

## ASPECTS OF GEOGRAPHICAL-CULTURAL PROCESSES AND MAKING OF THE ‘PERSONALITY’ IN EARLY BENGAL

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### Introduction:

This paper focuses on one of the least studied areas – aspects of geographical-cultural processes in the making of the ‘personality’ in early ‘Bengal’ roughly in a period from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE. This chronological bracket is going to be mentioned in my paper as early Bengal in general. In South Asian history, this period has been considered as a time when significant political and socio-cultural transformations took place, and the subcontinent was moulded into distinct contours. These changes and their dynamics lead to the societal-cultural formations of later periods. By following these processes, a ‘regional personality’ started developing in Bengal with a territorial stamp, as Bengal is being considered as one of the regional territories in South Asia. The present research is important not only because the theme has not been adequately explored, but also because the region Bengal itself offers an intriguing context for examination of the subject in question till the time when the name Bengal began to be applied to the whole region.<sup>1</sup>

As the term ‘personality’ has always been defined by scholars differently in different contexts, it is necessary to declare a disclaimer of using the term in this paper: the combination of characteristics or qualities that form an individuality/ distinctive character of a particular and well-defined geographical territory/ ‘region’ and a specific group of people who lived there. My attempt here is simply to throw lights on aspects of territorial and cultural processes in the making of the regional personality in Bengal in the ancient period, without any intention of either glorifying the territory/ region or its peoples. While doing this, I am aware of the fact that some nationalist historians may try to use the term ‘personality’ in the making of ‘national pride’ for a specific group of people and their territory by ignoring diversities and pluralities. Though my inspiration for taking this particular expression (‘personality’) comes from the seminal attempt at correlation of British geography, history and archaeology by Cyril Fox in his *Personality of Britain* (London, 1932) followed by B. Subbarao in his book titled *The Personality of India* (Baroda, 1958), I am not using the term in my paper as a ‘critical theory’, following nationalistic modality. Niharranjan Ray also used this term (‘ব্যক্তিত্ব’) in his famous book *Bangalir Itihas Adi Parva* (Kolkata, 1402 BS), where one could find ‘nationalistic approach’ in the narrative.

This paper briefly examines how some personality traits developed in the eastern part of India (later termed as ‘Bengal’) with time and how those traits have been influenced and

moulded by some geographical and cultural factors typical of this region. The process of forming personality in a region at any point of time happens to be influenced by many elements. It is my assumption that in Bengal the geo-physical factors and active cultural processes played exemplary roles in its gradual formations. In this context, my humble queries are to identify certain attitudes and traditions of a specific group of people in a particular geographical territory, which maintained continuity through the ages, changing and adapting itself to the new from time to time under the distinct geo-physical and cultural situations of Bengal region.

Therefore, the paper will, by and large, be based on primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include epigraphic documents, contemporary literary documents (surviving literature, Buddhist religious poetry, religious and legal texts, anthologies of court poetry etc.), and traveller's accounts. But paucity of sources, their limited and somewhat 'peculiar' nature makes the task of reconstructing regional personality of Bengal difficult. Because of the limited nature of information at one's disposal and the lack of maps and other pertinent tools, the historian of early Bengal is severely handicapped. However, there are at least some relevant books and articles which can be used here as secondary sources. Among these are the works of Niharranjan Ray,<sup>2</sup> Brajadulal Chattapadhyaya,<sup>3</sup> Puspa Niyogi,<sup>4</sup> Mamtajur Rahman Tarafdar,<sup>5</sup> and Kunal Chakrabarti.<sup>6</sup>

### **Geographical Process and Making of the 'Personality' in Bengal:**

It might not be unjustified to say that geographical features and processes have laid down the setting/foundation for the broad cultural profile of a specific group of people in constructing their personality traits in the eastern part of India from the antiquity. This naturally bounded area is always being considered as a definite geographical region in the South Asian subcontinent. Structural evolution of this particular land with the extensive well-defined old alluvium land tracts, comparatively new alluvial land, the largest delta of the world consisting of the Ganga-Brahmaputra river systems, and heavy monsoons are the landmark geographical features of this territory/region. The flatness of a region bounded by the Rajmahal hills on the north-west and the Lalmai-Chittagong ranges on the south-east creates a low-lying land, gradually sloping from the high plateau of the north towards the Bay of Bengal. It lies like an immense saucer of alluvial deposit between the Tippera hills on the east, the Shillong plateau and Nepal Terai on the north, and the highlands of Rajmahal and Chhota Nagpur on the west. The southern lip of the saucer is tilted downward where the alluvium is carried out to the sea by the combined streams of the Ganga, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers. The many rivers, their tributaries, distinctive water bodies, and climatic condition add unique dimensions to the territorial processes in Bengal.

B.M. Morrison<sup>7</sup> mentioned that there are five distinct major geographical regions in Bengal – the deltaic plain, the Tippera surface and the Sylhet basin, all of which are made up of recent alluvial deposits; and the Madhupur and the Varendra (sometimes spelt Bārind) uplands

composed of ancient Pleistocene alluvium. In the light of geology, the entire newly-created land in Bengal is duly recognised as a delta. The climate of the delta is marked by seasonal variations that are typical of a tropical and monsoonal climate. The heavy annual rainfall, combined with the warm temperatures throughout most of the year, produces a vegetational cover that can be termed as 'tropical semi-evergreen'.<sup>8</sup>

Richard M. Eaton<sup>9</sup> has termed Bengal as 'frontier zone' located on the eastern frontier of the Indian subcontinent and a 'transition zone' with a comparatively narrow land-bridge between South Asia and mainland South-east Asia. The multitude of rivers afford considerable fluvial communications for internal and external connectivity, and the delta's access to the Bay of Bengal offers it the opportunity of participating in long-distance sea-borne trade and consequent cultural contacts and interactions. Bengal is a region in which land and water are inextricably mixed; life and culture here are, of necessity, semi-aquatic and amphibian. Acting as arteries, this complicated hydrography is largely responsible for shaping the socio-cultural mosaic of its peoples.

