

## **Socio-Religious Beliefs and Practices in Bengal during the time of Allauddin Hussain Shah**

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***Abstract:**During the reign of Hussain Shah, the most important feature was Hindu- Muslim Religious Syncretism. The diverse Hinduism and simplicity of Islam were the two main striking features observed in medieval Bengal. It was seen that the secular thoughts preached by Hussain Shah led both Hinduism and Islam in a highly progressive direction. In the mentioned times in the paper we see a diversity of religious beliefs and practices followed by the people of Bengal. Those beliefs and practices were: Some beliefs and practices which continued in the elite class were strictly described in the Quran and Hadith. Similarly some beliefs and practices continued by the upper class were strictly followed by Dharmashastra. Perhaps the most notable feature of Hussain Shah's Bengal was that some striking beliefs and practices that were followed were invented by people who converted from Hinduism to Islam. Actually conversion to Islam or the advent of Islam was the main reason for the downfall of Hinduism. Chaitnaya revived Hinduism. Thus the Sufi Saints and Chaitanya contributed to the development of a religious structure in Bengal. Bengal hence became an important part of the Bhakti and Sufi movement which continued throughout India.*

***Keywords:** Assimilation,Buddhism,Conversion,Education, Hinduism, Islamisation*

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### **Introduction**

The Vedic period was known for its dominant Brahmanism. In the Hindu shastra, they divided their castes on the basis of their livings and professions. The post Vedic society was clearly divided into four Varnas-Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya, Sudra.They had been

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instructed to work differently and had to follow those accordingly. In the earlier stages, they continued to this settlement but at a later part the concept of controlling people in this way was so difficult. The lower class people were tortured by the upper class people. Gradually they started to protest the *Varna prathas* and Brahmanas. As a result, the Brahmins became weaker in society. This laid down the foundation of a plot when the concept of a new religion emerged with its more simplified concepts and morals. In 600 B.C, there was a rise of Buddhism founded by Gautama Buddha. He preached the gospel of non-violence, which would put an end to dislikes. This new form of religion would also have been liked by ordinary people and thus it grew popular among the masses. Similar incident happened in medieval Bengal where Islam entered India. Before the advent of Islam in India, Sena dynasty ruled in Bengal. The Sena rulers held steady affection towards the Brahmin culture and Brahmanism. They wanted to establish one caste, one religion, one social system that is based on Brahmanism and not accompany different religious philosophies and castes people tortured by orthodox morality and hypocrisy of Brahmanism. In 1203 AD, Islam entered Bengal with Bhaktiyar Khilji. Several people were attracted by the simple social and religious rule of Islam and hence Brahmanism lost its glory.

### **I**

Islam was not only the main reason for decline the Brahmanism, even the introduced of Nava Vaishnavism led to the decline of Brahmanism. Sahajiya Tantrism, rise of goddess cults and sufism played a vital role in the decline of orthodox Brahmanism. In addition to this, these religious sects introduced new socio-religious beliefs and practices during the time of Hussain Shah in Bengal. Vaishnavism continued even before the time of Chaitanya however it was deeply influenced by Tantrism or the Sahajiya cult. According to the philosophical doctrine and vaishnavism, Sahajiya are different from Gaudian or nava Vaishnavism. It is also to be said that Tantrism or Sahajiya philosophy has been introduced by Buddhism. Sahajiya believed that the main object of worship is knowledge and this knowledge resides within self and not outside it. They believed that this knowledge cannot be acquired through the study of books but only apprehended through the advice of preceptors and the indoctrination of Sahaja Sadhana. Sahajiya emphasized the importance of the body. They

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believe that the body embodies the universe and attainment of the self can be only made through bodily love. This is said to be the reason that Gaudian Vaishnavism looks down on the Vaishnava Sahajiya. There were no evidence to know their worshipping practices. They usually used sandhya script for exchange their thought. Sandhya script not clearly comprehensible to the people. Great poet Vrindaban Das said about their beliefs and practices that

*Ratri kori montro pori panchyakanna anne.*

*Nanabidh drabya aise ta sabar sone.*

*Bhakhya vogya gandhashala bibidho byason.*

*Kgaiya to sobe songe bibidho roman.*

But in the period of study sahabiya sect was gain popularity in bengal because they denied of chanting mantras, worshipping idols, denied veda and varna system. They actually believed in the fact that only relationship between god and man is love. No extra practices were considered to be done to get the grace of god. Side by side sahabiya philosophy gives equal right and position to lower and outcaste Hindus and Buddhists in religious beliefs. Women was freely joined the group. This simple ideology influenced the ordinary people and they love to join with sahabiya sect. From Mangalkavya ,we get evidence that newly converted muslim were also follow the Manasa goddess.

