

## **Inter-Community Relations in Medieval Bengal as Reflected in Contemporary Bengali Vernacular Literature**

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Medieval Bengal neither has any authoritative nor any continuous contemporary sociocultural historiography except Mirza Nathan's *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi*. This is a work on political history, which hardly throws light on the social conditions of Bengal. It deals with the expansion of the Mughal Empire in Bengal, Kamrup and Assam. Sir Jagadish Narayan Sarkar aptly describes the work as "an oasis in the desert of historical ignorance." Immediately after the British conquest of Bengal, the British administrators sought to collect all relevant details on the geographical, social and economic conditions of Bengal for the convenience of their administration. They also wrote history for the same purpose. Obviously the British historians were not free from bias. That is why Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay declared.

The works of history composed by Englishman are not true histories of Bengal....What is required is the history of Bengal; otherwise there is no hope for Bengal. Who will write it? You will write, I will write, all of us will write. Come, let us all write the history of Bengal.

Translated into English by Jagadish Narayan Sarkar.

Even today there exists no standard full-fledged social history of medieval Bengal. Nevertheless, Bengali literature had attained its maturity and had

definitely come into being during the period under review. Though no original work on the social history of contemporary Bengal exists, the typical Bengali mind was truly portrayed in the literature of this period. In this chapter an attempt has been made to focus on inter-community relations, mainly, Hindu–Muslim relations in medieval Bengal as reflected in the contemporary Bengali vernacular literature, namely *Mangal Kavya*, *Vaishnava Sahitya*, *Anubad Sahitya*, *Islami Bangla Sahitya*, *Purba Banga Gitika*, *Mymansingh Gitika*, *Punthi Sahitya*, *Atharo Bhatir Panchali*, *Sufi Sahitya*, *Pir Sahitya*, etc.

In studying the social conditions of medieval Bengal one has to bear in mind that the subject is very controversial. So I would have to critically examine different views on it. It will not suffice if one uses only one-sided materials, or if attention is focused only on one side of the picture. On the one hand, one has to admit that enmity existed in the political relations between the Hindus and the Muslims. The tradition kept the communal gulf wide open. The glory of one, for example, the stories of triumphs, the killing of Hindus and their slavery, constituted a source of shame and humiliation for the other. The breaking of idols and destruction of temples were proper and glorious to one but were to the other despicable, and considered to be a sacrilege of desecration. On the other hand, a different picture emerges if one turns from mere political relations and political history and from theoretical or legal works to study the life of the common man as depicted in contemporary literature.

As a matter of fact, from incidental references in contemporary literature one learns that the history of Hindu–Muslim relations is not a continuous and monotonous account of mere intolerance and different manifestations thereof. Even in literature one sees at times a bright picture and a reference to mutual influences in livelihoods. It is easily discernible from this that along with instances on blind bigotry a favourable atmosphere of mutual tolerance in society and culture was also developing.

First of all, one may use three distinct types of Bengali literature of the medieval period for the present purpose—(a) *Mangal Kavya*, (b) *Vaishnava Sahitya* and (c) *Anubad Sahitya*.

## Mangal Kavya

The Muslim invasion hit the Brahmins severely. For this reason, a section of Brahmins revised their conservative stand and came to a compromise.

The Brahmins were proud of their position in society in religious matters and disapproved of the low-class Hindus and their ways of life. But after the victory of the Turks, it was no longer possible for the Brahmins to look down upon the lower-class Hindus and disavow their gods, goddesses and mythology. They had also to give them a place and niche in literature. This literature, composed mainly of the stories of Hindu and Buddhist goddesses, is known as *Mangal Kavya* (Haldar 2).

The *Mangal Kavyas* were composed in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These three centuries witnessed the birth of *Bratagita Panchalis* (small poetic works with religious vows sung in honour of a deity). Jagadish Narayan Sarkar writes (1985: 81–82):

In connection with narration of the greatness of the village gods and goddesses, based on a fusion of chronicle and fairy tale, these narrative poems fit to be sung were first composed on three deities. In chronological order these were *Manasa Mangal*, *Chandi Mangal* and *Dharma Mangal*.<sup>1</sup>

## Manasa Mangal

A large number of poets of medieval Bengal wrote *Manasa Mangal Kavyas* one after another. Vijay Gupta was the most remarkable poet among them. He wrote his book during the reign of Sultan Jalaluddin Fateh Shah in 1494. He comments on the Sultan (quoted in Kalim 1988: 62–63):

The king was as valorous as Arjuna in the battle and was as beautiful as the morning sun.

He ruled over the world with his own prowess.

The subjects were happy under the efficient administration of the king.

Here, the Hindu poet praises the Sultan for the happiness in the minds of his subjects and compares him with Arjuna, the hero of Mahabharata. Without a good environment of mutual living between the Hindus and the Muslims such a poem could not have been composed by a Hindu poet of contemporary Bengal.