### **Geographical Process: Role of Water-bodies and Climate:**

Satish Mitra says, as we have veins and arteries in our bodies, this region is being vivified by numerous rivers.<sup>10</sup> Bengal's history, culture and heritage are founded on its numerous and diverse rivers and streams. These waterways – the life of the land – have nurtured Bengal through the ages and have influenced its appearance and nature, as they continue to do still.<sup>11</sup> It is quite clear from the discussion by Amitabha Bhattacharyya<sup>12</sup> on early medieval Bengal and the research done by Richard M. Eaton<sup>13</sup> on medieval Bengal that the hydrography of Bengal has changed in different ages. The constant shifting of river beds, particularly in alluvial soil, has continually transfigured the details of the face of Bengal in historic times.<sup>14</sup> These changes in the courses of the rivers<sup>15</sup> have very often compelled the people to shift their settlements from one place to another and thereby resulting in cultural acculturations and admixtures. The rivers have made the people of the land more accommodating to new manners, customs, and behaviour, which are the driving force in the making of the personality in territorial/regional Bengal.

In the chapters named 'A land of water and silt' and 'The delta as a crossroads', Willem Van Schendel (2009) mentioned that the three forms of water – river, rain and sea – gave Bengal a natural Janus face.<sup>16</sup> By introducing the 'Frontier Theory' to explain Islamisation in Bengal, Eaton highlighted the geographical situation and changing the courses of rivers and shifting cultivators in Bengal.<sup>17</sup> According to him, the cause of the expansion of land or agriculture was the shifting of the river channel from west to east and the rise of new land in the active delta area.<sup>18</sup> By analysing maps of the period 1548-1779 CE<sup>19</sup> and by pointing out the nature of the shifting river channels of Bengal, Eaton showed that in this time a lot of new and fertile land rose out of the riverbeds in South and East Bengal. Subsequently, large groups of people migrated from the comparatively barren land of the moribund delta to the active or fertile delta of South and South-eastern portion of Bengal.<sup>20</sup> In search of new fertile lands, people from

northern part of Bengal and even from India came and settled in this newly active deltaic region.<sup>21</sup> Though Eaton focused particularly on medieval Bengal, it is obvious that the role played by the rivers on socio-cultural scenario in early Bengal represents the condition prevailing in ancient times too. We can have some indications from the research on early settlement patterns by B.D. Chattopadhyaya, while he commented that the spatial characteristics of the rural settlements were their relationship with natural, particularly, water resources.<sup>22</sup> If we look into the land description portion of the property transfer records of early Bengal, we can find the random references of water bodies, i.e., the ponds (*puṣkariṇīs*) and the rivers as the natural landmark.

Akbar Ali Khan has come up with the ‘Open Village Theory’<sup>23</sup> and gives an interesting explanation about the role of water-bodies in the making of socio-cultural life-patterns in early medieval Bengal by a comparative study with the village structures in Bangladesh, India and some other South Asian countries.<sup>24</sup> Khan argued that villages in eastern part of Bengal were intersected with many rivers and channels that inextricably linked each other. It had new alluvium land. Productivity of land was comparatively high. That is why people did not organize their activities; they got accustomed to being individualistic. Open village and the insufficiency of corporate responsibility developed in Bengal region due to the geographical ‘uniqueness’ and the easy supply of water.<sup>25</sup> These open villages were organizationally ‘weak’, ‘lose’, and ‘ineffective’. Thus, it was easier to penetrate with different types of ideas here. The abundance of rivers in Bengal guaranteed water supply for all practical purposes. Corporate institutions were needed in much of South Asia for construction, operation, and maintenance of communal sources of water supply. Close co-operation was essential not only for running large-scale irrigation systems, but also for operating minor irrigation sources, such as village tanks which were extensively used in the Deccan.<sup>26</sup>

In socio-cultural spheres, rivers and other water-bodies left their perpetual influences in the making of regional personality in Bengal. A.H. Dani puts it poetically, “It is the constant flow of river current that has bestowed soft and durable tone to the music of Bengal. And probably the same sweet melody underlines the softness in the Bengali language ... Boats, boatmen, fishermen in rivers and ponds are common scenes in the countryside. As rivers are a constant companion so are ponds a centre of rural life and the rains refresh life year after year. It is the raindrops that awaken the spirit and in part a new sense of liveliness, from which takes birth the joy of dance and music. It is a familiar scene to see the children dancing in playful mood with downpour of rains”.<sup>27</sup>

Barrie Morrison has also examined the importance of the rivers of Bengal and comments that the inextricable networks of the rivers and their tributaries, and their geographical distribution in the entire region have given the opportunity to peoples of this region with naturally created water ways of communications.<sup>28</sup> Bengal is a place in which land and water are

inextricably mixed, one merging into the other without leaving any demarcating line, and life and culture here are, of necessity, semi-aquatic and amphibian.<sup>29</sup> The water-bodies constitute salient-most geo-features of the region of Bengal, demarcating the region starkly from the rest of the entire Indian subcontinent. At the same time, the sedimentation of the river-flown alluvium over a long span of time has created a region of islands in Bengal, which is bounded by the 'tangled network' of the rivers, leading to the emergence of a distinct geographical and cultural entity in Bengal.<sup>30</sup>

Now it can be stated here that rivers always played remarkable roles in the formation of life-patterns in Bengal and it goes without saying Bengal's socio-cultural profile, art, and architecture bear a definite stamp of this riverine deltaic land.

