

LIFE, SOCIETY AND CULTURE OF THE MUSLIMS OF MEDIEVAL BENGAL: SOME EPIGRAPHIC EVIDENCES

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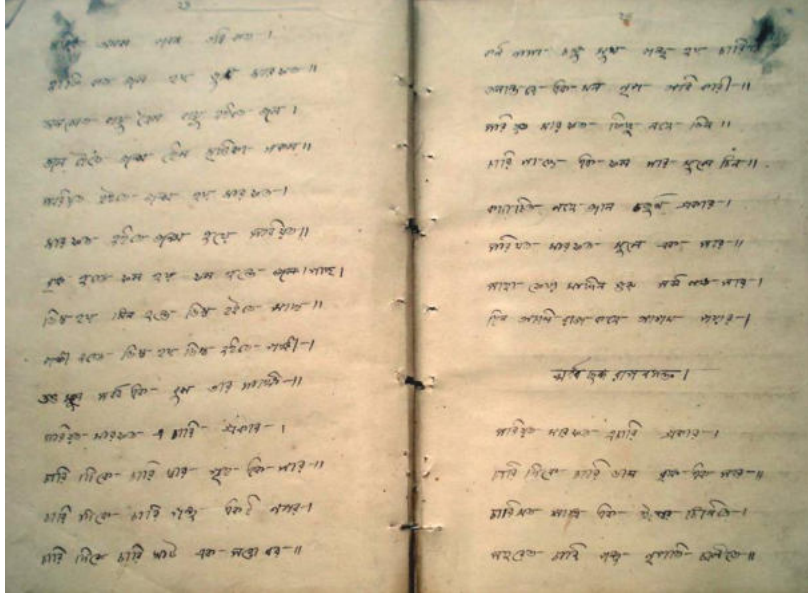


Plate 29.1: Ali Raja, *Agam*, folios 24-25, a 17th century Bengali *Pūthī* manuscript now preserved at Dhaka University Central Library, MS. no. S.A.B. - 9.

Bengali text (Plate 29.1) of the folios: 24-25.

সরিয়ত অনল পবন তরিকত ।
 হাকিকত জল হয় ভূমি মারফত ।।
 অনলেতে বায়ু হৈল বায়ু হইতে জল ।
 জল হইতে জন্ম হৈল মৃত্তিকা সকল ।।
 সরিয়ত হইতে জন্ম হয় মারফত ।
 মারফত হইতে জন্ম হয় সরিয়ত ।।
 বৃক্ষ হইতে ফল হয়, ফল হইতে গাছ ।
 ডিম্ব হয় মিন হইতে ডিম্ব হইতে মাছ ।।
 পক্ষী হইতে ডিম্ব হয় ডিম্ব হইতে পক্ষী ।
 তত্ত্ব মূল সর্ব্ব এক বুঝ তার সাক্ষী ।।
 সরিয়ত মারফত এ চারি প্রকার ।
 চারি দিকে চারি দ্বার গৃহ এক সার ।।
 চারি দিকে চারি পহু একই নগর ।
 চারি দিকে চারি ঘাট একই সরোবর ।।

কর্ণ নাসা চক্ষু মুখ পহু হয় চারি ।
 জনান্তরে এক মন নৃপ অধিকারে ।।
 সরিয়ত মারফত কিছু নহে ভিন ।
 চারি গাছে এক ফল সার মূলে চিন ।।
 কদাচিত নহে জান চতুর্থ প্রকার ।
 সরিয়ত মারফত মূলে এক পার ।।
 সাহা কেয়া মদ্দিন গুরু সর্ব্ব লক্ষ সার ।
 হিন আলি রাজা কহে আগাম পয়ার ।।
 খর্ব ছন্দ রাগ বসন্ত
 সরিয়ত মারফত এ চারি প্রকার ।
 চারি দিকে চারি ডাল বৃক্ষ এক সার ।।
 চারি মত শাস্ত্র এক ঈশ্বর চিনিতে ।
 সহরেত চারি পহু নৃপতি চলিতে ।।

Translation of the lines 7-10 of folio 14:

The fruit grows from the tree,
 And the tree again from the fruit...
 The egg comes from the bird,
 And the bird again from the egg.
 ‘All is one’ - is the essence of truth...
 Sharī‘a and Ma‘rifa are essentially one.¹

Introduction:

The lines that appear above are typical of the Bengali mystical verses found in a genre of early Muslim Bengali literature known as *pūthī*, which was popular among the rural masses until the late nineteenth century. Like this folk poetry, the early account of the spread of Islam in Bengal is still shrouded in myth and mystery due to the intricate nature of its history, complexities of its social evolution and the diversities of its religious traditions and popular beliefs.

Bengal, once an outpost of the Islamic world, today has the largest Muslim population in South Asia. Bengali Muslims (approximately 155 million in Bangladesh and 60 million in West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and other regions of South Asia and in certain parts of Arakan in Burma) form the second largest linguistic group in the Islamic world after the Arabs, if not the first. Islam is not only the faith of the majority of the approximately 270 million Bengali-speaking people inhabiting largely the eastern part of South Asia, but it is also their predominant and primary culture. Although geographically distant from Makkah and Madinah, the heartland of Islam, Bengal has nonetheless played an important role in shaping the history of the Islamic East.

The Emergence of Islam in the Bengal Frontier:

There has been much speculation about the factors that led to the spread of Islam in this region and several intriguing questions remain unanswered. One is why this particular region attained such an overwhelmingly Muslim majority, while many other regions in the central, western and southern or even eastern parts of the Subcontinent did not, though they remained under Muslim rule for a considerable period. There are a number of theories about the consolidation of Islam in Bengal.² They can be described mainly as: (1) mass immigration of Muslims into the area; (2) massive conversion of lower-caste Hindus to escape the caste system rigorously imposed by the upper class Hindus; (3) dominance of Islam as the religion of the ruling class and eagerness of the indigenous population to associate themselves with the ruling class; and (4) acceptance of Islam as a more appropriate way of life in the changed circumstances in the rural settings, i.e., from a tribal nomadic system to a settled farming system (e.g., Eaton’s theory about the emergence of Islam as the religion of axe and plough in the Bengal delta).³ It appears that though a large segment of the population in Bengal embraced Islam in a formal sense at various times and for various reasons, consciousness of their Islamic

identity and the degree of the intensity of their faith and religious adherence grew gradually over a long period, a process that continues to this day. A sizeable portion of the farming population gradually adopted Islam for practical reasons as if it suited their agrarian life more than the other extant faiths in the region. On the other hand, it seems that Islam did not gain much popularity among certain indigenous castes traditionally engaged in specific professions such as *Dom* (mainly engaged in bamboo handicrafts and various menial jobs), *Chamar* (leather related works, shoemakers), *Napit* (barbers), *Methor* (toilet cleaners), *kamar* (blacksmiths) and *kumar* (pottery manufacturers) etc.

Bengal experienced great prosperity during the rule of the independent Muslim sultans, whose far-reaching welfare works, such as *siqāya* (water tanks and wells particularly mentioned in quite a few Ḥusayn Shāhī inscriptions), helped spread Islam to the furthest corners of the region. Institutions, such as *waqf* and *madad-i-ma'āsh* (endowment and land-grants to support masjid, madrasas and khānqāhs mentioned in a number of inscriptions), benefited the commoners greatly, regardless of their religion. Islam thus appeared in Bengal as the religion of commoners.⁴ Bengal's ecological balance and natural harmony left a strong imprint on its popular literature, art, architecture, culture and folklore during the Sultanate and Mughal periods. Islam finally emerged as the faith, as well as the primary culture, of the majority of the population of Bengal. During the Mughal period too, Bengal witnessed sustained growth in the positive utilization of its natural resources without losing its ecological balance and came to be considered the granary of the empire.

There are a number of other issues pertaining to the formation of early Muslim society which remain unresolved. One central question is what was the relationship between the conquering Muslim forces, who must have been exclusively male, and the indigenous population? Minhāj al-Dīn, author of *Ṭabaqāt-i-Nāṣirī*, reports that, when Ikhtiyār al-Dīn Muḥammad Bakhtiyār returned to the capital Devikot in northern Bengal after his defeat in Tibet, in which almost all of his soldiers perished, the wives and the children of those who perished (predominantly Khaljī soldiers) started to wail in the streets, rooftops and corners loudly. The situation was so embarrassing for Bakhtiyār that he could not appear in public after that and he soon died broken-hearted.⁵ Does this statement imply that the Muslim army had settled down in this newly conquered land and married into the local population immediately after their arrival? While one cannot rule out the possibility that a limited number of families, particularly spouses, occasionally accompanied the Muslim army to Bengal, this certainly did not happen on mass scale for practical reasons. Female names in epigraphic texts, such as Boa Malati (see ins. dated 941/1534-1535), and other bits of social and historical evidence strongly suggest that large-scale inter-marriage between the newly settled Muslim male soldiers and the females from the local population occurred at different stages throughout history. Successive military expeditions by Delhi Sultans against independent Muslim rulers of Bengal brought more and more Muslim soldiers into the Bengali cultural region over centuries. Many of these soldiers settled in the region adding to the numerical expansion of the Muslim population in Bengal.