Ksemananda composed his *Manasa Mangal* in the mid-seventeenth century. He writes that in the house of one of the poem's Hindu figures

(Laksmindhar, son of Chand Saudagar), a copy of the Koran was kept along with other charms for the purpose of warding off evil influence (D. C. Sen 1954: 674). A poet of Barishal, East Bengal wrote in 1494, "In this instance, the written word appeared not in a Hindu household but in the hands of a mulla. A group of seven weavers, evidently Muslims, since they resided in Husainhati" (Zbavitel 1976: 161–62), were bitten by snakes unleashed by the goddess Manasa and went to the court of the Qazi seeking help. The poet wrote (quoted in Eaton 1994: 294–95):

There was a teacher of qazi named Khalas ... who always engaged himself in the study of the Quran and other religious books.... He said, if you ask me, I say, why are you afraid of demons (*bhut*), when we have got the religious books. Write (extracts) from the book and hang it down the neck. If then also the demons (implying snakes) bite, I shall be held responsible. The qazi accepted what the mullah said and all present to amulets from him (the mullah).

The above verse argues that in the society there was acceptability between the Hindus and the Muslims in times of danger. Richard M. Eaton (1994: 295) interprets this in the following manner:

Here we see a Muslim ritualist meditating on the people's behalf with a class of ubiquitous spirits, *bhut*, that pervaded (and still pervades) the folk Bengali cosmology.... In modern times, too, one finds ritualists employing the magical power of the Quran for healing purposes in precisely the manner that mullahs had done three centuries earlier.<sup>2</sup>

This may be interpreted as an indication of mutual respect between the two communities.

## Chandi Mangal

A few poems were composed during the sixteenth century using the background of the story of Kalketu, a hunter-cum-merchant, based on the greatness of the goddesses Chandi. Among all the *Chandi Mangal Panchalis*, Mukundaram Chakraborty's *Kavikankan Chandi* is the most famous. It was written in about the last quarter of the sixteenth century. Sukumar Sen (1948: 514) says:

It is doubtful if such a complete picture of Bengal and the Bengali people is available elsewhere in Bengali literature. His proficiency in Sanskrit literature and rhetoric, his knowledge and experience of customs and usages (*desi vidya* or *lok vyavahar*) and other matters are really surprising.

Translated into English by the author.

But the book is also valuable for the pictures in it draw on Hindu–Muslim relations. Kalketu, the hero, goes from Kalinga and builds the town of Gujarat. These might be imaginary towns, but the description of those Muslims who had left Kalinga and settled in Gujarat is not imaginary. It is a graphic representation what he actually saw in social life. As he writes (S. Sen 1992: 343):

Leaving the city of Kalinga, the ryots of all castes settled in the city of the Bir [the hunter of the story] with their household goods. Accepting the pan [betel] of the Bir, as a token of their consent to the agreement the Mussalmans settled there. The western end of the town was assigned to them as their abode. Then came the Syeds, Maulanas, Qazis, mounted on horses, and the Bir gave them rent-free land for their houses. At the extreme end of their settlement they made their Hosenhati, a place of Muharram Tazia and they congregated all about the place.

Translated into English by the author.

Mukundaram Chakraborty suggests that the Hindus and the Muslims who live in the land as close neighbours should learn to live in amity. The poet had no sympathy with manifestation of haughty aloofness or the spirit of scornful nonchalance in one community towards the other. He implies that the Muslims lived in a quarter of their own, separate from that of the Hindus and refers, apparently regretfully, to the customs of the two communities.

In his work, Mukundaram Chakraborty also depicts a picture of the daily life of the Muslims in his time. He only expresses the attitudes and feelings of the Hindus towards the Muslims. He says (S. Sen 1992: 343–45):

They rise very early in the morning, and spreading a red mat they offer their prayers five times during the day. Counting the *Sulaimani* beads, they meditate on Prophet Muhammad. Each of them contributes to the decoration of the *Mokam* [pir's house]—ten or twenty persons sit together and decide cases always referring to the Quran, while other sitting in the

marketplace distribute the pir *shirni* [the confectionary offered to the pir], beat the drum and raise the flag. They were very wise according to their own estimation, they never yield to anyone, and they never give up the *roza* or fast as long as they have life in them. Their appearance is rather formidable. They have no hair in their head but they allow their beard to grow down their chest. Travelling from one village to another, they offer prayers in every house as the disciples of spiritual guides or pirs. With beads in their heads some travel as leaders with black turbans on their heads as their symbols. They always adhere to their own ways. They wear on their head *topi* [cap] which has ten sides, and an *ijar* [pyjama] tied tight round the waist. If they meet one who is bare headed, they pass him by without uttering a word, but going aside, they throw clods of earth at him. Many *mians* [Muslims] with their followers sit there, they do not use water, but wipe their hands on their clothes after taking their foods. All four classes of Pathan sit there.... *Maktabs* also were set up where young Muslims were taught by pious Maulavis.

Translated into English by the author.

The salient features in the daily life of the Muslims depicted by the poet prove that he had close contact with the Muslims, otherwise such a description would not have been possible. Without good social relations between the Hindus and the Muslims how could a Hindu poet like Mukundaram Chakraborty know about the intricacies of the daily lives of the Muslims? The Muslims in the picture are represented as a highly devotional class of men. Mukundaram Chakraborty's account suggests that the education of the boys was not neglected by the Muslims of those days and the teaching imparted in the *maktabs* (elementary schools) could not have been altogether separated from religion. No communal sentiment in such a picture of society can be traced.