Upper class Hindus could not easily accept the sahabiya believes and practices. Vrindaban Das said that ‘authentic Vaishnavism is losing its glory’. During the time, Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu came to spread the ideology of pure bhakti for attain god Krishna. His personal attributes and religious believes helped to stop conversion of people into Islam. He was a sagun bhaktivadi saint and he recognize as an incarnation of Lord Krishna and Radha. The main ideology of his religion remained to offer love and surrender yourselves to the god. He introduced a popular path known Harinam sankritan, that path help vaishnava followers to easily get the grace of god. They believed that Namsankirtan is a loving devotion to Krishna and it can be express in a simple and pleasing form of song, dance and aided by chanting of Krishna’s name.

He also recognized no limitations to be put forward on this absorbing experience and encouraged participation of men in it. This breadth view was vastly disturbing to orthodox

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Hinduism. All men could fix a place in common religious worship and be counted as equal and thus the attitude of devotion started and revolution flourished. It is clear that he went beyond the custom of ideas of his time in direction of brotherhood of bhakti. He accepted converts from Islam and some of his earlier disciples were Mohammad faqir named Haridas. He repeatedly proclaimed his bhakti as being accessible to the lower classes of Hindu society. In short, it may be said that he had courage to preach messages of religious freedom which made a place for all in his way of loving devotion preached by Chaitanya. It later said that this can deliver them from sin and the cycle of birth and rebirth. It was also seen that females enjoyed equal freedom in Vaishnavism. Many people who weren't of any caste or religion accepted Vaishnavism. This was seen not only by the ordinary people but even the Sultan of Bengal, Allauddin Hussein Shahi accepted his loftiness when Chaitanya came to Ramkeli.

Eastern and southern part of Bengal became deprived from the impact of Chaitanya, Goddess cult was manifested in this portion. Mangalkavya give us detail description about goddess cult like manasa ,chandi,sitala,and kali etc. During this time ,the worshipping of these goddesses became easier , keeping vow and recitation of pachali were two main form to worship female deities. Goddess manasa who got much attention during this time period said- she can easily worshipped by remembering her name, singing of her greatness. She can also give child to them who had no children and could cure the uncured. According to Raghunandan, worshipping through bathing in Ganga River was fruitful at that time.

The customs prevailing in the system of the Islamic religion was completely different in that period as others. On the one half there were elite Muslims and on the other there remained local Muslims whose composition were non-Muslims or Bengalis converted into Muslims. The elite Muslim community was made up of Syeed, Mughals, Pathans, local Arabs, Persian merchants and Kaji living cities and towns. Literary and sculpture sources indicate devotional meditation and regular prayers in the month of Ramadan, Fasting and Recitation of Quran along with other religious text,paying zakat and performing Hajj in Makka was seen as common. Sufism the mystical path of islam had profound impact on the elite Muslim community during this period. Hussain Shah was himself influenced by Sufism.

According to the opinion of Gholam Hussain, Hussain Shah used to visit the shrine of Chistia Sufi saint in Nur Kutub e alam in Padua. Hussain Shah had also donated a huge sum of money for the expanse to the people who came to pilgrimage. It may be surmised from Shah that the deep influence of liberationism was present in the creation of Hussein's

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religious tolerance and attitude. On the contrary there has been evidence discovered of conservative policies by the elite Muslims. In the literature, kazi and moulavies are depicted as orthodox in the social system. For example in Nadia, the birth place of Chaitanya Namsankirtan practice was gradually increased. This phenomenon mentioned by Brindaban Das in Chaitanyabhakvad :

*Jahare pailo kajj marilo tahare  
Vangilo mridanga, anachar koilo dare  
Kaji bole hinduani hoilo nadia  
Koribo ihar sasti nagli paiya*

### **II**

During Hussain Shah's time in Bengal, the society was deeply influenced by sufism. The Pirs played a prominent role towards the development of Islam. Sufism was best known for their social justice ideas of equality and brotherhood. Sufism gave less emphasis on sharia law and rather focused on mystical and ritualistic practices to attain God. The notion of singing and dancing were considered to be primary concepts of their religious beliefs. They established Khanqhas in every corner of Bengal which were recognized as a center of public welfare and intellectual activity. In addition, they also established langar-khanas in the courtyard of these Khanqha's for providing food to all needy people. Those major activities and their personal characteristics such as leading a simple life, showing strong characters and devotion to faith touched the hearts of the people of Bengal. They had also given the chance to the lower caste's Buddhists and Hindus to enhance their social and religious position in the society. Sufism worked on women empowerment, and this could be evident that there were no restriction in dargahs or Sufi shrines as men and women worshipped alongside each other. The famous Moroccan traveller Ibn Batuta personally met Shah Jalal in 1345 AD and stayed 3 days with him. He stated that the 'Sheikh was one of the great saints and of a very unique personality, he has to his credit miracles well known to the public as well as great deeds, and he was a man of hoary age. The inhabitants of mountains had embraced Islam at his hands, and for this reason he stayed amidst them'. Some Khanqha's later became important learning

