it ignorance or the result of long cultural aggression? Can a blind nation unaware of its roots and cultural history remain politically and intellectually

independent? The principal reason for my writing this book is to seek answers to these questions.

In my sixty-three years, I have been through many ups and downs in life, possibly in equal proportion. The present authoritarian secularist government of Bangladesh and their patrons in New Delhi and Washington consider me an undesirable Islamist. Interestingly, I am neither a theologian nor member of any Islamic party. In fact, I have never been a member of any political party. I am just a modern-day Muslim who practises the religion in personal life. I have not grown a beard and I like to wear Western dresses. But I am definitely very proud of my Islamic heritage and am a strong believer in religious freedom for every citizen in this country as part of their fundamental right.

This is the second occasion that I have been in prison. My problem with the authorities is associated with the publication of critical reports regarding human rights abuses, corruption among the ruling coterie, miscarriages of justice and Indian aggression against Bangladesh in the newspaper of which I was the editor until my arrest on 11 April 2013. I was arrested at my newspaper office on the morning of that fateful day. Prior to my formal arrest, the police had kept me under unofficial house arrest for exactly four months from 12 December 2012 in the same newspaper office. My last offence was to publish an investigative news item exposing an act of grave misconduct by a High Court Judge.

A Skype conversation was leaked to the press in which Justice Nizamul Haq Nasim was heard conspiring with a Belgium-based Bangladeshi government agent to decide, in advance, sentences against the leaders of Jamaat-e-Islami on charges of alleged war crimes in 1971, while the case was still on trial before the bench of the offending judge. Appalled by such a miscarriage of justice, I decided to print the story in *Amar Desh*, the second largest vernacular daily newspaper in Bangladesh. The *Economist* in London also published the story almost simultaneously, releasing the story online on 8 December 2012 under the heading: “Bangladesh, Discrepancy in Dhaka, The War Crimes Court in Bangladesh has some explaining to do.” The story said:

“On 6<sup>th</sup> December 2012 the presiding judge of Bangladesh’s International Crimes Tribunal, Muhammad Nizamul Huq, passed an order requiring two members of *The Economist* to appear before the court, demanding that they explain how we have come by e-mails and conversations between himself and Ahmed Ziauddin, a lawyer of Bangladeshi origin based in Belgium. The tribunal was established in 2010 to consider accusations of war crimes committed in 1971, during Bangladesh’s war of independence from Pakistan. *The Economist* has heard 17 hours of recorded telephone conversations and

seen over 230 e-mails between the two men. This material is confidential and we are bound by law and the British press's code of conduct not to reveal such information except in matters of the most serious public interest. We did not solicit the material, nor pay for it, nor commit ourselves to publish it. These e-mails, if genuine, would indeed raise questions about the workings of the court and we are bound to investigate them as fully as we can." (Economist, Discrepancy in Dhaka, <https://www.economist.com>>2012/12)

One week later, The Economist published the full story in the print edition of 15 December 2012: "Trying war crimes in Bangladesh, The trial of the birth of a nation." Three significant paragraphs from the story are quoted here to give a picture of the sorry state of Bangladesh's dysfunctional judiciary:

"At the last moment, however, the presiding judge, Muhammad Nizamul Huq, resigned as chairman of the tribunal, following questions put to him by *The Economist* and the publication in Bangladesh of private e-mails which cast doubt upon his role and upon the court proceedings. Recordings of him speaking by telephone were also available on YouTube. *The Economist* has seen these, and other materials, and has been investigating their accuracy and significance. This week, we publish the results of these investigations. The e-mails and phone conversations we have seen raise profound questions about the trial. The material suggests the government tried to put pressure on Mr. Nizamul, albeit he seems to have resisted it. It seems to show he worked improperly with a lawyer based in Brussels, and that the lawyer co-operated with the prosecution – raising questions about conflicts of interest. And in Mr Sayeedi's case it points to the possibility that, even before the court had finished hearing testimony from the defence witnesses, Mr Nizamul was already expecting a guilty verdict. These concerns are so serious that there is a risk not only of a miscarriage of justice affecting the individual defendants, but also that the wrongs which Bangladesh has already suffered will be aggravated by the flawed process of the tribunal. That would not heal the country's wounds, but deepen them." (*The Economist*, Trying war crimes in Bangladesh)