## Dharma Mangal

The worship of Dharma Thakur or Dharmaraj (Raya) which had begun during the Sultanate period in Bengal as a result of the mixed practices of the Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus were also prevalent in Mughal Bengal. Many poets wrote *Dharma Mangal Kavyas*. Ghanaram Chakraborty is one of them. He completed his work in 1781. In his work (*Dhakurpala Part*) Ghanaram describes the settled locality of different castes, creeds and religions. He writes about the Muslims (quoted in Kalim 1988: 75):

In the heart of the town the Muslims settled themselves as a separate community. Many Mirs, Syeds and Pathans got high status there. The Mughals and the Shaikhs well versed in battle also settled there. They shared among themselves a piece of bread and were wholly absorbed in battle.<sup>3</sup>

Translated into English by the author.

One learns from the above verses that the poet had a good knowledge of the Muslim community and without close contact between the two communities the poet would not have been aware of the Muslims in such measure.

## Ray Mangal

*Ray Mangal* is one of the important *Mangal Kavyas*. Here also one readily sees local cosmologies expanding in order to accommodate new superhuman beings introduced by foreign Muslims. *Ray Mangal*, a poem composed in 1686, celebrated both the Bengali tiger god Dakshin Ray (king of South Bengal) and a Muslim pioneer named Bara Ghazi Khan. This poem describes that the conflict between the two was resolved, not by one defeating or displacing the other, but by the elevation of Bara Ghazi Khan to the status of a revered saint, and by the peaceful co-existence of the two figures, who would thenceforth hold a dual religious authority over the Sundarban forests of southern Bengal. This dual authority was represented by the installation of the symbol of the tiger god's head at the burial mound of the Muslim saint. The two were not, however, fused into a single religious personage, but remained mutually distinct. The agent who resolved the conflict between Dakshin Ray and Bara Ghazi Khan was neither the Hindu god Krishna nor the Islamic Prophet Muhammad, but a single figure represented as half Krishna and half Muhammad (A. Bhattacharjee 1947: 49–50). That is why Eaton (1994: 270) comments: "Islamic super human agencies were thus associated with indigenous agencies at two levels, though not yet fully identified with them."

## Annada Mangal Kavya

Bharat Chandra Ray, also known as Ray Gunakar, the court poet of Maharaja Krishna Chandra Ray of Nadia (one of the influential zamindars

of the nawabs of Bengal) composed *Annada Mangal Kavya* in 1752. It throws light on mid-eighteenth-century Bengal (Bandyopadhyay and Das 1369 B.S.: 16).

In *Annada Mangal* there is an imaginary conversation between Emperor Jahangir and Bhabananda Majumdar, an ancestor of Krishna Chandra Ray. Jahangir criticized the customs and rituals of the Hindus before Bhabananda. The latter could not and did not tolerate these blasphemies. He retaliated by mocking at Islam. The fictitious dialogue merely suggests that religious difference could be discussed freely.

As *Annada Mangal* was recited with music in the court of the king, where the courtiers were both Hindus and Muslims (p. 13),<sup>4</sup> it may be assumed that the poet did not present anything which would go against either community or religion.

Poet Kalidasa says, "I don't consider my technique to be satisfactory until the experts are satisfied." Bharat Chandra Ray was perhaps cognizant of Kalidasa's dictum and tried to please both the Hindus and the Muslim courtiers.

Bharat Chandra Ray says, through Bhabananda Majumdar:

For the Hindus, the Muslims and the other human beings and for the animals, God is for all and there are no two opinions in this. Is there anything different in the spiritual ruling in the Purana and the Quran? You, the Hindus and you also the Muslims, think over it. (p. 307)

Translated into English by the author.

Here the poet preaches the ideal of one God for all. He argues from the theological point of view that God is singular to the Hindus and Muslims. There is no orthodoxy in the poet's mind. Rather, he tries to preach religious synthesis.

## Vaishnava Sahitya

Sixteenth century Bengal witnessed a new wave of bhakti cult, better known as Vaishnavism. A new force arose during this period in Bengal with the philosophy of equality and brotherhood under the leadership of Sri Chaitanya (1486–1533) (Sarkar 1984: 103). The Bengalis became transformed into an entire and integrated nation by the cords of bhakti



(devotion) of Chaitanya. He had a deep love and great sympathy for human beings. Many poets composed verses about him and his philosophy in Bengal. The poems versified by the love of God and Radha–Krishna love or dalliance are known as *Vaishnava Kavya*.

Brindavandas and Krishnadas Kaviraj were the two most famous authors of Vaishnava literature in Bengal during the Sultanate period. They wrote that the Qazi of Nabadwip tortured the Vaishnavas. They were not tortured out of communal feeling but for political reasons. The non-Vaishnavas like the Saktas and the Naiyaiks complained to the Qazi against the Vaishnavas to stop *namkirtan* (devotional songs). The qazi ordered the stoppage of *namkirtan* to avoid conflict between the Vaishnavas and non-Vaishnavas. But it is remarkable to note that there is not a single instance that proves that the Muslim masses opposed the Vaishnava movement in any way.