The impact that the general climatic conditions and rainfall of the region exerted on society and culture of early Bengal is also no less preponderant. Regarding the climatic condition prevailing in early Bengal, there are a few references in literary and epigraphic records. The first reference on this regards made by the Mahasthan Brāhmī Inscription (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE).<sup>31</sup> There are frequent references to the rainy season, which through centuries has made its mark on the history and culture of the people of the land. By analysing the description made by Sandyākaranandī,<sup>32</sup> Jayadeva,<sup>33</sup> Śrīdharadāsa,<sup>34</sup> and even Abul Fazal<sup>35</sup> in a later date and some references in the epigraphic records,<sup>36</sup> it would thus appear that all through the ages rains of Bengal moulded the life-patterns of the people of the land in a diverse way. These sources also depicted some seasonal descriptions in early Bengal.<sup>37</sup>

In fact, socio-cultural traditions and the personality of Bengal were set up in early Bengal, to some extent, with the mutual interaction with climatic factors.<sup>38</sup> The distinct climate of Bengal made the local inhabitants 'contemplative', 'poetic', and 'lethargic' by nature and has played a role for the diversity in costumes, settlement, and transportation.<sup>39</sup> Above all, it is a long established fact that the demographic settings in this region are largely based on the geographical situation, especially climate and unusual water-bodies. Hence, the very effective influences of geo-features of Bengal on the social life patterns, cultural individualities and religious syncretistic traditions are undeniable.

### **Cultural Process and the Making of Regional 'Personality': Pre and Early Historic Phase:**

Just as the geological settings of Bengal have influenced the evolution of its prehistoric and early historic cultures, it is her geographical other distinct factor that has contributed in constructing the human diversity, cultural synthesis, and the trajectory of the assimilation of linguistic groups in the region<sup>40</sup> and has facilitated contacts and communications with its neighbours. This is a long course of action that has spanned over thousands of years.<sup>41</sup>

In this section, I intend to throw light on the formation of cultures of a group of peoples, in prehistoric and early historic Bengal, which began with the conflict, amalgamation, and

synthesis of the internal and external elements provided by human groups (such as the Proto-Australoid, the Mongoloid, the Alpine, and the Nordic etc.) and linguistic groups (such as the Austric-speaking peoples, the Dravidian speakers, and the Indo-Aryan linguistic groups etc.). The advent of the Indo-Aryan speakers in Bengal constitutes a historical watershed. They did not have any proper knowledge about the geographical condition of Bengal and could not be fond of the swampy, humid weather of the region.<sup>42</sup> *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (8<sup>th</sup> century BCE) presents a rather negative portrayal of the Eastern part of India. The people of Puṇḍra were characterised as ‘outcastes’ and allied with the ‘Dāsas’ and the ‘Dasyus’ in the texts.<sup>43</sup>

It can be assumed that the above-mentioned linguistic and human groups entered into Bengal through the land and sea routes that connected Bengal with the outside world and contributed to the formation of a mixed population and their cultures. The assimilation of such magnitude is quite different and interesting from the anthropological point of view. The peoples of this territory (eastern part of India) imbibed and intermingled with the influx of different linguistic and human waves in the region. Thus, it can be assumed logically that the geographical location of Bengal had played an important role in the movements of the peoples, their interactions, cultural intermingling, and the processes of adaptation.

Three comments might be made on the physical types and ethno-cultural composition of peoples of the land in pre-historic and early historic Bengal: *firstly*, the geographical location of Bengal had a distinctly significant appeal to outsiders in the remote past; *secondly*, the old alluvium, hilly areas, innumerable rivers and riverine tracts, and the high fertility of the soil ensured continuous human habitation in the region/ territory; and *thirdly*, the open gateway that the sea in the south of Bengal and historically significant land routes has greatly facilitated the process of the composition of physical types and cultural milieu of the peoples of territorial Bengal.

#### **‘Personality’ in Bengal: ‘Compromised’ Brahmanism:**

Here I would like to focus on the preponderance of pre-Vedic/ non-Brahmanic traits in cultures of the local people and reasons behind the belated arrival of the ‘Brahmanical orthodoxy’ in Bengal. In this connection, mention must be made about the conflict, amalgamation, and synthesis of ‘Puranic Brahmanism’, ‘compromised Brahmanism’, and ‘Brahmanical way of accommodating local culture’ in early Bengal.

It will not be an exaggeration to state that the blending of indigenous elements with those brought from outside and thus the moulding of Brahmanic ideas and thoughts in Bengal assimilating some indigenous elements of pre-Vedic/ non-Brahmanic origins led to differences with orthodox Brahmanism. From Niharranjan Ray and Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay<sup>44</sup> to Mamtajur Rahman Tarafdar<sup>45</sup> – all have agreed on the preponderance of pre-Vedic/non-Brahmanic legacy in cultures of the people of territorial Bengal. The Brahmanical orthodoxy has taken more than one thousand years to enter into Bengal due to the far distance of her location

from the north-western part of India, the entry route of the Brahmanical inflow. This relatively late-Brahmanization in Bengal strengthened and entrenched the pre-Vedic/non-Brahmanic culture in the region, on the one hand, and on the other, fostered in the local inhabitants a 'mental attitude' of accepting very little external elements without renouncing their own individualities.<sup>46</sup> Niharranjan Ray observes that Bengal has been much less Brahmanised than central Gangetic India: the mind of central Gangetic India was, to a large extent, ill-disposed to change, whereas that was not at all true of Bengal. The people of the territory of Bengal did not really swim with the current, when 'defeat' was inevitable, but sought to compromise in working out a synthesis.<sup>47</sup>