Indeed, Bangladesh today is an extremely polarized and wounded nation. The country under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is no better than a personal fiefdom. Instead of losing his job for a blatant miscarriage of justice as reported in *The Economist* and the *Amar Desh* daily, the offending judge has since been promoted to the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court. As expected, Mr Sayeedi was given the death sentence by the so-called International Crimes Tribunal which triggered widespread and violent street protests all over the country. Sheikh Hasina's government responded with unprecedented force and violence. More than one hundred



and fifty protesters were shot dead by the police. On the other hand, on 11 April 2012, a huge contingent of police was sent to the Amar Desh offices and printing press to arrest the editor. They then evicted journalists and other employees from the premises and padlocked the main door. Authoritarian secularist rulers in Bangladesh do not like to fight thoughts with thoughts although 'freedom of thought' is guaranteed in the country's Constitution. Nor do they want to engage in healthy debate as practised in free and democratic countries. The methods employed by the current rulers in Bangladesh are much simpler and more direct. They choke press freedom, resort to extrajudicial killings, practise enforced disappearances without any remorse and imprison dissidents for indefinite periods without trial. India takes care on behalf of her client in Bangladesh to assuage any misgivings in Washington and other Western capitals at this blatant disregard for human rights and democratic norms. Western politicians all know very well when to turn a blind eye to achieve their strategic and political goals. Lest we forget, the US foreign policy establishment once staunchly supported the Shah of Iran and Saddam Hussein in Iraq in spite of their brutal and inhuman records in suppressing dissent. A dying Shah, after his fall from power, was later denied entry to the USA for treatment of his cancer. Saddam was hanged on the morning of a Muslim religious festival by cronies of the US occupying forces in Iraq. The present Prime Minister in Bangladesh is another Shah or Saddam in the making, with active support from India and tacit support from Washington.

As the year 2015 was drawing to a close, I thought of the practical possibility of spending the rest of my life in prison. Since India became the cornerstone of US diplomacy in South Asia, the status of independent Bangladesh has been downgraded to that of a vassal of its giant neighbour. In such an adverse geopolitical situation, the chances of a known critic of the Bangladeshi government's Indo-centric policy being released from prison seemed minimal. I then decided to embark on this paean to my nation's heritage as my swansong. As I am not a historian, nor any type of scholar, I have tried to examine the issues as any moderately knowledgeable citizen searching for his identity would do. I knew from the beginning that the project would be both difficult and dangerous.

The difficulty part relates to the serious dearth of research materials available in prison. There is a small library and a reading room in Kashimpur Jail where one can work with permission from the authorities. But the books they have were of little use for my specific requirement. If it was possible, I would have used the internet for access to information. Unfortunately, in Bangladeshi prisons, inmates are not allowed access to the internet, even for academic purposes. The use of typewriters is also

forbidden. All writing has to be done longhand, as in the old days. I discussed the problem with my wife and she took it upon herself to supply the necessary books and other reference materials. But that is easier said than done. Before starting to write a chapter, I did not know my exact requirements. So, it has been an annoying experience of writing a section and waiting for my wife to come on her weekly visit so that I could give her a list of books and reference materials for which I would then have to wait at least a couple of weeks more. It was her patience and encouragement that prodded me into action. The prison authorities also assisted to some extent by, at least, not obstructing the flow of books.

Now the dangerous part. Bangladesh is currently ruled by a constitutionally illegal Prime Minister who likes to project herself as a liberal secularist. In reality, Sheikh Hasina is a classical fascist in secular garb. The government she heads has choked civil society, the free press and democracy. They do not allow any space for opposition political parties. Any criticism of the government is considered a criminal offence, punishable with life imprisonment. This authoritarian secularism has usurped all fundamental rights and freedoms of the citizens of Bangladesh. Opportunities to peacefully change the government through democratic means no longer exist in a country formerly hailed as a beacon of hope in the Muslim world for its rare adherence to a democratic political system.