It is interesting to note that a large number of Muslim poets appeared with Vaishnava sentiment, in Bengal in general and Sylhet region in particular, during the period of review. They have become remarkable like their Hindu counterparts in the world of Vaishnava literature by writing some *padas* about the amorous dalliance between Radha and Krishna. They were professedly Muslims in religion and though there is no evidence that they ever embraced Vaishnavism, they actually wrote Vaishnava *padas*.<sup>5</sup> A mere perusal of the verses without knowing the names of their composers would not enable a reader to discover whether these were composed by a Hindu Vaishnava or a Muslim Vaishnava for these are full of Vaishnava spirit. They preach the message of religious synthesis and tolerance in their poems. Jatindra Mohan Bhattacharya has traced 162 Muslim poets with Vaishnava sentiments and a little above 900 verses in his recent book, *Banglar Vaishnav Bhabapanno Musalman Kavir Padomanjusha* (1984). Unfortunately their dates are not always available. However, irrespective of their dates, the sentiments underlying their writings are significant and point to valuable conclusions. While Sashibhusan Dasgupta holds that most of them belonged to nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Rahman 2001), it is quite plausible to hold, with Sarkar, that traditions of such mutual toleration can be traced much earlier in contemporary literature even outside Bengal as well as in *Islami Bangla Sahitya* (Sarkar 1985: 89–90). In the writing of Sufi pir Qutban of Northern India (*Mrigavat* 1512), and a few other authors such traditions are available. Malik Muhammad Jaisi's (of Awadh) *Padmavat* (1520–40), in Awadhi, also preaches the message of Hindu–Muslim fusion. Mian Sadhan's Awadhi *Meinsat* (*Mayna Sati*) also bears the

clear impress of Vaishnava lyrics. This tradition was also followed in Bengal. Sarkar (1985: 98) says that even though most of the poets belonged to the eighteenth century, some at least belonged to an earlier period. Most of these Muslim poets were inhabitants of Eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh)—versifiers of Srihatta (Sylhet), Chittagaon, Tripura and Mymensingh exceeded in number than those from other places. Asim Roy (1983: 187) says, “Ranging from the sixteenth to the early years of the present century, these Muslim *pada* compositions have been gradually recovered and published in relatively old and recent compilations of Bengali *padas*.” From these arguments one might hold that there were a few Muslim poets with Vaishnava sentiments during the period under review. It is needless to say that the cultural value of the poems and songs is very important and significant. Even though they are poems and historical sources, they are nonetheless valuable as factors throwing light on the mental outlook and approach of the composers. The trend of composing poems with Vaishnava inclination by Muslims is especially helpful in understanding the oneness of the Bengali people and broadness of their mind during the medieval period.

This literature can be divided into a six-fold category, following Jatindra Mohan Bhattacharya (1984: 15), which has been adopted by E. C. Dimock. The six categories are:

1. Pure Vaishnava poetry, in which the quality of devotion and poetic style make the poem indistinguishable from one written by a Hindu Vaishnava.
2. Philosophical poetry, in which ideas neither specifically Hindu nor specifically Muslim are expressed with the help of imagery drawn from the Radha–Krishna story.
3. Poetry that employs the names Radha and Krishna to designate not the Radha and Krishna of Vaishnava text and belief, but an abstract God.
4. A purely secular poetry of love.
5. Poetry on Chaitanya.
6. Poetry using subsidiary Vaishnava themes, but without clear mention of Radha, Krishna or Chaitanya.

However, Asim Roy is critical of this classification. One finds that this classification is diffused, overlapping and inadequate for providing for a clear basis of differentiation. Here, since the purpose is only to examine the Vaishnava sentiment of the versifiers in the verses, one may avoid classifying the verses into categories.

Only a few Muslim poets with Vaishnava inclinations such as Daulat Qazi and Alaol, of the seventeenth century, will be mentioned here. A Sufi devotee, the poet Daulat Qazi, was at once the greatest Bengali Muslim poet and one of the most powerful poets of old Bengali literature. The poem *Sati Mayna*, which Daulat Qazi composed on the basis of Mian Sadhan's Awadhi *Meinsat* of the sixteenth century, is an incomplete *Panchali* poem. In *Sati Mayna* along with the adoration of Allah and Rasul (the Prophet) are mentioned the Dwarka of Krishna, dramatic performances of descriptions of twelve months (*baromasya pala*), various melodies, stories from the Puranas, Hindu dresses and *kirtan*. It also bears the clear impress of Vaishnava lyrics. The name of Alaol, an inhabitant of Faridpur district of eastern Bengal (now in Bangladesh), in the seventeenth century, is very important in this field. His best work is *Padmavat*, which was written in 1651 at the request of Magon Thakur, a minister of Arakan Raj. It is the Bengali adaption of *Padmavat* by the Awadhi poet, Malik Muhammad Jaisi (Rahman 2001: 73).