Epigraphic evidence does not give a clear picture of all these different historical settings nor does it provide complete answers to numerous questions regarding the spread of Islam in Bengal. Still, epigraphs offer many clues. The number of Islamic inscriptions during the Sultanate and early Mughal periods is fairly large (approximately 400 during the period 1204-1707), indicating the gradual spread of Islamic culture into the different spheres of Bengali life.

Merchants and the early contacts of Bengal with the West and Central Asia:

Merchants played a vital role in disseminating religion and culture in the Old World. This is especially true of Islam, as Muslim merchants carried the message of Islam to different corners of Asia and Africa both through overland and maritime trade. In the absence of any organized institution of professional missionaries, trade and commerce played a key role in conversion to Islam. However, the historical experiences as well as the process of this transformation were different in nature when compared with the aggressive proselytization practiced by Western Christian missionary institutions. While the missionary activities were viewed by many traditional societies in the East as one of the tools of colonial expansionism, Islam entered these regions in most cases as civilization-making ideology and finally emerged as a primary regional culture.

Although commercial activities played an important role in disseminating Islamic cultural and ideological influences in different regions, expansion of Islam cannot be reduced to commerce, nor can commerce (in the Indian Ocean, for instance) be reduced to mere Muslim mercantile activities. Factors leading to the diffusion of Islam varied from one region to another. While Islamic trade and maritime activities in South-east Asia and Far-east Asia played a key role in the Islamization process in a significant part of the region (e.g., Indonesia and Malaysia), it played a comparatively lesser role in Bengal.

In the first (introductory) phase of Islam in Bengal, Islamic contacts came from different directions, but mainly via the northern and north-western land route and the southern sea route of the Bay of Bengal through trade and commerce. Thus, the conquest by Muḥammad Bakhtiyār was not the first contact with Muslims in the region. Bengal had already come into limited contact with Muslim traders, merchants, sailors and sufi-shaykhs at a much earlier stage (**Plate 29.2**). Minhāj al-Dīn, author of *Ṭabaqāt-i-Nāṣirī*, mentions that when Bakhtiyār appeared before the gates of Nawdia, the capital of the Sena dynasty of Bengal, with only eighteen horsemen, the people guarding the gates of the city mistook them for a party of Muslim horse traders and opened the gates. This certainly suggests that Muslim horse traders were a familiar sight in Bengal before the conquest (**Plate 29.3**).

Indian sources also refer to early Muslim contacts with Bengal. A Sanskrit inscription of Ratnapala (third-fourth/ninth-tenth century) mentions ‘Tajikas’⁶ apparently a reference to the Tajiks of Central Asia. The Chinese form of the word, *Ta-shih*, was also used by Chinese sources to refer to Muslims, and the word seems to have been used with the same meaning in this Indian inscription.⁷ In a Sanskrit inscription dated 1206 found near the city of Gauhati in Assam, the name *Turaśka* (people of Turkic origin) is used for the Muslim forces in the area.⁸

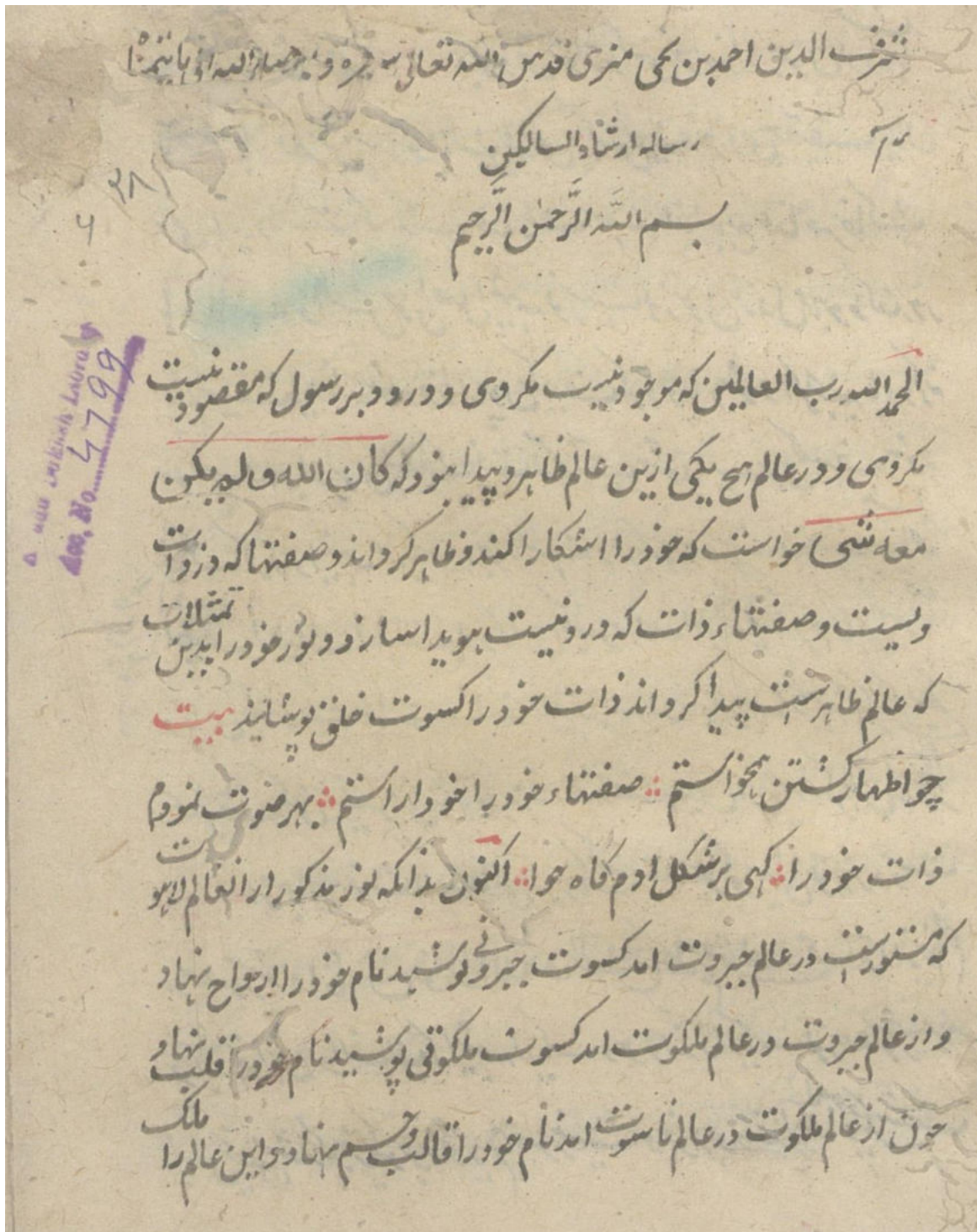


Plate 29.2: Letters, correspondences and remarks of early sufis (such as this folio from a manuscript *Maktubāt-i-Sharaf al-Dīn Yahyā Manīrī*) can be sometimes a rich source for understanding medieval cultural life of Muslim Bengal (Persian MS., Khuda Baksh Oriental Public Library, Patna, no. HL 4799, folio 28).