Even in the worst autocracy, a decree, ordinance or legal instrument in some form is at least required for the state to function. But in Bangladesh, the mere expression of a wish from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is all the law-enforcement agencies need to commit wholesale atrocities on citizens. The constitution in this country is amended at will to provide legal cover for the unchecked authoritarian rule of an individual. The judiciary is largely dysfunctional. In the world today, I am not aware of any other head of a government who wields more power than Sheikh Hasina. Even North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un, on occasions, is publicly censured by China, the principal source of North Korea's military power. In the case of Bangladesh's strong-woman, she has been given *carte blanche* by India to persecute the hapless people of Bangladesh in any way she wishes. India, being the USA's appointed guardian for South Asia (except for Pakistan, for being another nuclear power), has the power to decide whether democracy will ever return to this country. Bangladesh is now an unfortunate country of 160 million depressed, demoralized and persecuted people, living under constant fear of either uniformed or plain-clothed policemen banging on their doors late at night. Extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances have become everyday events. Yet she is admired by the USA and other Western countries precisely for committing such

atrocities. In the name of fighting so-called Islamic terrorism, Bangladesh has been turned into a ruthless police state with the blessing of both the USA and India.

The habit of getting used to it is a clear sign of surrender to the oppression of any fascist regime. It happened in Hitler's Germany, Pinochet's Chile and Saddam's Iraq. Even Ain O Salish Kendra (ASK), a human rights body known for its pro-Indian, secularist bias in Bangladesh provided chilling statistics in their October 2016 report. In the first nine months of that year, one hundred and fifty people were killed by law-enforcement agencies in custody, seventy-five persons were picked up by plain-clothed policemen and disappeared without trace, fifty-seven inmates died in jail, and ninety-five journalists were tortured, harassed, arrested or threatened by police and ruling party cadres. The Indo-US strategic alliance has turned Bangladesh into an Orwellian state. People cannot survive as human beings without some hope and comfort; they become soulless robots in the face of naked despair. I, however, refuse to sell my soul to the Lucifer in power in Bangladesh. I sincerely believe that, ultimately, strong faith can lead us onwards along the path of eternity.

The subject of my book and the findings therein may intensify the wrath of authoritarian secularist rulers in Bangladesh. I may not find any publisher in this country to touch my draft under the current regime even if I am released from prison by some unforeseen intervention. Barring a change of government, the book will probably be published posthumously. The other alternative is for my family to leave Bangladesh and publish it in a foreign country where they may genuinely practise the philosophy of freedom of thought.

If and when my work is published, I expect differences of opinion and even criticism from readers. My comments and findings may appear controversial to some. But I humbly submit that in the narration of history I have not deviated from well-established facts and respected scholarship. I take full responsibility for the conclusions that I have reached from those facts and my research work.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# THE DAWN OF ISLAM IN EASTERN BENGAL: THE HISTORY OF THE PAST MILLENNIUM

“Muslim Sovereigns ruled over most of the Indian subcontinent. What was exceptional, was that among India’s interior provinces only in Bengal, a region approximately the size of England and Scotland combined, did a majority of the indigenous population adopt the religion of the ruling class, Islam.” (Eaton, 2013: Introduction-xxii)

I find the above quotation from ‘The rise of Islam and Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760’ written by Richard M. Eaton, Professor of History at the University of Arizona, USA and published in 1993, very pertinent to begin this particular chapter. In 2016, at the time of writing this book, the total population of Bengali speaking Muslims living in independent Bangladesh and neighbouring West Bengal, an Indian state, was more than two hundred million. A sizeable diaspora of Bengali Muslims also lives in America, Europe, the Middle East, Australia and South-East Asia. Nearly 90 per cent of the total population of Bangladesh practise Islam, whereas only 30 per cent of West Bengal’s population is estimated to be Muslim. Bengali Muslims are the second largest ethnic population of the Islamic faith in the world, next only to the Arabs, fellow countrymen of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). In the quote above, Richard Eaton finds the adoption of Islam to be exceptional on account of the massive conversion of the indigenous population in Bengal as a whole. But there is an additional mystery in the remarkable story of the spread of Islam in Eastern India. The people of the comparatively more remote and downstream part of Bengal converted in much greater numbers to the new monotheist religion than the Bengalis of western part of the delta! Therefore, to be precise, the spectacular growth of Islam actually took place in the region of eastern Bengal which constitutes today’s independent Bangladesh, the most densely populated country in the world and the subject of my book. Richard Eaton, in his work, continues to raise a series of issues including this one that I have just raised:

“How can one explain this development? More particularly, why did such a large Muslim population emerge in Bengal so distant from the Middle East, from which Islam historically expanded and not in other regions of India? And within Bengal, why did an Islamic nation occur at so much greater a rate in the east than in the west? Who converted and why? At what time?” (Eaton, 2013: Introduction-xxii)

As a historian and researcher, Richard Eaton has sought answers to many other related questions to complete his excellent work. However, I am attempting a different project where the story of the spread of Islam in Bengal will cover only a single chapter instead of my whole book. I have attempted to write mostly on the past and present of political Islam in eastern Bengal. In my endeavours, I have sought help from the works of many eminent historians and authors including the already mentioned Richard Eaton.