This work can rightly be considered as a bridge of Hindu-Muslim friendship. Alaol was a gifted Bengali Muslim poet. He adopted a pure Vaishnava theme for his lyrics. He writes about Radha's secret meeting with Krishna, going early in the morning and returning late at nightfall. For this, she is taken to task by her sister-in-law. Radha finds some excuses to tide over the dilemma and difficulty (Rahman 2001: 73). Such is the theme of the piece.

Most poems of the devout Vaishnavas can be regarded as Radha-Krishna allegories. The Sufi pir and Vaishnava poet Syed Murtaza prays thus (quoted in J. M. Bhattacharjee 1984: 317):

Carry me across, carry me across, oh boatman Kanai  
Oh Kanai, do thou ferry me across.  
Oh Kanai, thou art the custodian of the ferry ghat and the watchman of  
the path.  
I offer my fresh youth as the ferry fare.  
The market time is well past, but there is no transaction.  
See the sun has reached the meridian.  
Oh Radha, the milkmaid,  
Lost are all the milkmaids in the market of Kanaiya.

Translated into English by the author.

Though Lal Mahmud was born in a Muslim family, he was a devotee of Krishna; he says of himself (J. M. Bhattacharjee 1984: 250):

Though born as a Muslim, I do not ever think that I shall be deprived of the sacred feet [of Krishna].

Now, Lal Mahmud has indeed accepted the name of Hare Krishna as his be all and end all.

He further says (J. M. Bhattacharjee 1984: 250):

Whether a Hindu or a Muslim, it is all the same to you,  
Who considers the caste of one's own son?

A bhakta [devotee] is the best of all castes whether he is a *chandal* [low caste] or a *chamar* [cobbler]

Some call you Kali; some call you *banamali* [literally the gardener, here Krishna] and others call you Khoda and Allah; this is the secret [essence] of all secrets.

Chand Qazi says that Radha was very much devoted to the songs of Krishna's flute. He writes (J. M. Bhattacharjee 1984: 96):

Chand Qazi says on hearing his (i.e. Krishna's) flute I cannot restrain my tears.

In sooth, I will not live unless I see Hari.

These verses clearly demonstrate the cultural integration among the masses of Hindus and Muslims. It is evident from the above examples that it was in Bengal that at one time the message of Hindu-Muslim amity was uttered by the Muslims and the degree of emphasis laid on such a message.

The influence of the yoga system is also clear on the natural cultivation of love (*sahaj prem sadhana*). This is the common belief that the supreme beloved resides within our body, which is like a house. Sarkar says (1985: 101-2):

The same sentiments of the same tunes run through the Sahajiya songs of the Buddhists, the Sahajiya songs of the Vaishnavas in the thought of the Sufi devotee in India. In practical sense in the eyes of the Bauls of Bengal the body itself is the temple. The same emotion pervades the description of the love sports by Radha-Krishna of the Muslim Vaishnava poets of Bengal, the poems and songs dealing with physiology-based relation of the individual and soul and the Supreme Being. One is the house (*ghar*) the other is the dweller (*gharani*). If Krishna represented the house Radha

was the dweller. If Radha was the house Krishna was the house-holder. This dalliance between the *deha* (body, shape) and *dehi* (embodied soul) the *murta* (corporeal) and *amurta* (incorporeal), *sima* (limit) and *asim* (limitless) constitute the inscrutable mystery of the absolute.

Poet Shahanur describes the body to be the tryst between Radha and Kanu. According to the poet Radha is the body, Kanu or Krishna is the mind (here, soul). He further narrates that in Radha's abode of this transitory body, Kanu or the eternal soul is like a sojourner. Some poets say just the reverse. For example, we may mention a verse of poet Uchhman or Usman. He says (quoted in J. M. Bhattacharjee 1984: 317):

Radha and Kanu reside together in the same room (in the same body), the two are not separate beings.

The boat sails day and night taking the name of Radha.

Kanu and Radha dwells forever in the same room (i.e. body).

If cruel Radha deserts Kanu, he will surely be ruined.

Here Radha represents mind or soul, Kanu only the body. So if cruel Radha (*pran*) leaves, that is, if life becomes extinct, Kanu, the body, is destroyed.

In the songs composed by the Muslim poets on Radha-Krishna *lila* different sentiments and terms associated with the pursuit of yoga are often found scattered in various forms. It is quite clear from the song of Gholam Huchhan (Hussain) that the Muslim poets reached the very depth of yoga and that this would not have been possible if there had been no cultural synthesis between the Hindus and the Muslims. It is necessary to mention the time of Ghulam Huchhan (Hussain). The *pada* by Ghulam Hussain was published in 1854 Saka or AD 1776. in *Abahan Patrika* by Syed Hassan Ali in the Asomiya language. So I think that the poet's time was earlier than AD 1776. Ghulam Hussain composes:

The boat built of unseasoned wood floats in mid-Jamuna and the pole for shoving the boat is made of unripe bamboo hence black-coloured is now the dress of Radha.

Oh Rai! Look keeping your eyes fixed on (Har's) eyes.