The initial stage of the process of 'Brahmanical way of accommodating local culture' in Bengal took place between 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE and 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, and continued in the next two centuries. The Brahmanical influence inevitably became weaker on its long eastward journey. Bengal received it at a stage when its pre-Vedic legacy found opportunity of becoming firm and the personality of the land got imbibed with it. The characteristics of socio-religious and cultural attitudes of the people of the land of early Bengal, which can be said to be typically Bengali, are, no doubt, the result of the fusion of the incoming elements of culture with indigenous elements, which acted as moderating factors.<sup>48</sup> In this context, reference may be made to the special preference for the goddesses representing female energy that culminated in the worship of Durga in popular festivals, the growth of tantricism, the absence of any head-dress, and the 'peculiar' laws of inheritance, codified by Jimutavahana,<sup>49</sup> which differed essentially from those in other parts of India.<sup>50</sup> Ray and Chattopadhyay noted firmly that in the process of the formation of Bengal's regional personality, the pre-Vedic/non-Brahmanic elements had a fairly important role to play. It can be said with fair amount of certainty that the territorial uniqueness and active cultural processes were responsible for this unique development in the eastern part of India 'Bengal' in ancient times.

In Bengal, the Purāṇas chose local goddesses and constructed a 'regional cult' which later became one of the major symbols of Bengal's cultural tradition.<sup>51</sup> Following its own distinct way, Bengal remoulded and integrated Brahmanism with local customs and practices that characterizes as the pre-Vedic 'mental attitude or framework'. The Brāhmanical social order, in Bengal, was undermined seriously during the early centuries of the Common Era (CE) because of the widespread popularity of Buddhism, the beliefs and practices of Tantra, and other such factors. In order to meet this challenge the Brāhmaṇas attempted to draw people from non-Brāhmanical folds into their sphere of influence and to earn the trust of the Brāhmanical leadership. According to Kunal Chakrabarti, 'the result was the creation of a composite, syncretic religious system which incorporated diverse rituals and beliefs without endangering the social supremacy of the Brāhmaṇas'.<sup>52</sup> This syncretistic tradition got a new dimension approximately between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE when a large number of Upapurāṇas<sup>53</sup> –

that offered a balance between the Purāṇic Brāhmanical tradition and the exclusively regional local traditions – were written in Bengal.<sup>54</sup>

The Paschimbhag Copperplate of 10<sup>th</sup> century CE<sup>55</sup> throws a flicker of light and contains a good deal of information about ‘Brahmanisation’ in Śrīhaṭṭa *Maṇḍala*. This is by far the largest grant among the Bengal epigraphs. I choose this particular copperplate as a proof for establishing my argument of ‘compromised Brahmanism’ in early Bengal. Very interestingly, the names of the Brāhmaṇas, as recorded in the charter, have local fervour and are typical of non-Brāhmanic family names such as Chandras, Dāma, Dāsa, Datta, Ghoṣa, Mitra, Nandin etc., current in the locality. Such non-Brāhmanic family names clearly speak of an established ‘regional type of Brāhmanical social life’ or a ‘compromised Brahmanism’ in the North-eastern part of Bengal adjacent to the Kamarupa area in the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE. The Nidhanpur Copperplates of Kamarupa King Bhāskaravarmaṇa (594-650 CE)<sup>56</sup> and the Tippera Grant of Lokanātha (7<sup>th</sup> century CE)<sup>57</sup> also bear the names of Brāhmaṇas with non-Brāhmanic endings. The presence of the non-Brahmanic name-endings is unusual to Bengal and Kamarupa and not usually found elsewhere in India. Even, the deities mentioned in the Paschimbhag copperplate, are equally Brāhmanic and *Mahayana* Buddhist. The Nidhanpur plates and Tippera grant of 7<sup>th</sup> century CE hints at the process of early Brāhmanic settlements in North-eastern part of Bengal. The Paschimbhag copperplate indicates the continuance of the same process in the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE. This process is being explained as a Brāhmanic-Buddhist compromised cultural scenario. There must have been some links with the long rooted pre-Vedic/ non-Brāhmanic legacy of the people of the land and the ‘brāhmanical way of accommodating local culture’, resulting in a ‘compromised’ Brahmanism.

### **‘Personality’ in Bengal: Transformed Buddhism:**

After entering into the territory of Bengal, Buddhism also imbibed lot of local elements such as adoration of images, most probably for the influence of the regional ‘personality’, though fundamentally it was a direct rejection of beliefs and practices that Buddha himself had preached in his original creed.<sup>58</sup> This transformation has been termed as *Vajrayana* and *Tantrayana*, more specifically, *Sahajayana* and *Kalachakrayana* (branches of *Mahayana* Buddhism).<sup>59</sup> *Mahayana* Buddhism is not the original concept, but has arisen mainly as subsidiary concepts out of a mixture of Buddhism and Brahmanism. *Mahayana* Buddhists believe that the Buddha is divine and that he manifests himself again and again for the salvation of human beings. *Mahayana* Buddhists believe in the concept of the Bodhisattva, a person who undergoes several rebirths in order to assume the sins and sorrows of human beings and thus achieve salvation for them. He does not work for his own ‘*Nirvana*’, but for the ‘*Nirvana*’ of all human beings. After achieving this state he is freed from the cycle of birth and rebirth. The principal aim of *Mahayana* Buddhists is to achieve the ideal of the Bodhisattva. This religious form spread throughout eastern India, and teachers like Atiśa Dipaṅkara went out to Nepal and



Tibet and popularised *Mahayana* Buddhism throughout those places. As Gandhara was the home of *Mahayana* Buddhism, which spread to Central Asia, China, Korea and Japan, Bengal was the home of the *Vajrayana-Tantrayana* variety that added new features to Buddhism in Tibet, China and the countries of the East.<sup>60</sup> Trevor Ling, surmises, Buddhism became 'too popular – it approximated too closely to the popular culture of Bengal'.<sup>61</sup>