There is no denying the fact that political Islam first set foot on the soil of Gaud, Pundra and Lakhnawati (Bangalah or Bengal was named later by Muslim and British rulers) with the victorious Turkish army led by Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1203 AD. But that does not mean there was no communication or contact between the people of Arabia, Persia, Afghanistan or Anatolia with the indigenous people of Eastern India prior to Ikhtiyar’s conquest. In fact, coins issued by Abbasid Caliphs have been discovered in excavations at Paharpur in Rajshahi and at Mainamati in Comilla. The coin discovered in Paharpur is dated 788 AD when the great Harun-al-Rashid was the Caliph in Baghdad. The coin found in Mainamati was issued by the Abbasid Caliph Muntasir Billah who ruled the Muslim world in 861 AD. It should be noted that Arab general Muhammad Ibn Qasim conquered Sind in 714 AD, nearly four centuries before Ikhtiyar Khalji marched practically unopposed to Nadia, the then temporary capital of Lakshmana Sena, the last ruler of the Sena dynasty in larger Bengal. Unable to defend against the onslaught of the Turkish cavalry, Raja Lakshmana Sena fled to the more remote, eastern and river-gritted region of Vikrampur in the vicinity of Dhaka, part of ancient ‘Bang’. Descendants of the Sena dynasty ruled that much smaller part of Bengal for another half century before the Muslim general Mugith al-Din Tughril conquered East Bengal from lingering Sena rulers and incorporated it into the Muslim dominion. The acquisition of Mugith facilitated the gradual expansion of Islam and the establishment of Muslim political power in other parts of India adjacent to Bengal.

Historians are nearly unanimous in their view that Arabs, being seafaring and maritime people from ancient times, had established commercial and religious contact with the coastal regions of southern and

eastern India long before the arrival of political Islam in India. Thomas Arnold, in his 'The preaching of Islam', notes the popular belief among the people of Malabar Coast that a Hindu king who is said to have embraced Islam during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). However, Arnold also added that there is no historical evidence to support this tradition. But there is no doubt that an indigenous community in that region converted to the monotheist religion during the very early period of Islam and it was from that southern coast of India, Islam crossed over to the Maldives and Laccadive. Thomas Arnold writes:

"We undoubtedly find that Islam has gained its greatest and most lasting missionary triumphs in times, and places in which its political power has been weakest, as in Southern India and Eastern Bengal ... the first advent of Islam in South India dates as far back as the eighth century, when a band of refugees, to whom the Mapillas trace their descent, came from Iraq and settled in the country. The trade in spices, ivory, gems, etc. between India and Europe, which for many hundreds of years was conducted by the Arabs and Persians, caused a continual stream of Muhammadan influence to flow in upon the west coast of Southern India." (Arnold, 1968: 266)

Abdul Mannan Talib, noted writer of Islamic history in Bangladesh makes the following claim in his book, *Bangladeshe Islam* (Islam in Bangladesh):

"Proselytization of Islam commenced in the Indian west coastal region of Malabar (presently Kerala) during early 7<sup>th</sup> century through the Muslim merchants. Cherumal Perumal, the Hindu King of Malabar left his throne to travel to Mecca to convert to Islam. Shayikh Jainuddin has described the King's meeting with the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and his eventual conversion to Islam in his book, *Tuhfatul Mujahideen Fee Baje Ah-walil Bartakaleen*. Many Hindus of Malabar converted to Islam around the same time." (Talib, 2002: 33)

Many historians consider the story of Cherumal Perumal to be merely myth given the absence of reliable or authentic supporting evidence. However, nobody disputes the fact that Islam arrived in India along the Malabar Coast in the early days of the religion. A recent discovery of an ancient mosque in the northern region of Bangladesh gives another twist to the established history of the arrival of Islam in eastern India.