Hari is inside the boat, his feet adorned with anklet bells jingling.

Set your ears on his ears and row the boat.

Straight in front of the nose.

And drink the honey of Hari, by a mouth-to-mouth kiss.  
The prow of the boat, Rai, moves ahead towards heaven.  
By following the right path Radha will surely attain Hari.

Translated into English by the author.

A few Muslim poets with Vaishnava inclinations have described God by using the name of Radha–Krishna. To Hachhan Raja Chaudhury of Sylhet district there is no difference between Radha and Khoda. He addresses Radha as Rahim and Rabbani:

I long for you, oh! You beautiful Radha, I yearn after you.  
For you Bengali Hachhan Raja roams with tears.  
The Hindus call you Radha, I say you are Khoda.  
If I invoke you as Radha, the Mullahs and the Munshis prevent me.  
I will not allow this difference to exist.  
Whatever the Mullahs and Munshis say is just nonsense.

(Quoted in J. M. Bhattacharjee 1984: 346)

He further says,

Oh my precious Radha, oh my precious Radha,  
Why does my mind hanker after you?  
Listen to me, oh Radha, you, the queen of the world.  
I do not agree that only the Hindus invoke you as Radha.  
Nothing exists except Allah, the rest is blank.  
Repeatedly does Hassan Raja call you Rahim and Rabbani and also  
Subhani.  
He calls Allah—Allah, I know not except one.

(Quoted in J. M. Bhattacharjee 1984: 346)

It is a wonder to see such a revolutionary change and radical shift in the field of literature on the soil of Bengal. This change was brought by the monotheist followers of Islam who were theoretically different from the Hindu idol worshippers. They broke the narrow limit of communalism, and casting all hesitations, composed books on the Hindu religion, wrote songs on mother Kali, described her greatness and wrote authoritative works on Natha literature. Sukur Mahmud's *Gopichander Sannayas* and Faizullah's *Goroksha Vijaya* may be mentioned in this context for their contribution

to Natha literature. Even today, after taking a bath in the Ganges many orthodox Hindus recite the *Gangastak* (hymn to the Ganga), composed in Sanskrit by Daraf Khan, the Muslim poet of Tribeni. Daraf Khan's work proved his liberalism. It is very interesting to note that Daraf Khan was felicitated by the contemporary Muslims instead of scolding him for his pro-Hindu attitude. "At Tribenighat I adore Daraf Khan, whose water for ablutions was supplied by the Ganges" (Qadir and Karim 1945: 31).

The present subject matter is very important for the social and cultural history of Bengal. The united devotional exercises of the two communities helped the integration of Hindus and Muslims in Bengal during the period of review from which the contemporary world can draw lessons.

## **Anubad Sahitya**

Neither the alien Muslim rulers nor the Muslim masses in Bengal had any knowledge of the Puranas and other classical works of the Hindus written in Sanskrit. In their quest for knowledge about Hinduism they desired the translation of the Sanskrit works into Bengali. There is also another opinion. During this period social conditions were not favourable for creating any type of literature, because uncertainty still reigned in the society, and literature supplied the only relief to mental liberation. For this reason the Muslim rulers were interested in translating works. The Bengali translations of the three holy scriptures, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata* and *Srimad Bhagabata*, which started with the Iliyas Shahis and continued under the Hussain Shahis, fulfilled the mental urges of both the communities, Hindus and Muslims. This trend of undertaking translations was also followed by the Mughal rulers.

Had the Muslim rulers of medieval Bengal not offered help to translate Hindu religious texts, the Bengalis would have had to wait long to receive them. One may understand from these translations that the Muslim rulers were respectful towards Hindu religious philosophy as they took initiatives for such translations.

## **Islamic Bengali Literature**

Though the process of Hindu-Muslim cultural synthesis began to be reflected in Bengali literature during the Sultanate rule in Bengal, Islamic

Bengali literature during the Mughal period too illustrates significant aspects of it. It is interesting to note that while the Hindu poets were primarily and mainly concerned with stories of the greatness of deities, the Muslim poets clung to the stream of romantic narrative poems and love songs. They also wrote numerous compositions regarding Hindu gods and goddesses. As regards Hindu–Muslim understanding, the writings of three Muslim poets of the seventeenth century, Sabirid Khan, Daulat Qazi and Alaol are very important.

A new tendency was seen in Bengali literature, namely, to write biographies of Prophet Muhammad and the Caliphs towards the end of the sixteenth century and the early part of the seventeenth century. Sayid Sultan occupies a distinguished place among the authors, with his poetical works, *Nabi-Vamsa* (Family of the Prophet) and *Rasul Vijay* (Prophet's victories). It is interesting that he composed two religious books of the Muslims and a tantric treatise on the science of yoga, named *Jnan Pradip* and *Jnan Chautisa*. The author consulted the Hindu Sastras, and the Sanskrit work *Hari-Vamsa* had been imitated in *Nabi-Vamsa*. That the author considered Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva and Krishna as Nabis (prophets) is a significant aspect to be noted in understanding religious practices of those times.