Territorial Bengal always 'fabricated' all the religions in her way. This can be deduced from the following facts, namely: (a) the arrival of Buddhism in Bengal, (b) addition of new dimensions and compromise with local culture; and (c) its eastward expansion towards mainland-maritime Southeast Asia and even Nepal, Tibet, and China. All these were the results of the influence of Bengal's peculiar geographical factors and her long cultural legacy that inextricably intermingled with each other and the reasons of gradual development of constructing 'personality' in a particular territory and their peoples.<sup>62</sup> However, it can be said that Buddhism amalgamated with some new dimensions of Tantricism in the eastern part of India (Bengal) and then exported it to the Southeast Asian countries and archipelago.<sup>63</sup> Buddhism had not attracted a major following anywhere except in this territory of Bengal. Bengal's own way of accommodating cultures always had an active input into the growth of regional consciousness and the regional type of cultures. In this regard Niharranjan Ray comments that the religious beliefs and rituals which evolved out of the impetuous adaptation and assimilation of Jaina, Buddhist, and Brāhmaṇical religions and different tantric rituals and methods with the prehistoric tribal beliefs, customs and traditions, religious festivals, and rituals of peoples of eastern part of India (Bengal) differ fundamentally from the beliefs and rituals of peoples of northern and southern parts of India.<sup>64</sup>

#### **'Personality' in Bengal: Popularity of Vaishnavism:**

B. M. Morrison shows from an analysis of the donations recorded in the epigraphs from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE that by far the largest proportion of land grants or gifts issued by Buddhist rulers in the central, western, and northern parts of Bengal were individual Brāhmaṇas. Among those receiving land in the eastern part of Bengal were mainly Vaishnava and only Saivite shrines, or what appears to have been a group of non-Buddhist monasteries.<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, Morrison has gone so far as to say that 'the testimony of the inscriptions suggests that Vaishnavism rather than Buddhism was the religion which was most popular with the rulers of the delta (Bengal)'.<sup>66</sup> Most donations were made to the temples and shrines of the various manifestations of Viṣṇu, and the religious belief of most of the rulers revealed a form of Vaishnavism.

Anthropological and linguistic researches exposed the fact that the original settlers of early Bengal were 'pre-Aryans' (pre-Vedic/ non-Brāhmaṇic), and Bengal had remained beyond the fold of Brāhmaṇic culture for long time. Vaishnavism, in fact, flourished in Northern part of India as opposed to Vedicism and spread in Bengal with its inclusion in the Gupta Empire about

the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. From the analysis of the epigraphic records its growing popularity in Bengal can easily be traced out. Here I am giving few examples. The Susunia Rock Inscription (4<sup>th</sup> century CE) of Chandra Varman of Puṣkaraṇa records the worship of Cakrasvāmin (Vishnu, the wielder of Discus) at Susunia Hill, situated about 12 km north-west of Bankura in West Bengal.<sup>67</sup> During the reign of Budhagupta (476-495 CE) the Damodarapur Copperplate Inscription (North Bengal) speaks of the gods Svetavarāha-Svāmin and Kokāmukha-Svāmin, both representing the 'Varāha' incarnation of lord Vishnu.<sup>68</sup> At the time of indicating the boundaries of the donated land, the Gunaigarh Copperplate grant of Vainyagupta (507 CE) mentions the temple of Pradyumneśvara. 'Pradyumneśvara' is no other than Lord Vishnu whose temple existed in the village Gunaigarh of Tipperah area, which suggests the eastward expansion of Vaishnavism.<sup>69</sup> The Kailan Copperplate Inscription of Śrīdhāraṇarāta (665-75 CE) informs us that the king recognises himself as 'Parama Vaiṣṇava' and devotee of 'Puruṣottama'.<sup>70</sup> Guravamiśra, the Prime Minister of Nārāyaṇapāla (861-977 CE) built an inscribed Garuḍa-pillar in the village Badala in Dinajpur district. The pillar inscription shows his intense devotion to Vaishnavism.<sup>71</sup> Kamauli Copperplate grant of Vaidyadeva (1128-35 CE) begins with the invocation to Vāsudeva and the opening verse is dedicated to the adoration to the Boar incarnation of Vishnu. He assumed the epithets, 'Paramamaheśvara', 'Parama Vaiṣṇava'.<sup>72</sup> The two Mainamati Copperplate inscriptions of Laḍahachandra also begins with the salutation to Vishnu.<sup>73</sup> The Varman rulers were 'Parama Vaishnava' and orthodox in their religious faith.<sup>74</sup> Interestingly enough, though the Sena rulers of Bengal were staunch followers of Puranic Brahmanism, Lakṣmaṇasena accepted Vaishnavism and assumed the epithets 'Parama Narasiṃha' and 'Parama Vaishnava'.<sup>75</sup>

The preference for this particular form of religious belief and practice speaks of and can be characterized as typical of the 'personality' of this territory of eastern part of India (Bengal).

### **'Personality' in Bengal: Folk/ Popular Islam:**

On the basis of the archaeological evidence, writings of the Arab geographers and the traditions current in different parts of the territorial Bengal, Abdul Karim has concluded that the Arabs had contact with Bengal coast and her sea-port from the 8<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>76</sup> But the early contacts were purely commercial. Around 12<sup>th</sup> century CE, some Muslim preachers started entering into Bengal. Gradually Bengal became a preponderantly Muslim region. Here, mention must be made of the same process of accommodating local culture in Islam in the region of Bengal, which Asim Roy terms as 'the syncretic Islam'.<sup>77</sup>

It has been asserted that the Muslims of Bengal form a distinct community, and in their social and cultural life they are closer to the non-Muslim population of this region than to Muslims living elsewhere in the subcontinent or lands beyond the territory. This local character of Islam, which M.R. Tarafdar calls 'a regional type of Islam',<sup>78</sup> must have been rooted in the pre-Vedic/ non-Brāhmaṇic legacy of the land. This is also termed as 'folk Islam' or 'popular