واعزاز فرمود چون بدان اکر ام استظهار یافت لشکر بطرف بهار برد و آن
 ولایت را هفت کرد یکد و سال بدین منوال بران حوالی و ولایت مید و اسپد
 تا استون در حصار بهار کرد ثقات ر و اة چنین روایت کرد ند که باد و سیت
 بر کستان بدر قلعه بهار رفت و معافضه جنگ پیش او برد دو برادر
 بودند دانشمندان فرغانی یکی نظام الدین دوم همصام الدین رحمت
 الله در خدمت محمد بختیار همصام الدین را این کاتب حروف دریافت
 لکهنوتی در شهر سورسنه احدی و اربعین و ستمایه و این نقل از دست
 چون بدر حصار وصول افتاد جنگ پیش بردند و این دو برادر دانشمندان
 در میان آن فرج غازیان جانباز بودند چون محمد بختیار خود را بقوت
 و دلیری در تنوره آن حصار انداخت و قلعه را فتح کرد و غنایم بسیار
 بدست او برد و پیشتر ساکنان آن موضع بر بهمنان بودند و در اینجا کتب
 بسیار بود و تمامه ان بر بهمنان سرها تراشیده داشتند و همه کشته شدند
 چون ان کتب بسیار در نظر اهل اسلام آمد جماعتی را طلب کردند
 که تا از معانی کتب اعلا می باز دهند جمله کشته شده بود ند چون معلوم
 شد تمامه آن حصار و شهر مدرسه بودند و بهار بلغت هند و بی مدرسه
 باشد در آن اسخ بر آمد با غنایم بسیار بازگشت و بخدمت سلطان
 قلیب الدین آمد و اعزاز و اکرام و دریافت جماعت امراء حضرت را از انکشا

Plate 29.3: Another folio from a different manuscript of *Ṭabaqāt-i-Nāṣirī*, in which Minhāj Sirāj al-Dīn mentions about one of his eyewitness sources in Lakhnawti, Ṣamṣām al-Dīn, who participated side by side with Bakhtiyār in his campaign of Bihar and Bengal and whom Minhāj met in 641 AH/1243 CE.⁹



Plate 29.4: A late sultanate mosque (Basri Shah Masjid) in Chitpur, North Kolkata.

It was the coastal areas of the Bay of Bengal where the Muslim traders, saints and sufis came first and introduced Islam much before the Muslim conquest in the north. The possibility of some early Muslim settlement especially in its south-eastern coastal region may not be ruled out as Muslim traders had extensive maritime activities in the Bay of Bengal. A number of medieval Muslim maritime accounts provide detailed descriptions of Baḥr al-Harkand (the Bay of Bengal), its tides, waves and currents, wind directions, islands and many other navigational details.

Shipwrecks and other calamities in the Bay of Bengal no doubt led to Muslim voyagers, particularly the Arab seafarers, gradually settling there. Place names, such as Jahaj Bhangar Ghat (meaning the landing stage after shipwreck), in Chittagong coastal areas bear the relics of such incidents in the past. An old Arakanese chronicle, first noticed in the mid-nineteenth century, reports a few Arabs in a village on the coast of Arakan, not far from Chittagong. According to another Arakanese chronicle, about a century-and-a-half later, King Tsu-la-Taing Tsanda-ya (340-346/951-957) defeated one Thu-ra-tan (Arabic sultān) and erected a victory memorial at Tset-ta-going (Chittagong).¹⁰ Evidently, the ‘Thu-ra-tan’ was a person to be

reckoned with and had for some reason or other aroused the jealousy of, or posed a threat to, the Arakanese king, but he is not mentioned in any other source. On the basis of the Arakanese chronicle, the historian Enamul Haq concluded that the Muslim settlers in the Chittagong region gradually grew into a compact and influential community, and eventually organized an independent principality comprising the coastal Chittagong and Noakhali districts. The ruler of this Muslim principality bore the title *sultān*.¹¹



Plate 29.5: The city of Bengala as appeared in the *Chart of Empire of the Grand Moghuls*, by N. Sauson in 1652 (reproduced in Mookerjee's Magazine, New Series, vol. 1, no. 1, July 1872, p. 345).

Chittagong was visited by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa during the reign of Fakhr al-Dīn Mubārak Shāh (739-50/1338-1349), who described it as a port near the mouth of the Ganges, as do the Chinese accounts of the fifteenth century, and Abū 'l-Faḍl, the courtier-historian of Akbar's reign. It may therefore be assumed that Muslim merchants, who went there, referred to it in Arabic as *Shāṭī' al-Gangā* (the bank of the Ganges) or later *Shāṭī-Jām* (e.g., Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad ibn Sulaymān, *Umdat al-Biḥār*). The expression gradually assumed the local form (of Bengali dialect) Sadkawan, Chitagang or Chatgaon. Through Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, we also know that the sea trade was never limited to Chittagong; rather, traders penetrated through inland waterways deep into the mainland.

There is an admixture of Arabic words, idioms and phrases in the local dialects of the Chittagong and Noakhali districts, a result of the close contacts between Arabs and the local

population through the ages. While contacts with Muslims in other parts of Bengal were overland and mainly Turko-Persian, the coastal areas were influenced more by Arab contacts. The first Muslim conquest of Chittagong did not occur until the fourteenth century, in the time of Fakhr al-Dīn Mubārak Shāh of Sunārgā'on (Dhaka), and effective control of the area was not achieved until the early sixteenth century. When the Portuguese merchant Barbosa visited the locality about 924/1518, he found the port, which he describes as the prosperous city of 'Bengala', inhabited mainly by rich Muslim merchants from Arabia, Persia and Abyssinia (**Plate 29.5**). They owned large ships and exported fine cotton cloth, sugar and other valuable commodities to such places as Coromondal, Malabar, Cambay, Pegu, Tennasserin, Sumatra, Malacca and Ceylon.

Early tenth/sixteenth century accounts indicate Bengali Muslim merchants spread widely across the ports of the archipelago carrying Muslim Bengali cultural influence with them. As a result, rulers in the peninsula and Sumatra were called sultan like their counterpart in Bengal. Tomé Pires particularly noted that many of the Moorish people of Pasa are Bengalis and even the Moorish king is of the Bengali caste.¹² Naturally, the growth of such a prosperous Muslim community must have taken time. Expansion of the Bengali Muslim merchant community and their mercantile activities in the Indian Ocean and their role in spreading Islam in South-east Asia in the medieval age is an important subject in its own right which has yet to be researched properly. The tradition of shipbuilding always existed in Bengal delta since ancient time. It grew further after the advent of Islam in the region as Bengal gradually assimilated in the world trade system. Early Islamic maritime literature provides us with valuable information about Baḥr Shalāḥaṭ (the Strait of Malacca) and the neighbouring islands such as Jazira al-Ramnī or Jazira al-Rāmī, which was most likely the city of Lāmurī on Sumatra).¹³ Jazirat al-Rāmī may also refer to the kingdom of Rame, which is mentioned by the English traveller Ralph Fitch, who visited Bengal in 1585-1586. Its capital was Ramu, which still exists not far from the town of Cox's Bazar, but it is now a small and declining town.

After Islam was introduced in the coastal area of Bengal, it spread into neighbouring Arakan. In the map of Blaves, the area to the south of the river Karnafuli, consisting of the southern Chittagong district and the district of Chittagong Hill Tracts, is designated as 'Codovascam', the name the Portuguese gave to the locality, after Khudā Bakhsh Khān, an administrator of the area who established himself as its ruler towards the end of the Ḥusayn Shāhī period.¹⁴ The Magh rajahs of Arakan often caused much hardship to the Muslim inhabitants as well as to the rulers of Bengal, especially during the early Mughal period. The constant encounter of the Arakanese with the Muslims in Bengal, however, eventually resulted in the strong impact of Islam on their culture. The support of the Muslim rulers of Bengal for the Arakanese king Naramithla in his battles with Ava during ninth/fifteenth century, as appears in some local oral traditions, further indicate this interaction. In the long run, Arakan itself became,

and still remains, predominantly Muslim. Thus, the first phase of Islamic contact, predominantly Arab, paved the way for the consolidation of Islam in Bengal and its neighbouring areas. It was, however, limited in nature, as it failed to establish the Arab Shāfi'ī culture that commonly prevailed along the coastal belt in the Indian Ocean perhaps due to its very liberal attitude in day to day matters (for example no restrictions on any kind of seafood). In spite of the continuous European onslaught on Arab maritime activities in the Indian Ocean beginning in the early sixteenth century, Arab ships continued to sail from different ports to the Bay of Bengal, particularly from Oman, trading mostly in the fine Bengali cotton fabric of muslin until the beginning of the eighteenth century.

During the Sultanate period, particularly after the coming to power of the Bengali Muslim sultan Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Shāh (r. 818-836/1414-1433) from the house of Ganesh, further economic integration of Bengal with the wider world of Islam provided the region with stronger economic growth. Its market became open to Indian Ocean trade and Bengali agriculture and industrial products found an outlet for maritime export. Thus, Bengal, as well as all of South Asia, became an integral part of the Islamic civilization that dominated the contemporary Old World until the advent of Western colonial powers in the region. After the Mughal emperor Akbar's conquest of the entire region and the establishment of state administration at the grass-roots level even in the low, marshy land of the southern delta, Bengal was integrated further into the world trade and commerce system. Islam, in Eaton's view, entered this delta as a civilization-building ideology.¹⁵

The beginning of Islamic consolidation:

Like most of the other regions in the Islamic world, the history of Islam in Bengal begins not with defeat, but with victory; not with fall, but with rise. The pivotal message of the early Islamic inscriptions is of God's help in the total victory, not God as a source of testing (see, for instance, Chehil Ghāzi Masjid inscription in Dinajpur, dated 865/1460). The first Islamic inscription from the reign of Sultan 'Alā' Dīn 'Alī Mardān asserts that Islam grows every moment due to the effort of the ruler. Even the popular titles of the Muslim rulers of the Bengali Sultanate, such as Abū 'l-Muẓaffar (victorious), convey the same message.