In the pir ballads, literature on the pirs, we get a blending of the Dharma Thakur of the Buddhists, the pir of the Muslims and the Narayan of the Hindus in the *Pir Panchalis* (poetical works praising the glories of the pir) composed in the seventeenth century, specially towards the later part.

Towards the end of the Muslim rule in Bengal, the first effort towards the fusion of religions between the Hindus and Muslims was made through the ballads of *Satya Pir* and *Satya Narayan*. Sukumar Sen (1948: 80–81) says that the scribes of the pir ballads were Hindus, the singers were Muslims, but their composers were poets of both the communities. He further states that numerous Hindu writers, from West Bengal to Assam, composed *Satya Narayan* or *Satya Pir Panchalis* by equating Rahim of Mecca and Rama of Ayodhya. There are considerable similarities between the ballads of Faizullah of West Bengal and the *panchalis* of Rameswar Bhattacharya. The story of Faizullah contains clear hints of communal synthesis. He salutes the adored deities of both communities in the beginning and then writes:

You are Brahma, you are Visnu, You are Narayan  
Listen, O Ghazi, pay heed to yourself to preaching in the assembly (i.e.  
instead of fighting)

(Quoted in Sarkar 1985: 94)



As regards the contrariety between Brahmanism and Islam, the Brahmin says that one loses his caste by reading the Koran since at its very beginning there is the word 'bismillah'. In reply *Satya Pir* gives the following argument:

Except one Brahma no two Brahmas exist, the Lord of all is one Niranjan Gosain, in whose name Brahma, Visnu, Maheswar utter prayers. In one pore of his skin lies the endless universe. Without hands, without legs, he holds the world. he has no mouth to eat; he hears without ears, sees without eyes. None can recognise him though he is omnipresent. Bismillah is but another name of that very same Niranjan; Visnu and Bismillah are not at all distinct.

(Quoted in S. Sen 1948: 465)

So *Satya Pir*, *Satya Narayan*, *Vishnu*, *Bismillah*, *Allah* and *Niranjan* have all become fused into one. Hence the view of late Professor Ramesh Chandra Majumdar that *Satya Pir* was the god of the Muslims and *Satya Narayan* of the Hindus does not appear to be correct, at least at the time of the rise of this worship.

Of all the Panchalis composed by the Muslims this deserves mention most. This ballad is important proof of how closely the two communities had come into contact with each other.

## **Purba Banga Gitika and Mymansingh Gitika**

During the medieval period a large number of poets, both Hindus and Muslims, from different places of East Bengal, composed lyric poems (*gitikas*) regarding the sorrows and joys of people in the villages. Collectors gathered preserved all of them with care. Dinesh Chandra Sen collected these *gitikas* from them, and edited and published them in books under the names of *Purba Banga Gitika* and *Mymansingh Gitika*. The exact date and year are not always available of all the *gitikas*. In spite of that these are very important source materials for the study of the social history of Bengal under the rule of the Mughals and the Nawabs of Bengal.

*Purba Banga Gitika* and *Mymansingh Gitika* manifest and witness the amicable relationship between the Hindus and Muslims in Bengal.

They refer to good mutual understanding among the votaries of the two religions during the Mughal rule. A Muslim poet wrote in the adoration of a ballad named *Nurunneha O Kaborer Katha*,

The Hindus and the Muslims are a rope of a same bundle: someone says Allah Rasul, someone says Hari. Bismillah and Shri Bishnu are the same; when they are made different, they are called Ram and Rahim.<sup>6</sup>

(Quoted in D. C. Sen 1954: 497)

The poet tried to unite the Hindus and the Muslims on the same platform. He did not find any difference between Rama and Rahman except that they were called by different names. Muslim pirs and Hindu gods are the same in his eyes. The poet's liberalism can be compared with the outlook of a great philosopher. These verses have a deep message for present-day India grappling with various divisive forces like language, province and religion. Another Muslim poet writes in *Pir Batasi Pala*,

After adoring you, O brothers, Hindu and Muslim I extend my adoration for the Pirs and also I adore Mecca, Madina, Kashi and Gayathan.<sup>7</sup>

(Quoted in D. C. Sen 1954: 539)

The above verse speaks of the cultural syncretism between the two communities, Hindus and Muslims, during the period under review.

A ballad named *Nizam Dacoit* is equally important to mention here. It is a ballad from Chittagong district, dating from the seventeenth or eighteenth century. The poet of this ballad says in the opening lines,

First of all I bow down to the Supreme Deity (Prabhu), and secondly to (the same Omnipotent Being conceived as) the Creator (Siraj); and thirdly to the benign Incarnation of Life. The Koran and other scriptural texts I regard as revelation—the sacred utterances of the Lord (Prabhu) himself.

(Quoted in D. C. Sen 1954: 539)

Translated into English by Richard M. Eaton.

It is very interesting to note that one can find in this literature a Hindu hero and a Muslim heroine in one *gitika* and Muslim hero and Hindu heroine in another. The heart of the poet was so clean that it did not ever

fail to portray the true picture of the society and the real image of the characters of their times in contemporary literature. In fact these ballads tell us much about the religious universe of the unlettered audience to whom they were sung. Dusan Zbavitel has written of the ballads of Mymansingh and Purba Banga very aptly that they were “neither products of Hindu or Muslim culture, but of a single Bengali folk-culture” (quoted in Eaton 1994: 281), which may be justly said of medieval Bengali folk religion generally.