“Ancient mosque unearthed in Bangladesh in a remote village in northern Bangladesh: an amateur archaeologist has discovered the remains of a mosque believed to be built in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Villagers initially stumbled on the site where they found ancient treasure and artifacts of Islamic history, including a stone with Quranic scripture, buried underground. Further investigation into the findings could prove the site to be the earliest mosque built in South Asia. Al Jazeera’s Nicolas Haque reports from Rangpur in northern Bangladesh.”

(Source: Aljazeera, [www.aljazeera.com/asia/2012/08](http://www.aljazeera.com/asia/2012/08))

Let us now, look into the political and economic situation of Eastern India in a period when Islam, as the new and latest monotheist religion, had already established its foothold in Sind and Multan in the north and the Malabar Coast in the south of India. Dr. Muhammad Mohar Ali writes in ‘History of the Muslims of Bengal’:

“So far as Bengal is concerned, our knowledge about the early Muslim traders’ contact with it is derived from stray and indirect references by the Arab geographers. Some of them speak about flourishing ports and valuable commodities in that part of the world, which are clearly identifiable with the coastal region of Bengal and its products. Thus, Abu al-Qasim Ubaid Allah ibn Khurdadhbih (d. 912 AD) while discussing the places of trade interest on the coast of the Indian Ocean after ‘Sarandip’ (Ceylon) and the river ‘Kudafarid’ (the Godavari on the east Indian coast), refers to a port called ‘Samandar’ where rice was produced in abundance and to which aloe-wood was brought down for export from a distance of 15 or 20 days through sweet water (i.e. through inland river) from a territory named ‘Kamrun’ and other places. This place of Samandar is also mentioned by the famous twelfth century Arab geographer, Abu Abd Allah al-Idrisi (d.1164 AD). “Samandar is a large town, commercial and rich,” he says, “where there are good profits to be made. It is a port dependent upon Kanauj, king of this country. The city of Samandar is situated on an inlet which comes from the country of Kashmir. It was built upon the back of a large river which falls into the river Musala, called by the ‘author of the book of marvels the river of perfumes’. Al-Idrisi also mentions that the chief produce of Samandar was rice and that aloe-wood was brought there from Kamrut, 15 days’ distance through sweet water.” (Ali, 1985: 30)

On analysing the description of Samandar given by the Arab geographers, modern-day historians have come to the conclusion that the port of Samandar was situated in south-eastern Bengal. The large rivers that Arab geographers have mentioned are the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. There are possibly a couple of discrepancies in the above description: first, Kamrut is clearly Kamrup and, secondly, the reference of Kanauj as the king of Samandar is confusing. Kanauj is the name of a



place in northern India and no king by that name can be found in Indian history. Furthermore, the period about which al-Idrisi writes was the 8<sup>th</sup> century and the great Dharma Pala of the famous Pala dynasty was ruling Bengal at that time. About the present name of Samandar, there are two schools of thought among historians. It could either be the island of Sandwip or the famous port of Chittagong. There is also reference to Jazirat-al-Rami in the records of Arab geographers. Some scholars like to think that present-day Ramu of Cox's Bazar is the ancient Jazirat-al-Rami. Dr. Mohar Ali further adds on the subject:

“The English traveler Ralph Fitch, who visited Bengal in 1585–86, also refers to this kingdom of Rame. As it was situated on the sea coast, it is very likely that the Arab merchants were acquainted with it. In may be pointed out that the word Jazirah was used not only to denote islands, but also riparian lands. Sulaiman, the merchant who lived in the middle of the 9<sup>th</sup> century mentions that the king of Rami was a powerful ruler with 50,000 elephants and an army of 15,000. Elephants are even now-a-days found in large numbers in the hilly region of the Chittagong district. On the whole, therefore, it may be assumed that the Jazirat al-Rami of the Arab geographers were either the state of Rami on the Chittagong coast or a land not very far from it.” (Ali, 1985: 35)

On the identification of the city of Samandar, the findings of Prof. Abdul Karim do not substantially contradict Dr. Mohar Ali's research. According to Prof. Karim:

“Having found that Samandar of Arab geographers lay in the Bengal coast, we now try to find out its exact location. In the map of Joao de Barros, dated 1550 AD, we find that the Ganges on entering into Bengal is bifurcated at a place called Fatiabas (Fathabad?) and flowed into two main streams, the western one flowing through what may now be identified with the Bhagirathi channel and the eastern and the wider one i.e. the Padma channel going down to the sea at Chittagong. According to Abul Fazal, ‘Its (Bengal's) rivers are countless and the first of them in this province is the Ganges: its source cannot be traced ... Rising in the mountains towards the north, it passes through the province of Delhi, and imperial Agra, and Alhabad and Bihar into the province of Bengal, and near Qazihattah in the Sarkar of Barbakabad, it divides into two streams, one of them flowing eastwards, falls into the sea at the port of Chattagong.’ Ibn Battutah visiting Bengal in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century gives similar information. He says, ‘The first town of Bengal which we entered, was Sudkawan, it was a great city, situated on the shore of a vast ocean. The river Ganges to which the Hindus go on pilgrimage, and the river Jun (Jumna) have united near it before falling into the sea.’ Ibn Battutah's Sudkawan is identified with Chittagong. Ptolemy writing his geography in about 150 AD gives an

account of the lower Ganges, its branches, and the country which they traversed. He refers to its five branches, the western most, the Kambyson mouth at longitude 144.30' and latitude 18.15' and the eastern most called Antibole at longitude 148.30' and latitude 18.15'. The Kambyson mouth has been identified with the Bhagirathi channel at Tamralipti or modern Tamluk and the eastern most Antibole mouth with the Sandwip channel between Sandwip and Chittagong. Scholars have also shown that the eastern most course was also the principal course of the Ganges in the days of Ptolemy." (Karim, 2007: 42)

Prof. Karim concludes by saying: "It is probable, therefore, that the Samandar of the Arab geographers may also be identified with Chittagong and the island opposite Samandar with Sandwip."

It is beyond doubt that the Arab Muslims travelled to the coastal regions of Bangladesh during the early days of Islam as part of their global commercial activities. It is also not unlikely that some of them might have settled in the long coastal belt from Noakhali to Cox's Bazar. There are popular stories in the Arakan region that the Arab Muslims had been established on both sides of Myanmar and Bangladesh since ancient times. According to tradition, the first such settlement resulted from the capsizing of Arabian ships due to a cyclonic storm along Chittagong-Cox's Bazar coastal belt. It is highly probable that some Arab preachers and Sufis had also travelled to this part of the subcontinent long before the Turkish military expedition of the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. Touching on the issue, Dr. Nihar Ranjan Roy writes in his *Bangalir Itihas*:

"Few examples can be given where people have arrived in Bangladesh from outside India. Some Arab Muslim families came to Bangladesh for commercial purpose and then settled here. People of such origin in small numbers can be found in Noakhali-Chittagong and other districts of Bengal. During a long cycle of centuries, they have merged with indigenous people through association and intercourse. Negrito blood related Habshis may also be referred. Five or six such Habshi Sultans ruled for a long period of time in Bangladesh." (Roy, 1949: 41)

However, the conquest of Ikhtiyar Khalji definitely, paved the way for the Sufis to arrive in greater numbers from Arabia, Persia and Anatolia. Readers should bear in mind that at that time this part of the subcontinent was not very hospitable due to its deltaic geographical configuration, huge rivers and dense forests. Before narrating the story of the further spread of Islam, a short summary of the social conditions and cultural geography existing at the time is needed to assist the readers in understanding the

extraordinary transformation of faith among the indigenous peoples of the delta.

The Aryans in ancient times generally viewed the inhabitants of the Ganges delta beyond the eastern bank of the mighty river with contempt and indifference. Dr. Nihar Ranjan Roy, quoting from various Indian mythological classics, states that the Aryans considered the people of Vanga, Pundra and Magadha to be barbarians. Mahabharata, the much-venerated Aryan epic denigrates the people living along the coastal belt of eastern Bengal as '*Mleccha*' or untouchables. There was a strict custom among the Aryans that any member of the community who crossed the river Ganga and set foot on the eastern bank would lose sanctity. Anyone doing so had to perform various tough purification rituals before being allowed to return to the clan and commence community life.