It was on 19 Ramaḍān 601 (10 May 1205)¹⁶ that Ikhtiyār al-Dīn Muḥammad Bakhtiyār, an adventurer from the Turkish Khaljī tribe of mountainous central Afghanistan (known as Khaljistān), defeated Lakhśmana Sena, a Hindu king of the powerful Sena dynasty of Bengal, with just a handful of soldiers and swept over almost the whole terrain of Rāra and Barindra in an amazingly short time. This sudden Muslim victory was very surprising since Lakhśmana Sena was considered a powerful king of eastern India who had previously conquered many neighbouring areas and towns such as Kalinga, Kamarupa, Puri (Purushattam-Khśetra in ancient days) and Prayaga. He was, in fact, quite appreciated by a contemporary Muslim historian,

Minhāj al-Dīn, who wrote in detail about the early Muslim campaigns in Bengal. Through this military victory, a strong Muslim foothold was established in the eastern part of South Asia which was soon to change the social, cultural, political and demographic makeup of the region. Marshal sports, such horse riding, were never a part of the popular culture of Bengal, nor did cavalry ever play any meaningful role in the defensive strategy of the Bengal army. On the contrary, the military victory of this raiding Muslim army was achieved through the superior tactics and swift mobility of the Muslim cavalry, as depicted in some of the earliest beautifully minted commemorative gold and silver coins of Bakhtiyār and Sultan ‘Alā’ Dīn ‘Alī Mardān Khaljī both at Gaur and Delhi.¹⁷ Another underlying factor contributing to this victory was the failure of the Sena dynasty to gain popular support, especially from the semi-Hinduized indigenous Buddhist population of Bengal, who had not accepted the rule of the Hindu Sena dynasty wholeheartedly. Bengal had a rich tradition of Buddhism before the Sena rule. In addition to the Buddhist Pala dynasty, some of the early Hindu kings were also influenced by it. On a Ramapala Sanskrit copperplate, for instance, we find that a Hindu king, Suvarna Chandra, is described as a follower of Buddha.

Unlike their predecessors the Buddhist Pala dynasty of Bengal, who were the original inhabitants of Bengal, the Senas were Brahman Kshatriya (one of the highest Hindu castes) and worshippers of Shiva and Shakti. They came probably as fortune seekers from Karnat in South India, a region far away from Bengal. Shortly after their arrival, they were able to establish a fiefdom in Barindra, in northern Bengal.¹⁸ As the Pala dynasty weakened, the Senas began to emerge as the only powerful rulers of Bengal. Their adherence to the caste system kept them from establishing roots among the local population. The Vedic religion, which the Aryans brought with them, never took strong root in the local people of this region. This might have been one of the factors that led a good portion of the indigenous *Mlechcha* (a Sanskrit term essentially connoting non-Aryan natives/uncivilized non-Hindu aborigines of India) population (such as the Mech tribe in the north, according to *Ṭabaqāt-i-Nāṣirī*) to cooperate with the Muslim conquerors identified by the Aryan (Vedic) Hindus as *Yavana* (originally Sanskrit word meaning polluted outsiders/aliens, somewhat close to the ancient Greek concept of *Barbarophonoi*). As a counterbalance to the previous ruling class of the Senas, Bakhtiyār tried to woo some non-Aryan indigenous tribes in the region successfully to the extent of building a huge monastery for the Buddhist population of the area.¹⁹ Thus, we notice that the assimilation of the indigenous people with the new immigrant Muslims from Afghanistan and Central Asia started at the very dawn of the Muslim conquest. This factor may have influenced Bakhtiyār to move his seat of rule farther north to Devikot, inhabited mainly by local tribes to this day rather than to Lakhnot or Nawdah (and its adjacent areas), in the heart of the Lakhnawti (Gaur) region.

The earliest recorded conversion to Islam took place among the indigenous tribe of Mech (most likely an abbreviated form of the Sanskrit word *Mlechchha* close to the ancient Greek idea

of *Xenos* [ξένος]) inhabiting the foothills of the Himalayas in the north of Bengal.²⁰ The newly converted Muslim 'Alī Mech, an influential tribal leader, played a key role in guiding Bakhtiyār Khaljī during his Tibet campaign as well as ensuring a safe return passage for him after the disastrous failure of his Tibetan expedition. It seems that a large segment of the tribal population slowly converted to Islam over a long period as they gradually moved towards a settled agrarian life.²¹ Another factor contributing to the diffusion of Islam in this region was the role of religious personalities (e.g., *qādīs*, '*ulamā*' and sufis) and traders who interacted successfully with the Bengali peasants.

The military success of Bakhtiyār Khaljī in Bengal resulted in the creation of a strong Muslim presence in the eastern hinterland of the Subcontinent. It also generated a zeal for further expansion among the new ruling class. Had Bakhtiyār's military adventure in Tibet been successful, the history of Sino-Islamic relations would have been quite different, for Tibet might have entered into the ethos of Islam. In any case, Bakhtiyār's successors continued a policy of expansion in almost all directions, though with limited success. The early rulers, such as Ḥusām al-Dīn 'Iwaḍ Khaljī and Mughīth al-Dīn Ṭughril, led a number of military campaigns in eastern Bengal. In the first half of the fourteenth century, Muslim troops penetrated into Suknāt (Sylhet), Kāmru (Kamrup) and Assam, crossing the Brahmaputra river in the east and north-east, and to Chittagong on the Bay of Bengal in the south.

This second phase of Islam in Bengal proved to be far more dynamic than the earlier phase, which was limited mostly to commerce. The emergence of early Islamic capitals such as Lakhnawti, Gaur, Pandua, Ekdala and Tanda in the north, and later on Sonārgā'on and Dhaka in the east and Sātga'on in the south-west, played an important role in the further consolidation of Muslim settlements in the region. Unlike Delhi, the Indian Muslim capital, Bengali Muslim capitals gradually turned into Muslim majority areas. Because of Bengal's distance from Delhi, this easternmost region proved from the very beginning to be difficult for the central government at Delhi to control and administer. The governors in this remote province, appointed from Delhi at the earlier stages, often tended to exercise their authority like sovereign rulers, a phenomenon that led to the creation of independent political structures in the region from the very beginning.

While this new wave of contacts through land routes overshadowed the age-old sea link that was once instrumental in the diffusion of Arab-Islamic culture in the coastal areas in the south, the northern overland contact introduced a fresh element in the cultural dimension that came from Central Asia with certain blends of the old Sassanid-Persian legacy. But at the same time, Central Asian '*ulamā*', *mashāyikh* and sufis, particularly from Khurasan (e.g., Muẓāffar Shams Balkhī) played an important role in introducing Islamic literature and disseminating Islamic education in the region. Many Persian words started appearing in the daily vocabulary of the Bengali language.²² A number of the earliest Islamic inscriptions in Bengal

(including the first Islamic inscription in the reign of Sultan ‘Alā’ Dīn Khaljī [1210-1213] and the third Islamic inscription in the reign of Balkā Khān Khaljī [1229-1231]) were inscribed in Persian. The highly Persianized ruling elite obviously favoured Persian as the court language. Though Arabic maintained its superiority in religious discourse, as we find in a khānqāh inscription dated 618/1221, sufis such as Nūr Quṭb al-‘Ālam (d. 1459?) freely used Persian for their writing, such as *malḥūzāt* (mystical tracts) and *maktūbāt* (letters). We also notice that a large number of inscriptions in Khan Jahan Mausoleum complex were rendered in Persian approximately around the year 863 (1459). One also notices the spread of a few *rawḍas* (shrines associated with the veneration of saints) in this early period.²³

The emergence of the Bengal Sultanate:

Sultan ‘Alā’ Dīn Khaljī, the second Muslim ruler of Bengal, proclaimed himself sultan as early as 607/1210, only six years after the Muslim conquest of Bengal, as did some of the other early rulers who were offshoots of the Delhi-based Balbani dynasty. During the reign of Muḥammad ibn Tughluq of Delhi, Bengal came to be ruled by Fakhr al-Dīn Mubārak Shāh at Sonārgā’on, ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Alī at Lakhnawti in the north-west, and Qadr Khān probably in Sātḡā’on. In this power struggle, it was Ḥājī Ilyās Shāh (740-759/1339-1358) who finally emerged as victorious in Sātḡā’on and then in Lakhnawti. Under his able leadership, all three mini-states were merged into an independent Bengal Sultanate whose territories were gradually expanded. Thus it was Ilyās Shāhī rulers who successfully established a real independent Sultanate around the middle of the fourteenth century. Under this dynasty, art and architecture flourished, and commerce in Bengal’s textiles and agriculture rapidly increased. In the beginning of the fifteenth century, Ghiyāth al-Dīn A‘ẓam Shāh strengthened cultural links with China, Persia and the Arab world. The port of Chittagong served as an important centre of trade with the outside world, particularly with the lands farther east, and a point of embarkation for the Muslim pilgrims to Arabia for the *ḥajj*.²⁴ Many Arab voyagers, travelers, traders and religious personalities visited Bengal during this period. Among the ‘*ulamā*’ from Makkah, who visited Bengal during this period was Aḥmad ibn Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad al-Tarūjī (a scholar and traveler from Alexandria, Egypt; d. 812/1410) who found this country very prosperous.²⁵

As with most of the other parts of the Islamic world, the relationship between the ruling class and the ‘*ulamā*’ as well as sufi and shaykhs in Bengal during this period, could at best be called a love-hate relationship and was often mired in hidden tension, an uncomfortable state of mutual acceptance that prevails in the region to this day. ‘*ulamā*’ and sufi-shaykhs were particularly concerned about the growing influence of the Hindu elite and bureaucracy who held high positions in state affairs. Among the sufi-shaykhs, Nūr Quṭb al-‘Ālam, who resisted the growing political influence of Raja Kānsa (probably a misspelling of Sanskrit Gaṇeśa), was the most vocal. A powerful Bengali Hindu landlord of Bhaturia in Barindra, Raja Kānsa seized power around 1414 and again during 1416-1417, but finally lost his bid to impose high caste Hindu Sanskrit culture in the land, as his son Jadu embraced Islam through Nūr Quṭb al-

‘Ālam. After the enthronement of Jadu, who took the name of Sulṭān Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Shāh (r. 1414-1433), Bengal looked to Makkah, Madinah, Damascus, Cairo and the other cultural and intellectual centres of the Arab world for its religious and cultural frame of reference, rather than depending solely on the Persian sphere of influence in north India and Central Asia. Conversion of an influential high caste local Hindu elite to Islam had a far-reaching effect as it set another important precedent for the further Islamization of upper-class Hindus in Bengal. Thus, a third phase of the consolidation of Islam began in the region in the form of Bengali Islamic culture. In his successful pursuit of formal recognition and nomination as amīr by the Abbasid caliph in Cairo, Sultan Jalāl al-Dīn sent his envoys to Sulṭān Bārsbāy in Egypt with royal gifts. He also sent generous endowments to Makkah and Madinah to build two madrasas there which became famous as Bengali madrasa. This renewed age-old Arab-Bengal connection helped Bengali Islamic culture draw closer to the important religious centres in Arabia. Though this Bengali Muslim dynasty did not last long (as the former Ilyās Shāhi dynasty was restored in 841/1437), the religious trend could not be averted.

Bengal enjoyed great prosperity under some of these independent sultans, and its cross-cultural ties were broadened. While Chinese emissaries were received at the royal courts in Bengal, ambassadors of the Bengali sultans travelled as far as Cairo and Herat on their diplomatic missions. Bengal maintained ties with both East and West. The restored Ilyās Shāhī dynasty ruled Bengal until 893/1487, when the leader of the Ḥabashīs or the black palace guards (originally slaves from Africa), the eunuch Sulṭān Shāhzāda, murdered the last Ilyās Shāhī Sulṭān Faṭḥ Shāh and seized power. After a brief period of anarchy, order was eventually restored. But the power gradually passed over to Sayyid ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Ḥusayn Shāh in 898/1493, who claimed to be a descendant of a Sayyid family of Arab ancestry. This new dynasty further strengthened Islamic traditions by building a series of mosques and other religious edifices (**Plate 29.4**). So far, more than 100 mosque inscriptions have been discovered from the Ḥusayn Shāhī period alone, which lasted only about forty-six years (from 1493 to 1538). The enlightened rulers of this dynasty patronized the arts, culture and, particularly, Bengali literature. Some of the great epics, such as the *Mahābhārata*, were translated into Bengali at this time. The public projects of these sultans (such as digging wells, construction of water-fountains, roads, dams, causeways and bridges as recorded in a large number of inscriptions) improved the lives of a vast number of non-Muslim subjects and contributed to the rapid spread of Islam in the region.

Inscriptions from this period provide us with much information about various aspects of life and society of the time.

Islam during the Mughal Period:

After a long campaign, Bengal was finally subdued by Akbar towards the end of the sixteenth century, and soon after was incorporated into the Mughal empire. Henceforth, it

became one of its *ṣūbas* or provinces.²⁶ Though its status was now reduced to a mere remote province of the mighty Mughal Empire, it was still considered one of the richest regions of South Asia. Its ports were used by many pilgrims in the East to travel to Makkah and Madinah. The Mughals were able to establish a very effective administrative and revenue system in the country. Under their able administration, the region continued to show economic growth. Many new settlements took place during this period in less populated or uninhabited parts of the Bengal delta, particularly in the south, which, in a way, contributed to the consolidation of Islam in the region. There is a popular expression in Bengali about the old landscape of these marshy lowlands which says: *Jale Kumīr Dangai Bāgh* (which means: Crocodile in the water and tiger in the land). The semi-nomadic people at the edge of the Sundarban forest region in the south, locally known as *Buno* (forest people), depended solely on forest resources (such as hunting and honey collection). Many of them started identifying themselves with Islam as they came in touch with Muslims. Place names in the extreme south such as Bular Ati in Satkhira (literally: seven cucumbers, a symbolic reference to seven agricultural settlements) district, refers to the process of clearing the land from a kind of dense bamboo shoots (*bula* in the local dialect) for settlement.

New settlements in Bengal were quite often named after the pioneers who founded those settlements, such as Maḥmūdīpūr (a *pūr* or settlement founded by Maḥmūd) in Satkhira, *Mulla Tero Gharīa* (a settlement of thirteen families under a *mulla*) near Kushtia city and *Baro Gharīa* (a settlement of twelve families) near the town of Chapai Nawabganj. The settlement process played such an important role in the region that during the colonial period, the English word 'settlement' itself became an important official term in the land and revenue administration. Thus, during the time of the British Raj, settlement surveys were conducted periodically and settlement records were prepared with every meticulous detail of the area on elaborate maps. For example, one of the surveys that took place on both sides of the upper Padma river in Chapai Nawabganj, Murshidabad and Malda districts (in the vicinity of Gaur and Pandua) was known as *Diyār* (meaning habitation in Arabic and Persian; *Diyāra* in local dialect) settlement, where the settled population claimed to be the descendants of the Afghan soldiers during Muslim rule.²⁷

Overall, the Mughal rulers were liberal in their attitude towards their subjects regardless of their religion. Not only did they promote Muslim institutions such as madrasas and masjids through endowments and land grants such as *madad-i-ma'āsh*, but they also occasionally supported Hindu institutions such as mandirs and temples.²⁸ During this period, the Indo-Persianized syncretic tradition found a new impetus in the region. A class division in Muslim society existed in Bengal from the very beginning, as depicted in the first Islamic inscription from the reign of Sultan 'Alā' Dīn Khaljī, which refers to *khāṣ* (elite) and *'ām* (commoners). The division became more apparent during Mughal rule as a dividing line could easily be seen now between the noble class, the Brahmin class of the Muslim elite known as *ashraf* (nobles),

consisting mainly of immigrant Muslims, and the non-Brahmin class of Muslim masses, known as *aṭraf* (sometimes also known as *ajlaf* or *arzal*, meaning people in the periphery, comparable to the term *mlechcha* in Hindu social classification) who formed the bulk of the indigenous Muslim population in the rural areas. With the gradual passing of power into the hands of the East India Company after the decline of Mughal rule in the second half of the eighteenth century, a Hindu version of *ashraf*, known as *bhadrolok* (elite people), replaced the Muslim *ashraf* who had, until then, held most of the administrative and other official and semi-official posts and formed a majority of the rich and middle-class of the Muslim population.