## Punthi Sahitya

The value of *punthi* (manuscript) literature of Bengal can hardly be overestimated. Abdul Karim Sahitya Visarad collected *punthis* written by several writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by dint of his personal efforts from various sources. They were quite helpful for the study of Hindu–Muslim relations during the period under review. For example, a *punthi* entitled *Imam Churi* written by an unknown writer is mentioned. This is an imaginary story, written in imitation of the legend about Sri Chaitanya Deva, of how a merchant kidnapped the two grandsons of the Prophet, Hassan and Hussain (Sharif n.d.: 22). It indicates that one religion had regard for another religion.

## Identification in Literature

One finds in Bengali literature dating from the sixteenth century—romances, epics, narratives and devotional poems—that the Muslim authors identify God and the Prophet using Sanskrit words. Haji Muhammad, the sixteenth century poet identified the Arabic Allah with Gosai (Sanskrit for master), Saiyid Murtaza identified Prophet Muhammad’s youngest daughter Fatima with Jagat Janani (Sanskrit for mother of the world), and Sayid Sultan identified Adam, Abraham and Moses with Prabhu (Sanskrit for Lord), or more frequently, Niranjan (Sanskrit for one without colour, i.e. without qualities). Later, Ali Raza, the eighteenth century poet identified Allah with Niranjan, Iswar (Sanskrit for God), Jagat Iswar (Sanskrit for God of the Universe), and Kartar (Sanskrit for Creator). One sixteenth century poet wrote, “Muslims as well as Hindus in every home” would read the *Mahabharata*, the great

religious epic of classical India. Another poet of that century wrote of Muslims being moved to tears on hearing on Rama's loss of his beloved Sita in the epic Ramayana. It is hardly surprising then, that romantic tales from the Islamic tradition drew on this rich indigenous substratum of religious culture. For example, an eighteenth century Bengali version of the popular Iranian story of Yusuf and Zulaikha employs imagery, clearly recalls Radha's passionate love for Krishna, the central motif of the Bengali Vaishnava devotional movement. These are some of the examples of local influence on the Bengali Muslims.

## Conclusion

From the above discussion one can infer that there are numerous instances in medieval Bengali literature to show that during the period under consideration the relationship among the masses of the two communities was on the whole friendly and cordial. Both communities lived peacefully. The two communities lived side by side in amity as good neighbours, in perfect harmony and in a spirit of peaceful coexistence. There was hardly any communal clash between the two communities. Tension might have cropped up occasionally but that was confined mostly to the upper stratum and hardly affected the common people of the two communities. The tension, if any, arose more often out of the struggle for power or appropriation, and not necessarily out of communal animosity.

## Notes

1. Apart from these there were also some other *Mangal Kavyas* (eulogistic poems about gods and goddesses), for example, *Shiva Mangal* or *Shivayan*, *Kalika Mangal*, *Ganga Mangal*, *Ray Mangal*, etc. may be mentioned.
2. See also Karim (1959: 171) and cf. Gupta (1962: 140).
3. In the introduction to the *Sunya Purana* Muhammad Shahidullah writes that the Brahmins regarded the Buddhist worshippers of Dharma and the Muslims in a uniform manner. So Dharma Thakur represented the joint remonstrance of the Buddhists and the Muslims against the Brahmins. Many Islamic rites and customs have merged in the system of Dharma Thakur.
4. Bharat Chandra Ray refers to the names of Muslim courtiers in Krishna Chandra Sabhabarnana, namely, Mahmud Jafar, the *jamadār* of sepoys, Habsi Imam Boxsh, head of the Habsis and Sher Mamud, the chief dancer, showing that the king appointed several Muslims in his court.

5. The Mughals of Sylhet also patronized Vaishnavas through grants called *vishnottar*, and Shaivas through grants called *sivottar*. For example, we can say that the Mughal government granted four *qulbas* (15.6 acres) of jungle and a house to Gobinda Das, a Vaishnava holy man (*bairagi*) described as *mustahaqq-i-wajibar-riyat* (worthy of honour), an Arabic-Persian phrase that would have befitted any accomplished Muslim scholar or Sufi. See Eaton (1994: 262).
6. Sir Asutosh Chaudhury collected *Nurunneha O Kaberar Katha Pala* in 1928. The *gitika* contains 632 lines. Chaudhury was told of the ballad by Sher Ali Khan, the zamindar of Bara Vathan, which lies under Diwang Hill. See D. C. Sen 1954: 497.
7. Sri Chandra Kumar Dey collected *Pir Batasi Pala*. He wrote that he tried for more than two years for the collection of this *gitika*. The major portion of this *pala* was collected from Brindaban Bairagi of Ajmer. The remaining part of this *pala* was collected from Sridan Patuni and Jagabandhu Gayan of Laxmiganj. See D. C. Sen 1954: 539.

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