Islam' and it had to accommodate a wide variety of local religio-cultural elements.<sup>79</sup> A.F. Salahuddin Ahmad characterised the regional individuality of Bengal as Bengal's Personality and asserted that spiritual humanism and not traditional religious fundamentalism attracted the Bengali mind throughout history.<sup>80</sup>

### **'Personality' in Bengal: Distinct Rural Way of Life:**

Now I would like to throw lights on the distinct rural way of life in early Bengal which can explain personality traits of common people. As portrayed in the ancient literature<sup>81</sup>: the seasonal pattern and the natural setting, such as 'the cuckoo singing, the blossoming of the mango, the buzzing of the bees and the lily buds in the tanks and ponds in springtime', or in the monsoon rains 'the village children, smeared with mud and with sticks in their hands, running after the rising fish in the flooded paddy field which is full of croaking frogs' or 'the happy village youngman in the nights of monsoon lies with his wife in his thatched pavilion over the roof on which grows pumpkin vines and he listens in her embrace to the constant downpour of rains' or 'the peasant houses are happy in the harvest of the winter rice and sweet with perfume from jars of new-stored grain'<sup>82</sup> – all have an 'eternity' about them. In *Saduktikarnāmrta*<sup>83</sup> too, we find glimpses of how geographical situation of early medieval Bengal exerted its definite impact on the lives of the rural poor 'Bangali's'<sup>84</sup>: '... posts of wood are moving, mud-built walls are melting, straws of thatch are flying away; the frogs are capturing my room for hunting the earth-worm ...'.<sup>85</sup>

These verses depicted contemporary rural life in Bengal. An interpretation of those same verses focusing on geographical and cultural symbols help us extract a fascinating image regarding the livelihood of the common people in early medieval days in Bengal region. Likewise, *Āryāsaptaśatī* of poet Govardhana Āchārya<sup>86</sup> also contains salient information about distinct cultural attitudes, traditions, and the natural environment of early Bengal. In this Sanskrit Anthology, it has been picturesquely described as to how seasonal patterns explicitly impact not only on the external manifestation of the nature, but also on life and cultures of local peoples in general in this particular territory.<sup>87</sup>

### **'Personality' in Bengal: Individuality in Art and Architecture:**

Bengal has a long rooted history and heritage in art<sup>88</sup> and architecture, which is the depiction of distinct regional personality traits and traditions. Archaeological excavations have yielded numerous artefacts made of the clay, mud, stones and rocks which have been manufactured by the available raw materials of Bengal's geographical surface. Among the articles of daily functional architecture, the extensive use of bamboos, straw, reeds, and mud have been documented.<sup>89</sup> To quote Dani: 'Bamboo, cane, and reed are the God-given material to the Bengalis who have used them from household architecture to all kinds of beautiful furniture, tools, and plants, baskets and mats, bowls and plates, storage jars and luxury items for the poor as well as for the nobility'.<sup>90</sup> Religious establishment of early Bengal comprising of monasteries,

stupas, temples etc. were also constructed by the common, natural raw materials available in Bengal. Indeed, during this time, by burning the unique muddy clay of Bengal, bricks were being widely used in construction of architectural structures, as Dani puts it as ‘...the muddy clay of the flats that is used for brick architecture’.<sup>91</sup> While explaining the impact of geography in the urban architecture in early Bengal, Amita Ray mentioned that the scattered, intermittent regional archaeological ruins in Gangetic West Bengal and North Bengal speak vividly of the regional versatility, opulence, and excellence.<sup>92</sup>

Among the material remains unearthed from the archaeological sites in Bengal, the terracotta artefacts or terracotta plaques are the most significant.<sup>93</sup> Not only on the origin of the terracotta plaques, but its extensive use, were greatly influenced by the geographical environment. It is precisely for this reason that the use of the terracotta art had been continued since very remote past. During the Buddhist, the Brāhmaṇas, and at a later stage, the Muslims continuously used and maintained this tradition for the ornamentation of religious establishments in Bengal. Some terracotta artefacts depicted dresses and ornaments of the local people, their daily life, religious belief and cult, and economic condition of the people of the land that were closely associated with and influenced by the geographical factors.<sup>94</sup> The muddy clay of Bengal has played a significant/profound functional role in the evolution of the distinct Bengal art and architecture, which in turn play a pioneering role in the construction of the ‘personality’ in Bengal. As a matter of fact, the distinct geo-features of Bengal, her riverine nature and abundance, and fertility of alluvium have all made her the ‘ideal’ and ‘unique’ cradle of terracotta, and even pottery and clay-modelling.<sup>95</sup> The terracotta plaques discovered from Chandraketugarh excavations in recent days have attracted scholars’ special attention for its distinctive features. The main reason is their greater excellence; their brightness, clarity, and glow in comparison to other plaques have made them ‘distinct’ and ‘unique’ to Bengal.<sup>96</sup>

Barrie M. Morrison proved the efficacy of the ‘eternity’ in the life-patterns of Bengal in his analysis of the pottery found at the Lalmai sites. In determining the type composition, their distributions and manufacturing details he has successfully drawn upon the contemporary pottery types and has clearly shown that pottery pattern has not really changed very much till date.<sup>97</sup> Morrison has included an appendix on the pottery augmented by many drawings. These are the depiction of personality traits in Bengal.