Epigraphic texts are one of the primary historical sources that provide us at times with some amazing information about the life, society and culture of the Muslims of medieval Bengal. For example, there are four Arabic inscriptions that give us with some interesting aspects of Bābā Ṣāliḥ who lived towards the end of fifteenth century through the beginning of sixteenth century whose life would have been perhaps considered a traditionally successful and exemplary life of a wealthy rural Muslim landowner of medieval Bengal. On the basis of what appears in the inscriptions, one can conjecture that he used to live a pious life engaging at times in the construction of religious edifices such as mosque etc. (as recorded in a masjid inscription in Bandar dated 886/1481-82). Towards the end of his life in 910 (1504), he built a mosque as an act of piety in the village of Azimnagar, in the present district of Dhaka (see the masjid inscription of Azimnagar dated 910/1504). In the following year in 911 (1505), he set out on a pilgrimage to Makkah. On his successful return, he assumed the title of Khādīm al-Nabī Ḥājjī al-Ḥaramayn wa Zā'ir al-Qadamayn Ḥājjī (the servant of the Prophet – the one who made a pilgrimage to Ḥaramayn [the two most sacred places] and visited the two [holy] footprints – Ḥājjī Bābā Ṣāliḥ) as recorded in an inscription (see the masjid inscription of Bandar dated 911/1505). An inscription in the following year (the tombstone of Ḥājjī Bābā Ṣāliḥ from Sonārgā'on dated 912/1506), with a Qur'ānic verse at the beginning, records the death of Ḥājjī Ṣāliḥ, the pious. Apparently, the inscription was set on his tomb intended to be a shrine (*rawḍa*) for the locality. Details of these inscriptions are given below as examples. Indeed they help us draw an overall picture of the lives of the people of the Muslim communities of medieval Bengal.

Masjid inscription in Bandar dated 886 (1481-82)

Original Site: Above the central entrance of a sultanate mosque (known as Khondokartola Masjid) at Bandar on the bank of Shitalakhya river (about one kilometre from Ferryghat), opposite Khizrpur (in Narayanganj district), Bangladesh. **Current Location:** In situ. **Material; Size:** Black basalt; 45 × 55 cm. **Style; No. of Lines:** *thulth* in Bengali *ṭughrā*; three lines. **Reign:** Sultān Faṭḥ Shāh (886-893/1481-1488). **Language:** Arabic. **Type:** Commemorative inscription. **Publications:** Blochmann, *JASB*, XLII (1873): 182-183; Dani,

Bibliography of Muslim Inscriptions, 34; S. Ahmed, *Inscriptions of Bengal*, 113-114; A. Karim, *Corpus of Inscriptions*, 196-198; Md. Abu Musa, *History of Dhaka through Inscription*, 48-49; Siddiq, *al-Nuqūsh al-Islāmiyya fī 'l-Bangāl*, 184 (See also its Persian translation by Layla Musazadeh, *Katībah hā* [كتيبه ها], 229-230); Siddiq, *Bangāl mein 'Arbī wa Fārsī Katbāt*, 290-292; Siddiq, *Epigraphy and Islamic Culture*, 211-212; Siddiq, 2017, *Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal*, ICSBA, pp. 341-342.

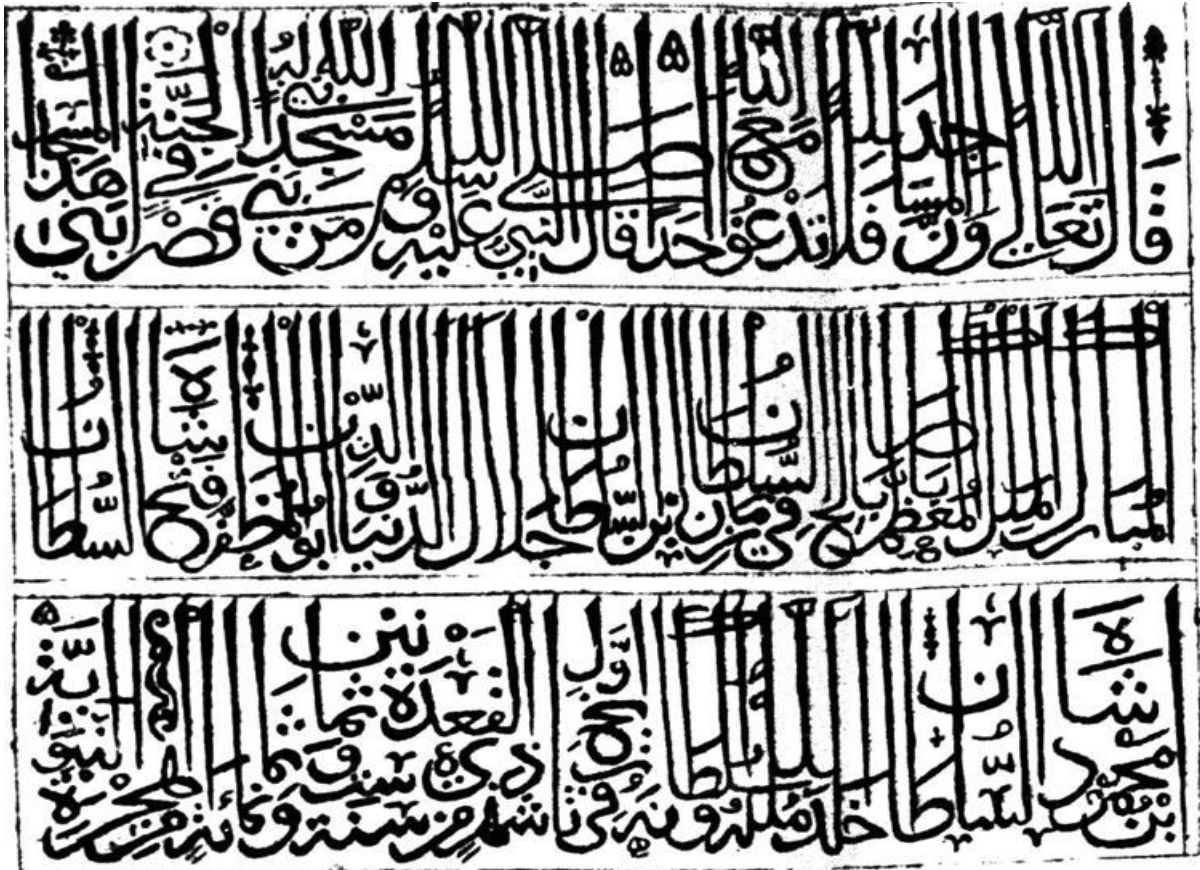


Plate 29.6: Masjid inscription in Bandar.

Text (Plate 29.6):

- L-1 قال الله تعالى وأن المساجد لله فلا تدعوا مع الله أحدا قال النبي ﷺ من بنى مسجدا بنى الله له قصرا في الجنة بنى هذا المسجد
 L-2 المبارك الملك المعظم بابا صالح في زمان السلطان ابن السلطان جلال الدنيا والدين أبو <أبي> المظفر فتح شاه السلطان
 L-3 ابن محمود شاه السلطان خلد الله ملكه وسلطانه في تاريخ أول شهر ذي القعدة سنة ست وثمانين وثمانماية من الهجرة النبوية

Translation:

L-1 Allah the Exalted said, 'And verily the mosques are for Allah, so do not invoke anyone with Allah'. The Prophet, peace and the blessing of Allah be upon him, said, 'Whoever builds a

mosque, Allah will build for him a palace in Paradise'. Al-Malik al-Mu‘azzam [the exalted lord] Bābā Ṣāliḥ built this auspicious mosque

L-2 in the reign of al- Sulṭān ibn al- Sulṭān Jalal al-Dunya wa'l-Din Abu'l Muzaffar Fath Shah al- Sulṭān

L-3 ibn Muhmud Shah al-Sultan, May Allah make his kingdom and authority everlasting, on the first of the month of Dhu'l Qada [in the] year eight hundred and eighty six Hijra.

Masjid inscription in Azimnagar dated 910 (1504)

Original Site: A Sultanate masjid at the village of Azimnagar, Dhaka district, Bangladesh. **Current Location:** Not known. **Material; Size:** Not known. **Style; No. of Lines:** *naskh*; not known. **Reign:** Sulṭān Ḥusayn Shāh (899-925/1494-1519). **Language:** Arabic. **Type:** Commemorative inscription. **Publications:** Blochmann, *JASB*, XLII (1873): 284; Dani, *Bibliography of Muslim Inscriptions*, p. 46-47, no.77; S. Ahmed, *Inscriptions of Bengal*, pp. 167-68; A. Karim, *Corpus of Inscriptions*, pp. 267-68.