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centres for both Muslim and non-Muslim people. The features of Sufism not only attracted the aristocratic Muslims but also the lower class and outcaste Hindus and Buddhists. Pir Murid system was seen to continue evident from the very beginning of Hussain Shah. This system emerged from Hindu's Guru-Sisya tradition. So that can be inferred that this system in the Muslim society has been taken influenced from the Hindu religion. Reports indicate that Alauddin Hussain was the founder of the Satya Pir veneration however this hasn't been certainly proved. We see before how Hussain Shah praises his love towards Sufi Saints. From the inscriptions of Hussain Shah, we know that Barbak Shah had instructed a death sentence to Ismail Ghazi for his honour.

According to the *Smriti Sastra*, the Hindu Society of Bengal was predominantly caste based and it was based on this caste that compulsory duties of the Hindus were described on their social and domestic life. In terms of literature it has been said that there were importance of only three sub caste in the Hindu society namely to be Brahmin, Kayasthya and Vaidya. It was seen that from birth to death the presence of Hindus in different festivals and rituals was inevitable. While at the time of the Sena dynasty, every religious and social occasions were celebrated however during the time of Hussain Shah, due to the popularity and growth of Islam and Nava-vaishnavs, there was a decline in power for Brahmins and other religions. The Brahmins were the pundits of the Hindu religion and developed the Hindu Sculptures. During the reign of Hussain Shah, the life of Brahmins were not only confined to Veda study but also they played a vital role in handling administrative duties. Some notable names such as Rup Goswami, Sanatan Goswami, Jugai and Mathai are notable have mentioned the same. The conservative Brahmins faced a considerable influence from the growing power of Asraf Muslims and this resulted to a fully annoyance at the time of the contemporary society of Bengal.

R.C.Mazumder said that castaway became a prominent issue in the Hindu Society and it was to be seen that Hindus were out casted if they touched any food or water that was touched by any Muslim prior. They were also out casted if they smelt the food prepared by any Muslim. These beliefs remained strict among the Brahmins. The Brahmins were hence divided into 36 mals known as 'Misri', 'Surai', 'Bangala', 'Bali', 'Naria' etc. In the rise of the Kayasthya, the royal family of Hussain Shah took part of a vital role. Native poets Yashoraj Khan, Srikar Nand, Bijay Gupta, and Kabinda Paramaswar were also Kayasthyas. They were literate and were engaged in farming. Abul Fazl wrote that at the end of the

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16<sup>th</sup> century different Zamindars of Bengal province were Kayastha. Aristocratic Muslims were the steer men of religious and educational system of the Muslim Society in Bengal. They were with the administrative system and business was their main occupation.

Based on hereditary occupation, lower caste muslims were divided into gola, jola, mukeri, pithari, kabari, sanakar, hazam, darzi, rangrez etc. Portuguese Barbosa talked about the lifestyle and sense of clothing of a well-recognized Muslim family in Bengal. He described how they used to wear a nahajoga till their feet and a lungi from the waist. A reshmi patta was tied over the lungi and in addition to this, they carried knives with them. They wore various kinds of ornaments made with precious stones, golden footwear and a cap made with thin cotton. A Chinese tourist during the reign of Hussein Shah wrote that they used to eat steamed and roasted beef (cow meat), banana, jackfruit and pomegranate. Barbosa described about the process in which Muslim women of that family made sura (wine) from the juice of palms at home. Mahuan saw many stall of sura in Bengal. It had been described that the lower caste Muslims would wear knee lengths upper-part clothes in white and a turban on head. Religious muslims would also wear a kind of cap on top of their head but stayed bearded however. These people would also greet people from other religions with a Salaam. The Dargah of Pirs would be their gathering place in the evening hours and during that time, they would lit candles and distribute sweets which was a great tradition. In social system Sufi played important role they were expert in use of weapon and religious text. Through Shastra a they spread Islam all around and even shah Jalal advocated this. Using both these aspects he won over many Hindu regions and preached Islam. He even laid the foundation of a Dargah and used public kitchens thus helping in the development of Human beings. Alongside these in addition he even helped in development of Humanity.