Around 500 AD, we find Pundrabardhan, the northern part of Bengal, to be a flourishing autonomous province of the Gupta dynasty. However, this region has an even older history of civilization. According to Buddhist myth, Gautama Buddha himself travelled to Pundra to preach his faith. Buddhist theological universities were built at Paharpur and Mahasthangarh in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and their fame spread even to China. Mainamati at Comilla was another famous monastery built at the early stage of Buddhism in eastern Bengal. Chinese monks used to travel regularly for study in these institutions during the Gupta period. Those monks wrote books on their travels, stays and studies. There are records that the monks had actually travelled to northern Bangladesh even a few centuries earlier than the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Except during the brief reign of Hindu king Shashanka in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism enjoyed uninterrupted royal patronage in Bengal throughout the first millennium. Also, in the other parts of India, many of the powerful rulers were followers of Buddhism. Asoka, Kushans, Guptas and Harshavardhana are notables among them. In Bengal, the Pala dynasty who ruled for nearly 500 years after the death of Shashanka were followers of Buddhism. However, the Pala kings used to patronize both Buddhism and Brahmanism during their reign out of political necessity. Many of their Chief Ministers were Brahmins. Dr. Abdul Mumin Chowdhury, a professor of University College London writes on Buddhism in South Asia:

“There was a boost in Brahmanical strength in certain parts of Bengal around this period. Even then, the adherents of Brahmanism were mainly confined to the upper stratum. They remained so during the next four and a half centuries of the Pal and Sen rule. As Hiuen Tsang’s account shows, Bengal was primarily Buddhist. Of the Buddhists, the Mahayanists accounted only a fourth of the total. These demographic facts as well as

remoteness spared Bengal from the anti-Buddhist ‘disorder’ in North India. This however did not stop the Brahman landed potentates, the samantas that had been implanted in the main under the Guptas, from asserting themselves in north and west Bengal.” (Chowdhury, 2008: 214)

The Hindu King Shashanka of Bengal is historically known for his strong anti-Buddhist bias. His bitter enmity with the famous King of Kanauj, Harshavardhana, an ardent Buddhist, is the subject of much literature and myth. There are stories of severe persecution against the followers of Buddha during Shashanka’s reign. However, with the advent of the Pala dynasty in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Buddhists once again regained their advantageous position. At the period when Arab traders were settling in small numbers along the coastal belt of south Bengal during the reign of Dharma Pala, the most famous king of the Pala dynasty, the dominant religion was definitely Buddhism. Four centuries later there was significant change in the cultural and religious geography of the region and, by the time Ikhtiyar Khalji forced the last Sena ruler to flee from his capital at Nadia, Brahmanism reigned supreme. It should be noted that Buddhism lost its vibrancy and basic character gradually over this period. It was greatly influenced by Brahmanism and their practice of idol worship seeped into the once non-ceremonial religion. Jawaharlal Nehru writes about the decay of Buddhism in ‘Discovery of India’:

“The rational ethical doctrine had become overlaid with so much verbiage, so much ceremonial, canon law, so much, in spite of the Buddha, metaphysical doctrine and even magic. Despite Buddha’s warning, they had deified him, and his huge images, in the temples and elsewhere, looked down upon me and I wondered what he would have thought.” (Nehru, 2002: 131)

Senas replaced the Pala dynasty in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Senas were Karnataka Khatriyas and migrated to Bengal from south India to serve in the army of the Pala dynasty. By the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century the Pala dynasty had decayed to insignificance and Vijaysena, the patriarch of the Senas ended the Pala regime and became ruler of Gaud and Lakhnawati. During nearly one hundred years of Sena rule, the Brahmans and other higher caste Hindus gradually became powerful at the expense of the previously dominant Buddhist community. All the Sena kings were faithful to their Karnataka Khatriya tradition and there was an accompanying shift of royal patronage in favour of Brahmans and Khatriyas. Simmering discontent among the Buddhists and other indigenous people due to the pro-Brahmin and pro-Khatriya bias of the Sena dynasty enabled political Islam to take root in the newly acquired

territory within a short space of time. The persecuted Buddhist population generally welcomed egalitarian Islam. Richard Eaton provides an excellent insight in his description of Bengal before the Turkish conquest regarding inter-mixing between Arabs and the people of Bengal:

“Under the patronage of the palas and various dynasties in Samatata (today’s Bangladesh), Buddhism received a tremendous lift in its international fortunes, expanding throughout maritime Asia as India’s imperial cult par excellence. Dharma Pala himself patronized the construction of two monumental shrine-monastery complexes Vikramsila in eastern Bihar, and Paharpur in Bengal’s Rajshahi district and between the sixth and eleventh centuries, royal patrons in Samatata supported another one, the Salban Vihara at Lalmai (today’s Comilla in Bangladesh). As commercially expansive states rose in eastern India from the eighth century on, Buddhism as a state cult spread into neighbouring lands—in particular to Tibet, Burma, Cambodia, and Java where monumental Buddhist shrines appeared to have been modeled on prototypes developed in Bengal and Bihar. At the same time, Pala control over Magadha, the land of the historical Buddha, served to enhance that dynasty’s prestige as the supreme patrons of the Buddhist religion. Masudi’s (Arab geographer) remark about Muslims residing in Pala domains is significant in the context of these commercially and politically expansive Buddhist states, for by the tenth century, when Bengali textiles were being absorbed into wider Indian Ocean commercial networks, two trade diasporas overlapped one another in the delta region. One, extending eastward from the Arabian Sea, was dominated by Muslim Arabs or Persians; the other, extending eastward from the Bay of Bengal, by Buddhist Bengalis. The earliest presence of Islamic civilization in Bengal resulted from the overlapping of these two diasporas.” (Eaton, 2013: 12)

A Bengali writer’s book, *Hajar Bachorer Bangla Samskriti* (One Thousand Years of the Bengali Culture) also provides an interesting picture of the cultural geography of ancient Bengal. Ghulam Murshid in his effort to find the root of Bengali culture writes:

“Now we need to see, the region which gave rise to Bengali culture; since when that region had become known as Bengal. The wide area which is now called Bangladesh, was separated among various regions even seven to eight hundred years ago. In the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah united the different parts under a single command. Till that time, this region was not recognized as a united region or state. There were various small states in the region. Names of the states also changed over time. But, generally a few names were considered authentic at different stages. Those are, Gaud, Rarh, Banga, Shumma, Barendri, Pundra, Harikel, Samatata, etc. (2016: 18) ... In the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup>

century, at the end of Sena rule, when the Turks conquered this country, it was still not known as Bangladesh. The area which the Turks conquered was called Gaud, not Bengal.” (Murshid, 2016: 19)

Bakhtiyar Khalji lived for only two years after his famous victory that ended Sena rule in Bengal. He undertook an ambitious expedition to Tibet which was a military failure. On the eve of the expedition, Bakhtiyar divided his domain into three strategic regions and appointed his lieutenants as their governors. Muhammad Shiran, Husam al-Din and Ali Mardan Khalji were appointed to govern Lakhnūr (Birbhum), Tirhut, and Oudh and present-day Rangpur respectively. Ikhtiyar al-Din with a ten-thousand-strong army reached the foothills of the Himalayas after two weeks of marching through the very difficult terrain of Kamrup in his attempt to capture the Himalayan kingdom. Tibetan forces put up fierce resistance and, having failed to breach the defence of the opposing forces, Ikhtiyar al-Din attempted to retreat. But during what became a long retreat, his forces were continuously ambushed and harassed by the army of the hostile Kamrup ruler. At the end of the long and perilous journey, he made it back to his cantonment at Deokot near present-day Dinajpur with only a handful of soldiers. Devastated and heart-broken, he died soon after. Ikhtiyar’s death sparked a long succession battle among his three governors which lasted for seven years. After a series of ups and downs in the ensuing battles, Husam al-Din ultimately came out victorious and ascended to power taking the name Ghiyath al-Din Iwad Khalji. He was the first Muslim ruler in Bengal to mint coins in his name. Iwad’s rule of nearly fifteen years witnessed both expansion and consolidation in Muslim rule. He retained Lakhnawati (Gaud) as his capital and refused to accept the suzerainty of Delhi Sultan. His refusal to accept Delhi’s domination irked the powerful Sultan Iltutmish. Delhi Sultan dispatched a huge army under the command of his son, Prince Nasir al Din, to defeat the ruler of Gaud. Iwad was finally killed by the forces of Sultan Iltutmish in 1227 AD.

By the time Prince Nasir al-Din defeated and killed Iwad, Sufi preachers from central Asia had started arriving in Bengal in significant numbers. According to Richard Eaton, the earliest known inscription concerning such immigrant Sufis is to be found in the Birbhum district of West Bengal. The inscription, dated 29 July 1221, records the construction of a Sufi lodge and specifically refers to a Sufi from Maragha, Iran. However, the most famous Sufi during the early period of political Islam’s expansion in Bengal was Shaikh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi (d. 1244). He travelled to India after the death of his teacher, Shaikh Shihab al-Din Suhrawardy, the renowned mystic in Baghdad in 1235 AD. Shaikh Jalal-al-