Text:

قال النبي صلى الله عليه و سلم عجلوا بالصلاة قبل الفوت و عجلوا بالتوبة قبل الموت بنى هذا المسجد المبارك الملك المعظم المكرم بابا صالح و قدتم بناء هذا المسجد فيأول المحرم سنة ٩١٠

Translation:

The Prophet, may peace and the blessings of Allah be upon him, said, “Hasten with prayer before [it] expires, and hasten with repentance before death [overtakes you]”. al-Malik al-Mu‘azzam al-Mukarram (lit., the exalted and revered) Malik Bābā Ṣāliḥ built this auspicious mosque. And the construction of this mosque was completed on the first of Muḥarram, [in the] year 910 [14 June 1504].

Discussion:

Bābā Ṣāliḥ, whose name appears in three more inscriptions (dated 886/1481 and 911/1505; and the inscription dated 912/1506), is shown here with the title *malik* ‘lord’, which was normally used for the highest ranking administrative and military officers in the Sultanate Bengal.

Bābā Ṣāliḥ Masjid inscription from Bandar dated 911 (1505)

Original Site: Originally found somewhere on the bank of Lakshya river near Bandar (opposite of Narayanganj, not far from Ḥājjī Bābā Ṣāliḥ Masjid), Bandar Police Station, Sonargaon sub-district, Narayanganj district, Bangladesh. **Current Location:** Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka, inv. no. 00138 (old entry no. III.C.11). **Material; Size:** Black basalt; 21.3 × 16.6 inches (54 × 42 cm). **Style; No. of Lines:** Monumental *thulth*; three lines. **Reign:** Sulṭān Ḥusayn Shāh (899-925/1494-1519). **Language:** Arabic. **Type:** Foundation

inscription. **Publications:** Blochmann, *JASB*, XLII (1873): 283; Dani, *Bibliography of Muslim Inscriptions*, p. 52, no. 91; S. Ahmed, *Inscriptions of Bengal*, pp. 170-71; A. Karim, *Corpus of Inscriptions*, pp. 273-74; Siddiq, *al-Nuqūsh al-Islāmiyya fī 'l-Bangāl*, p. 235; idem (Persian translation by Layla Musazadeh), *Katībah hā*, pp. 295-97); idem, *Bangāl mein 'Arbīwa Fārsī Katbāt*, pp. 367-68; Md. Abu Musa, *History of Dhaka through Inscription*, 57; Siddiq, 2017, *Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal*, ICSBA, pp. 429-430.



Plate 29.7: Bābā Ṣāliḥ Masjid inscription.

Text (Plate 29.7):

L-1 قال الله تبارك وتعالى وأنّ المساجد لله فلا تدعوا مع الله أحدا

L-2 بني هذا المسجد المبارك في زمن السلطان علاء الدنيا والدينابو<أبي>المظفر حسين شاه السلطان خلد الله ملكه

L-3 الملك المعظم المكرم خادم النبي حاجي الحرمين وزائر القدمين حاجي بابا صالح - - - [سنة] احدى [عشر] وتسعمائة من الهجرة النبوية

Translation:

L-1 Allah the Blessed and Exalted said, “Verily the mosques are for Allah alone, hence do not invoke therein anyone else with Allah [72:18]”.

L-2 During the reign of the sultan ‘Alā’ al-Dunyā wa ’l-Dīn Abū ’l-Muẓaffar Ḥusayn Shāh al-Sultān, may Allah perpetuate his kingdom.

L-3 al-Malik al-Mu‘azzam al-Mukarram (the sublime and exalted lord), the servant of the Prophet, the one who made a pilgrimage to *Ḥaramayn* (the two most sacred places) and visited the two [holy] footprints. . . . Ḥājji Bābā Ṣāliḥ built this blessed mosque [in the year] nine hundred and from the Hijra of the Prophet.

Discussion:

This inscription was acquired by Dacca Museum (now Bangladesh National Museum) on June 1, 1916. According to the earliest handwritten register (manually prepared inventory) by Nalinikanta Bhattashali, the inscription was originally found somewhere on the bank of Lakshya river near Bandar, opposite of Narayanganj not far from Ḥājji Bābā Ṣāliḥ Masjid.

This is perhaps the first inscription in Bengal where the appellation *ḥajji* appears. The institution of the *ḥajj* was well-established in Bengal by this time. The port of Chittagong (also known as Islāmābād, see *East India Registrar and Directors*, 1906, p. 1) was used for *ḥajj* by Bengali Muslim pilgrims, and others from the neighbouring regions. One of the earliest recorded pilgrims who left through this port for Makkah was Mawlānā Muẓaffar Shams Balkhī, a famous disciple of Shaykh Sharaf al-Dīn Manīrī, whose travel arrangements were made by Sultān Ghiyāth al-Dīn (*Circa* 792-814/1390-1411).

Tombstone of Ḥājji Bābā Ṣāliḥ from Sonargaon Dated 912 (1506)

Original Site: Tomb of Ḥājji Bābā Ṣāliḥ nearby Ḥājji Bābā Ṣāliḥ Masjid on the bank of the river Lakshya in the village of Masjidbari in Bandar (opposite of Narayanganj; Police Station Bandar), Sonargaon sub-district, Bangladesh. **Current Location:** Bangladesh National Museum, Dhaka, Bangladesh; inv. 00139 00140 (original entry of the old registry book of Nalinikanta Bhattashali III.C.6). **Material; Size:** Grey basalt stone; 16 × 8½ inches (41 × 22 cm). **Style; No. of Lines:** *rayḥānī*; two lines. **Reign:** Sultān Ḥusayn Shāh (899-925 /1494-1519). **Language:** Arabic. **Type:** Tombstone. **Publications:** Blochmann, *JASB*, XLII (1873): 283-84; Dani, *Bibliography of Muslim Inscriptions*, p. 54, no. 95; S. Ahmed, *Inscriptions of Bengal*, pp. 171-73 A. Karim, *Corpus of Inscriptions*, pp. 275-76; Siddiq, *al-Nuqūsh al-Islāmiyya fī ’l-Bangāl*, p. 236; idem (Persian translation by Layla Musazadeh), *Katībah hā*, pp. 298); idem, *Bangāl mein ‘Arbīwa Fārsī Katbāt*, pp. 368-69; Md. Abu Musa, *History of Dhaka through Inscription*, 58.; Siddiq, 2017, *Arabic and Persian Inscriptions of Bengal*, ICSBA, pp. 430-432.



Plate 29.8: Tombstone of Hājji Bābā Ṣāliḥ.

Text (Plate 29.8):

- L-1** الله لا إله إلا هو ليجمعنكم إلى يوم القيامة لا ريب فيه ومن أصدق من الله حديثاً
- L-2** هذروضة الحاجي الحرمين الزاير القدمين خادم النبي عليه السلام حاجي بابا صالح المتوفي في تاريخ شهر ربيع الأول المعظم من سنة اثني عشر [وتسعمائة]

Translation:

- L-1** “Allah! There is no god but He. He will surely gather you at the day of resurrection, about which there is no doubt, and whose word can be truer than Allah’s” [Qur’ān 4:87].
- L-2** This is the *rawḍa* (grave [lit., garden]) of Hājji Bābā Ṣāliḥ, who made a pilgrimage to *Haramayn* [and] visited the two (holy) footprints, the servant of the Prophet, peace be on him, who died on [the] date of the month of Rabī‘ al-Awwal in the year nine hundred and twelve [August 1506].

Discussion:

Like the previous one, this inscription was also acquired by Dacca Museum (now Bangladesh National Museum) on June 1, 1916. All four inscriptions of Hājji Bābā Ṣāliḥ are interesting as they help us understand the social life of the Muslims in Sultanate Bengal. They indicate what happened in the last days of Bābā Ṣāliḥ’s life, revealing the lifestyle of this traditional man of his age belonging to the Muslim elite in medieval Bengal. In the Bandar mosque inscription (dated 886/1481) and the Azimnagar inscription (dated 910/1504), Bābā Ṣāliḥ’s name appears without the appellation of *hājji*, indicating that he had not yet performed

hajj. The *ḥadīth*, he chose for the Azimnagar inscription, is about the importance of repentance before the death, suggesting that he knew his last days were upon him. After making this inscription, he set out on the pilgrimage, probably in the same year (910/1504). When he returned from pilgrimage towards the beginning of 911/1505, he started building another mosque in his hometown of Bandar, which he completed in the same year (i.e., 911/1505). After a few months, he died, as the tombstone records, in the month of Rabī‘ al-Awwal 912 (August 1506). The writing style in this inscription represents a local variety of *rayḥānī* found in some Bengal inscriptions during this period.