Sculptures have also occupied a significant place in the plethora of Bengal’s art and architecture.<sup>98</sup> It has been minutely observed by the researchers as to how geography of Bengal had influenced the genesis and ‘envious development’ of this art. The statues and figures belonging to the first phase are made of grey, white or spotted sand stone; those belonging to the second phase are made of bluish siliceous stone; and finally, those of the third phase are made of the black chlorite stone. As far as the first two, it is not yet been specifically determined by the academicians whether these raw materials were being found in Bengal itself. However,

regarding the third, Dani comments, 'It is the black chlorite hillock of Rajmahal that supplies the raw material for stone sculpture of the Pāla period'.<sup>99</sup>

Apart from these, some wooden figures of Pāla-Chadra-Sena-Varmaṇa period have also been found from some archaeological sites. Scholars also opine that ivory artefacts were extensively produced too: it has been documented now from numerous authentic sources that the forests on the frontiers of Bengal were the breeding ground of elephants. A good number of ivory artefacts have been found in the excavations at Pandu Rajar Dhibi, Chadraketugarh and Mangalkot.<sup>100</sup> The Bhatera copperplate inscription of Sylhet (11<sup>th</sup> century CE) mentions that Govindakeśava Deva, the ruler of Śrīhaṭṭa, sanctioned a piece of land for building a temple and appointed some ivory artisans.<sup>101</sup> Prāgyjotiṣa (Kamarupa) was famous for elephants and ivory art. Because of the geographical affinity between Śrīhaṭṭa and Kamarupa, ivory art expanded into Bengal easily. Wood craft<sup>102</sup> has flourished in this region much more than metal craft because of availability of the raw materials.

### Observations:

The preceding discussion underlines the fact that the geographical-cultural processes of making specific region and population in early Bengal demonstrate the spirit of the land and the age in very clear terms. This process began in the pre-historic period and it is clearly manifested in the socio-cultural and religious distinct life-patterns of a group of people in an active territory of Bengal during the historic period. Before the coming of Brāhmanic ideas, thoughts and practices, Bengal witnessed an advanced civilizational standard. The earliest evidence of this can be found for instance in Pandu Rajar Dhibi.<sup>103</sup>

It is very interesting and noticeable that 'catholicity', 'humanity', 'liberty', and 'tolerant spirit', according to Niharranjan Ray, had been manifested in religious cultures in early Bengal. This religious 'catholicity' and 'tolerant spirit' was definitely practiced not only at the state-level, but also by the people, who imbibed this spirit from the non-Brāhmanic legacy of the land.<sup>104</sup> For instance, at the time of the Buddhist dynasties, i.e., the Pāla, the Deva, and the Chandra rule in Bengal, Brahmanism had widespread following and royal patronage. These typical features in the religious cultures of the local inhabitants have been explained by Niharranjan Ray by pointing out the "pre-Aryan heritage, mixture of racial elements in the composition of the population, and the weak current of the Aryan influence".<sup>105</sup> Ray has further discerned a love, respect, and extreme eagerness for 'humanism' in the personality of Bengal and has gone so far as to say that this 'idealistic humanism' is the best and the greatest legacy of the ancient period to the medieval age.<sup>106</sup> The *Dohākoṣa* of Saroyovajra<sup>107</sup> also clearly demonstrates the rational spirit, humanism, and the freedom of thought of the age.<sup>108</sup> These were represented in the mental framework of the age and seem to have been spread through ages under Bengal's active and unique territorial surroundings. Islam entered into Bengal, where such

a catholic mental framework prevailed, became well accepted, and achieved popularity among the peoples.

The personality of Bengal was largely influenced by the pre-Vedic/ non-Brāhmaṇic legacy of the local people, because geographically Bengal located itself far beyond the stronghold of Vedic/Brāhmaṇical orthodoxy. The Brāhmaṇical influence became weaker on its long eastward journey from the central Ganga valley. Territorial Bengal received it at a stage, when its non-Brāhmaṇic socio-cultural roots were firmly established. Hence, the people of this region have found a kind of ‘mental attitude’ or personality of accepting very little of external elements without renouncing their own individuality. Just like a cane plant, the people of the land have manifested their elemental spirit of resilience even after confronting and braving several adversities since antiquity. This particular trait of Bengal’s personality has been called by Niharranjan Ray as *baitasībṛtti*<sup>109</sup> (resilient spirit of the cane plant). From an analysis of the sources of the period under review, scholars have seen a significant indication of ‘liberalism’ in Bengal’s personality. This essentially generous ‘deltaic mind’ continued during the Middle Ages. One could easily find reflections of this liberal attitude in the copperplate of land grant inscriptions of early Bengal from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE. The popular attraction towards Vaishnavism is clearly manifested in these records. Even in the medieval period, in the Chaitanya and Nathasanyasis, anyone can clearly hear echoes of this characteristic liberalism.

It’s natural that in the formation of a regional personality and art and architectural individuality, different elements would remain active in different regions. In the Bengal context, it is her active geographical territory; natural boundary by hills, jungles and high lands; distinct geo-physical factors such as largest delta, abundance of water, alluvial soil, heavy monsoon; active cultural assimilative power and processes have played an exemplary mutual interactive decisive role. In this way, with the human-environment interactions, ‘regional personality’ developed in Bengal with an individuality of its own.

### **Conclusion:**

Geographers and historians have accepted Bengal as a ‘geographical region’ and ‘cultural region’. This paper is referring to a period when neither the ‘national identity’ nor the ‘provincial identity’ of Bengal as a politico-administrative unit had developed. But I have gone a little further and asserted an idea of ‘personality’, ‘cultural territory’, and an imperfect awareness of a ‘cultural community’ that had begun to emerge in Bengal in the given chronological bracket. The developments of cultural little communities in Bengal are created through historical transformations and a process of mutual interactions between human and land from the antiquity. Geographical-cultural resources and processes enabled little communities to transform gradually into a regional community in Bengal. I have looked merely at the beginning of this process. It is true that too much emphasis on the origin of cultural traits may exert a backward drag and make one oblivious to future developments. The personality traits of little communities in Bengal did not

give up their deep rooted cultural legacies, though Bengal got involved in a process of cultural transformation with the pan-Indian Brahmanical model. Needless to say that Bengal always accepted newly emerging cultural symbols in one way or another, and some traits in personality were established before CE-1300 days. It should be kept in our mind that 'regional personality' evolve, over a period of time and is subject to continuous renewal and change.