The ordinary Bengali people wore *dhoti* and scarfs folded like *chadar* and the elite aristocrats wore coats and turbans. The women meanwhile wore *sarees* and small folds made of *sarees* wrapped around their waists. In addition they also wore various types of ornaments and jewelry. The eating lifestyle of the Bengali people had lots of variety and there was an influence of religion as well to the eating habits of people. The people who followed Nava vaishnav ate vegetarian food and even Sri Chaitanya in his book Charitamrita described the usage of food citing some inscriptions.

*Pit sugandhi grite anno sikta koilo*

*Charidike pate ghrito bahiya cholilo...*

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*Dosh prakar saag nimbo sukutar jhol*

*Moricher jhaal, chana bora, bori, ghol*

*Dhukdho tumbi, beshari, lafra*

*Mocha ghanto, mocha bhaja, vividho shakra.....*

The people who believed in female Goddesses ate both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food. However the people from the Sahajiya sakha ate meat and fish both. According to the *Brihadhamapurana*, *amavasya*, *chaturbashi purnima ashtami dadasi* were considered days when meat and fish weren't consumed. However in the Bengali society, Hindus and Muslims both peoples consumed betel leaf and it was main thing of hospitality.

### III

In contemporary literature we also find the evidence of women education. Through Hindu Smriti Shastra, we come to know that women had no independence and would have to follow instructions as levied by the male counterparts in the society. However during the times of Tantrism women were allowed to take part in major activities. The decline in women empowerment during that period was contributed by two main factors: Child Marriage and the *Kulin pratha*. Due to the *Kulin pratha*, there was a huge increment in the number of widowed women. The widowed women had to face tougher life conditions as compared to normal women and they were forced with major limitations. Staying apart from their husbands, moving around places due to their own desires at inconvenient times were seen to be as unaccepted behaves by the society. The character disposition of these women were always considered to be in doubt and the poet Kankan Chandi also mentions the story of an affluent merchant who went far away from his wife due to trade when his wife was six months pregnant writing a letter,

*Ashesh mongol dham khulo na juboti*

*Tode ashirvaad priya porom piriti*

*Sandeho bhanjan potro korilo nirmiti*

*Jokhon tomar garvo hoilo chhoi mash*

*Jei kale nripadeshe jai parobash.*

During this period, there was a rapid advancement of education system in Bengal. This period contributed significantly to the rise of the education System. It was seen that not only had the

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sultans but also had Sufis, ulama, nobles and chieftains taken up the chief work of spreading education as their religious responsibility. During this same period, there was a considerable increment in the number of mosques, Madrasas, Majlis and Maktabas that was established in every corner of Bengal. In every Masjid, the Imam took the responsibility of spreading informal education in all parts of the region. Formal Primary and Secondary Education was served respectively through the Maktabas and Madrasa. Different sections of Islamic literature like Hadith, Fiqh, Tafsir, Nahu, Kalam etc along with diverse subjects such as astronomy, mathematics, medicine, geography, Persian and Arabic literatures were taught in these educational institutions. Most of these educational institutions also provided lodging and boarding facilities alongside serving education.

An important inscription was discovered dated 1502 around English Bazaar which carried the evidence of patronage about education by Alauddin Hussain. Through these inscriptions it can be inferred that Shams- al – Din Yusuf started constructing Madrasas in Darasbari, however he couldn't complete it. During Hussain Shah's time, the construction of this Madrasa was finally completed and Bagha in Rajshah became a famous learning center founded by Shah Muazzam Darishmand. Women were free to take only primary education in Maktabas. Higher education of women was limited in the aristocratic Muslim families. It was also seen that the number of Hindu Pathshalas increased and was open for boys and girls of the Hindu society irrespective of the caste system. The number of Tole also increased offering Sanskrit as a medium which was accessible only for the higher class people.

### **Conclusion**

So it may be said that as like Aryans, the Muslims also came in South Asia with the aim of settlement and spread of the faith. However, contrasting the Aryans, the principles of equality and social liberalism in Islam earned great influence over the root level people who were facing various socio-cultural oppressions in that time. Therefore, Islam has been the most widely accepted and culturally rooted foreign religion in Bengal Delta. As the rulers adopted the local culture by settling down in Bengal, essentially there was tolerance in cross religious faiths, and administration was basing on welfare. Consequently, in the period of over 550 years, Aryan, Buddhist, and Islamic norms and philosophy naturally experienced some

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positive admixture and influence on one another. Besides of the life-way, thoughts, and customs, the process of mutual assimilation also appears in architectural, numismatic, and various archaeological, historical, and literary sources in medieval Bengal.

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