Notes and References:

1. See also Asim Roy, *Islam in South Asia: A Regional Perspective* (New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1996), 29.
2. The most brilliant discussion about these theories can be found in Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993): 113.
3. See also, Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 268–303.
4. Some of the royal titles in the early Islamic inscriptions, such as *malādh al-warā* (shelter of mankind) *Rukn al-Danā* (support of the commoners) in the madrasa inscription at Zafar Khān Masjid in Tribeni dated 698/1298 (ins. no. 12), indicate this trend.
5. Minhāj al-Dīn, *Ṭabaqāt-e-Nāṣirī*, ed. W. N. Lees (Calcutta, 1863–1864): 149-153.
6. *JASB*, 47 (1898):116.
7. Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*, vol. 1: 36.
8. Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, ‘An Epigraphical Journey to an Islamic Land’, *Muqarnas*, 7 (1990): 83-108.
9. Persian MS., Khuda Baksh Oriental Public Library, Patna, no. HL 27, folio 231.
10. *JASB*, 13 (1844): 36.
11. Muhammad Enamul Haq, *Purbo Pakistane Islam* (Dhaka, 1948): 17; M. A. Rahim points out, ‘Reading of term *Thu-ra-tan* as *Sulṭān* cannot be dismissed as fantastic.’ He thinks that it is reasonable to suggest that the term *surtan* is an Arakanese corruption of *sulṭān* since such a word did not exist in Arakanese or Buddhist tradition. The *sulṭān* was the ‘chief of the influential community of Arab merchants in the Chittagong locality, not the ruler of a kingdom covering the Chittagong and Noakhali districts, as it is supposed’; see Muhammad Abdur Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, vol. 1, 1201–1576 CE (Karachi, 1963): 44.
12. Cortesão, *The Suma Oriental of Tomé Pires* (London: Hakluyt Society, 2010): 142.
13. Abū ‘Abd Allah Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu‘jam al-Buldān*, vol. 4 (Cairo: Matba‘ al-Sa‘āda, 1906): 213; Gabriel Ferrand, *Relations de Voyages et Textes Géographiques Arabes, Persians et Turks* (Paris, 1913): 180–181.

14. Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*, vol. 1: 225.
15. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 308.
16. This date can be confirmed based on numerous beautiful gold and silver coins that were intricately struck in the mints of Gaur and Delhi in the consecutive years of Bakhtiyār's victory, some of which are now preserved in Delhi Museum, the British Museum and the Smithsonian Institution. Almost all of these coins depict a horseman charging at full gallop holding a mace in his hand, symbolizing the powerful cavalry of the Muslims that helped them conquer this land. See Parameshwari Lal Gupta, 'The Date of Bakhtiyār Khilji's Occupation of Gauḍa', *Journal of the Varendra Research Museum*, 4 (1975–76): 29–34; G. S. Farid, 'Hitherto Unknown Silver Tankah of Sultan Alauddin Ali Mardan Khilji, 607–610 A.H', *Journal of the Asiatic Society*, 18, 1–4 (1976): 104–106; John Deyell, *Living without Silver: The Monetary History of Early Medieval North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 364–367, coin no. 298.
17. Nicholas W. Lowick, 'The Horseman Type of Bengal and the Question of Commemorative Issues', *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, 35 (1973): 196–208; *idem*, *Coinage and History of the Islamic World*, vol. XVII (Aldershot: Variorum, 1990): 195–208; Parameshwari Lal Gupta, 'Nagri Legend on Horseman Tankah of Muhammad bin Sam', *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India* 35 (1973): 209–212; Parameshwari Lal Gupta, 'On the Date of the Horseman Type Coin of Muhammad bin Sam', *Journal of the Numismatic Society of India*, 38 (1976): 81–87; *Delhi Museum Catalogue* 6, Coin 3a.
18. Niharanjan Roy, *Bangalir Itihas* (Calcutta, 1359 Bengali year): 501.
19. It was known as Tishu Lamba (the seat of Luma) situated roughly between 20.7 ° latitude (north) and 89.2 ° longitude (east), about eighty miles from Rangpur.
20. Minhāj al-Dīn, *Ṭabaqāt-e-Nāṣirī*, ed. W. N. Lees (Calcutta, 1863–1864): 149–153. Mech and various other tribal people still inhabit the northern area of Kochbihar (about twenty-five miles from Alipur), West Bengal and occasionally support local insurgent groups aiming to regain old political entities, such as Kamrup and Kamta lands, that survived contemporaneously with the Bengal Sultanate. On the other hand, the little known tomb of Bakhtiyār Khalji, located atop a mound (that apparently contain unexplored ruins of an earliest Muslim headquarters there) in place known as Pīrpāl near the village of Narayanpur, about eight kilometre southeast of Gangarampur Police Station (and not far from Devikot, the capital of Bakhtiyār Khalji) in Dakshin Dinajpur district, is revered as the shrine of a Muslim saint for centuries by the indigenous population (mostly belonging to tribal or Hindu schedule classes) of the area as well as local Muslims.
21. See also Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 195–227.
22. This influence can be felt more strongly in certain local Bengali dialects used by the rural Muslims of North Bengal, particularly in and around early Muslim capitals such as Gaur and Pandua, and in the dialect of the Shērshabadi clan (to which the author himself belongs) on the both sides of the river Ganges in Malda, Murshidabad and Chapai Nawabganj districts. On the other hand, an Arabic

- linguistic influence can be observed more in the Bengali dialects of southern Bengal, particularly in Chittagong division.
23. For instance, see Rawḍa Inscription in Barahdari dated 663/1268 and Rawḍa Inscription in Mahasthangarh dated 700/1300.
 24. Muẓaffar Shams Balkhī (d. 1400), for instance, used this port with the permission of Sultān Ghiyāth al-Dīn A'zam Shāh (r. 1389–1410) to embark on a trip from Chittagong to Makkah; see Muẓaffar Shams Balkhī, *Maktūbāt-i-Muẓaffar Shams Balkhī*, Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, Patna, Persian MS Acc. no. 1859, Letter 148. See also S. H. Askari, *Maktub and Malfuz Literature as a Source of Socio-Political History* (Patna: Khuda Bakhsh Oriental Public Library, 1981): 16.
 25. Taqī al-Dīn al-Fāsī, *al-'Aqd al-Thamīn*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1998): 26.
 26. C. E. Bosworth, *The Islamic Dynasties* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967): 194-195.
 27. Descendants of Afghans and other immigrants from Khurasan and Central Asia gradually assimilated with the local population (e.g., through marriages) and have barely maintained their separate identities in the long run. However, there are still some traditional families which have retained their ancestral family names (i.e., surnames such as Khān, Paththān, Yūsufzai, Lohānī, Afrīdī and Pannī) or have been able to preserve their family trees to some extent indicating their Afghan or Central Asian origin. To cite a typical example, we may mention here a family line (the author's own ancestors) in the village of Gopalganj near Sujnipara railway station in Murshidabad district which claims its ancestry from the Khurasān region. This family originally bore the surname of Khān, though the surname was dropped at some point. The family tree runs as follows: Kulthum Yūsuf > bint (i.e. daughter of) Mohammad Yūsuf Ṣiddiq (author of this article) > ibn (i.e. son of) Muhammad Muġīb al-Raḥmān > ibn 'Abd al-Ghanī > ibn Ayyūb Ḥusayn > ibn Ḥājī Shahādāt Mondol > ibn Bulāqī Mondol > ibn Nizām al Dīn Mondol (probably lived in Shērshabadi settlement area on west bank of the river Padma in Sutithana of Present Murshidabad district) > ibn 'Abdal-Karīm Bishwas (probably migrated from Khayber Pakhtunkhwa to Bengal) > ibn Ḥaydar 'Alī Khān (probably migrated from Afghanistan to Khayber Pakhtunkhwa). Another branch of this family living in the village of Ambhua near Rajgram railway station in the district of Birbhum records its family tree as following: Kulthūm Bibi (author's grandmother) > bint Mawlānā 'Abdal-Raḥīm > ibn Ḥājī Qalandar Ḥusayn > ibn Shihāb al-Dīn Khān > ibn La'al Muḥammad Khān > ibn Shēr Khān Peshāwarī. A family line of a female from the same clan in the village of Ambhuais: Mājida Khātūn (mother of Kulthūm Bibi) > bint Taplū Khān > ibn Samīr al-Dīn Khān > ibn Ḍamīr al-Dīn Khān > ibn Nakhbīr Khān Paththān. All these three families pioneered a religious movement, known as *Ahl al-Ḥadīth*, in their respective localities, and supported the Jihād movement against colonial rule in one way or other.
 28. 'Register of sanads', Sylhet District Collectorate Record Room, nos. 17: 18, 75, 243; nos.19, 94, 154, 158, 279; nos. 20, 334, 618, 619; nos. 851, 853, 959; nos. 397, 400.