#### Notes and References:

1. The name 'Bengal', with which I am concerned in this paper, did not exist. Bengal was a colonial territorial-political construction and from the practical point of view it is convenient to use that name and it should be taken to denote present-day Bangladesh, plus the states of West Bengal and Tripura of India – a territorial unit in the historical sense, and often recognised by geographers as a 'region' within South Asia. Apart from these areas, a few adjacent parts of Assam, Bihar, Jharkhand and Orissa were also being included in this region, since these were more or less in the common orbit of historical processes with early Bengal. To be more precise, the land inhabited by the Bangla linguistic group during the Iliyas Shahi and Husain Shahi dynasties in the medieval age, is being implied as the land of Bengal here. O.H.K. Spate, ATA Learmonth and B.H. Farmer, *India, Pakistan and Ceylon: The Regions*, Chapter 19: The Bengal Delta (Region XII), London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., third edition revised and completely reset, 1967, pp. 571-599.
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8. O.H.K. Spate, *India and Pakistan*, London: Methuen and Co. Ltd., 1954, p. 68.

9. Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.
10. Satish Chandra Mitra, *Yaśohar-Khulnār Itihās* (in Bānglā), Calcutta: Chakravarti, Chatterji & Co., 1922, p. 12.
11. Niharranjan Ray, *History of the Bengali People*, p. 53.
12. Amitabha Bhattacharyya, *Historical Geography of Ancient and Early Medieval Bengal*, pp. 11-35.
13. Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.
14. Amitabha Bhattacharyya, *Historical Geography of Ancient and Early Medieval Bengal*, p. 115.
15. We can have some ideas of the shifting channels of the rivers from contemporary land maps of Bengal, and of India, were drawn up by the Portuguese, Dutch and English in the later period in between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries CE that showed gradually changing shape of Bengal's rivers and settlements. These vicissitudes can also be seen in the accounts of such foreign travelers as Ibn Battuta (CE 1328-54), Bernier (14<sup>th</sup> century CE), Ralph Fitch (CE 1583-91), Fernandez (CE 1598) and in some regional literature of medieval times such as *Maṇasāmaṅgal*, *Chaṇḍimaṅgal*, *Rāmāyaṇa* of Kṛttivāsa and *Ānandamaṅgal* etc.
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18. Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and The Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, p. 226.
19. Maps directed by Gastoldi (CE 1548), Fanden Brock (CE 1660), D Barros (CE 1615) and Rennel (CE 1779) showed the picture of changing the river channel of Bengal. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, pp. 196-97.
20. Richard M Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and The Bengal Frontier*, pp. xxii-xxiv.
21. Richard M Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, pp. xxii-xxiii.
22. BD Chattopadhyaya, *Aspects of Rural Settlements and Rural Society in Early Medieval India*, Calcutta/New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 1990, p. 18.
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24. Akbar Ali Khan, *Discovery of Bangladesh*, pp.143-44.
25. Aksadul Alam, 'Theoretical Basis of Islamisation in Bengal: A Review', p. 137.
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33. *Gita-Govinda* of Jayadeva, translated and edited by Lakshminarasimha Sastri, Madras, 1956, pp. 27, 72-103.
34. *Saduktikarnāmṛta* of Śrīdharadāsa compiled in 1206 CE, edited by Pandit Ramavtara Sharma, with a critical introduction in English by Har Dutt Sharma, Lahore: Motilal Banarsi Dass/ The Punjab Sanskrit Book Depot, 1933.
35. H.S. Jarrett (trans), *Ain-i-Akbari*, Vol. 2, revised by J.N. Sarkar, Calcutta, 1948-49.
36. For instances Bangarh copperplate inscription of Mahipāla (*Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*, pp. 200, 205-06), Khalimpur copperplate of Dharmapāla (*Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*, pp. 106-07), Mongyr copperplate inscription of Devapāla (*Corpus of Bengal Inscriptions*, pp. 120-26) and Tirumalai inscription of Chola dynasty (*Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. 9, pp. 229-233) etc.
37. We can find a vivid description of the spring season or *Vasanta* in early Bengal in several *Sloks* of the *Gītāgovinda*, *Pavanadūta* and *Rāmcharitam*. Winter and autumn were also depicted in some verses of these literary accounts.
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40. The data and analysis followed in this section is largely based on the research work by Haroun Er Rashid: 'Land and People: Physical and Anthropological Geography' in *Bangladesh – National Culture and Heritage*, edited by A. F. Salahuddin Ahmed and Bazlul Mobin Chowdhury, Dhaka: Independent University, Bangladesh, 2004; 'Land and People: Change in Environmental Condition', in *Cultural Survey of Bangladesh Series I(Archaeological Heritage)*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2007; Niharanjan Ray, *History of the Bengali People*, pp. 15-49; and Ajay Roy, 'Bangalir Nritattik Parichay' in *Bangla Sahityer Itihas*, Vol. 1, edited by Anisuzzaman, in Bangla, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1987, pp. 83-153.

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46. Niharranjan Ray, *History of the Bengali People (Ancient Period)*, translated by John W Hood, Calcutta: Orient Longman, 1994, pp. 579-80.
47. Niharranjan Ray, *History of the Bengali People*, p. 580.
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52. Kunal Chakrabarti, 'Cult Region', p. 3.
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66. B.M. Morrison, *Political Centers and Cultural Regions in Early Bengal*, p. 154.
67. *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XIII, p. 133.
68. *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XV, pp. 113-45.
69. *The Indian Historical Quarterly*, Vol. VI, p. 551.
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