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THE DIFFUSION OF ISLAM IN BENGAL AND THE ARTICULATION OF A NEW ORDER

The Land:

> 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....
> Shar¬'a and Ma'rifa are essentially one.

(Ali Raja, *Agam* folio 24-25)[1]

The lines that appear above are typical of the Bengali mystical verses found in a genre of early Muslim Bengali literature known as *puthi*, which was popular among the rural masses until the late nineteenth century. Like this folk poetry, the early history 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.

The name Bengal in its English form -- Bang®la or Bang®l, in Arabic and Persian and Bangl® or Bangladesh (as a historical term), in its Bengali version -- refers to the territory roughly situated between 27º and 21º latitude and 92.50º and 87º longitude (see map 1). The eastern parts of the present Dhaka district, the districts of Comilla and Sylhet (Hab®naq according to Ibn Battuta, Sukn®t in other Islamic sources and Xrihatta in Sanskrit) in Bangladesh and the state of Tripura in

1

India were known in ancient times as Samatata. The northwest part of Bengal, to the west of the river Atrai up to the Ganges, is relatively high land. It was known as Gow¥a (popularly Gauṟ or Gauṟo, at times referring to the metropolitan area of the region) in the early days, and later on as Barind in Persian writings (according to an early Muslim historian, Mawlana Minhaj al-Din 'Uthman Siraj al-Din[2]) or Varendra Bhum¬ in local Sanskrit and Bengali writings. This was where the Muslim conquerors first settled; they used Lakhnawti (according to Islamic sources; Lakṣmnavati in Sanskrit and Bengali) and the neighboring cities of Gaur, Devikot, and later on Pandua and Ekdala as their capital. The section lying to the west of the Hugli-Bhagirathi river bore the name of Radha or Radh (according to the *Tabaq®t-i-Nasiri* of Mawlan® Minhaj Siraj al-Din). The northern part of Radha often served as an entry point for the early Muslim forces coming overland from the north. The famous ancient port city of Tamralipti lay at the southern tip of Radha.

Southern Bengal (namely, Sundarban and Khulna in Bangladesh and Twenty Four Parganas in West Bengal, India) was usually known as Banga (Vańga in Sanskrit), and the coastal land as Harikela (e.g., the Chittagong area in the early period as well as Sylhet in the later period)[3]. Muslim geographers called it Harkand from which comes Bahr al-Harkand, the early Arabic name for the Bay of Bengal. From the early eight to late tenth centuries, Harikela was an independent state contiguous with Samatata and Vańga (which included Chandradvipa)[4]. The ancient Harikela kingdom once extended to Sundarban. A thick forest on the coastal region of the Gangetic delta (at present mainly in the southernmost part of the present division of Khulna in Bangladesh and in the district of Twenty Four Parganas [Chhabbish Pargana in Bengali] in the Indian state of West Bengal), Sundarban once extended much deeper into the mainland. It bears traces of early human settlement. Indigenous non-Aryan nomad tribes roamed in this region and gradually came under the influence of Hinduism and Buddhism (through rulers such as Dummanpal around the twelfth century), and finally Islam. In the east of

Harikela, a Hindu kingdom -- Chandradvipa (Deva dynasty) -- emerged in the thirteenth century, which was gradually absorbed in the Mughal empire in the early seventeenth century.[5]

The earliest Islamic sources from before the conquest of Bengal do not refer to this land by the name of Vańga or Bangala; they call it the kingdom of Ruhm¬,[6] probably a reference to Suhma, an ancient name of the western region of Bengal (see map no.1). There is considerable confusion about its location and its name appeared as Ruhm¬,[7] Rahma,[8] and Dahum.[9] Of these, the closest to Bengali is Dharma (a spelling used by Sulaym®n al-T®jir[10]), a possible reference to a famous Bengali king Dharmap®la (769-801). Sulaym®n al-T®jir also noticed correctly Dharmap®la's non-aristocrat i.e., humble origin. According to Ibn Khurrad®dhbih,[11] Ruhm¬ was a vast kingdom which probably included in its frontiers the Kanja (Ganges) river and Abbina, was bordered by K®mrun (Kamrup) not far from China, and was bountifully supplied with elephants, buffalo and Indian aloe wood. Its coast, according to Hudud al-'Alam,[12] included areas such as Nimy®s, Samandar, Andras, Urshin (Orissa) and Harkand (ancient Harikela near Chandradvipa in South Bengal). The port of Samandar which was presumably located somewhere in the Chittagong coast from Karnafuli estuary to the Choto Pheni estuary[13] (or perhaps near the present port of Chandpur at the mouth of Meghna river), is mentioned by al-Idrisi, who also refers to a river "Musla," perhaps the Meghna.[14]

The kingdom of Ruhmi, according to most of these early sources, fought constantly with its neighbors, Ballahar® (Raja Ballahraya of the R®strakuta dynasty of the Deccan) and Jurz (Gurjaras of Kanauj). It was particularly famous for its fine cotton cloth, known in the West as muslin. In addition to gold coins, cowrie-shells were used for currency. Trade with the Arabs flourished in the port cities in the south, especially in Sh®ti'-jam (Chittagong) and Samandar. The recent discovery of two Abbasid coins in Bangladesh, one from Paharpur dated 172/788 from the time of H®run al-Rash¬d (170-208/786-809)

and the other from Mainamati minted during the reign of Abu Ahmad 'Abd-Allah al-Muntasir bill®h (247-248/861-862), attests to this early Arab - Bengal trade link which undoubtedly speeded up the Islamization of the region.[15]

The name Vaṅga or Vangala-de˜a is quite old. We find it during the reign of Govinda Candra (sometime between 1021 to 1023 AD) in the Tirumalai Sanskrit inscription of the Rajendra-Cola dynasty. It also appears in a few other Sanskrit inscriptions of the Chandra dynasty discovered in Mainamati, Bangladesh.[16] The historian Minh®j Sir®j al-D¬n was perhaps the first Muslim writer to refer to the name Bil®d-i-Bang. Besides Banga, he also mentions a few other regions (or perhaps sub-regions) in this eastern part of South Asia, namely, Bih®r, Bil®d Lakhnawti (Gauda De˜a), Diy®r Sukn®t (most likely the Samatata region comprising the present Sylhet district),[17] and K®mrud (Kamrup).[18] Shahr-i-Nawdia (mistakenly transliterated as Nadia, but unlikely to be the same as the present district of Nadia), the capital of Laksmanasena (R®y Lakhmaniyah according to Minh®j) was probably located on the bank of the old channel of the river Jahnabi or Bhagirathi which changed its course later on westward. It may be identified either with the present village of Nawda[19] on the western bank of the currently dried river Pagla slightly westward of Mahdipur village, or with the village of Nawdapara, an archaeological site near Rohanpur railway station in Chapai Nawabgnaj district, both not far from the city of Gaur. This assumption is further supported by epigraphic evidences, as a number of inscriptions of the early Muslim rulers (including the bridge inscription from Sultanganj from the reign of Sultan 'Al®' al-D¬n 'Ali Mard®n Khalj¬ in circa 1210 -- 13 [ins. no. 1] and the masjid-madrasah inscription from Naohata from the reign of Balk® Khan Khalj¬ in circa 1229 --31[ins. no. 3]) have been discovered in the areas not far from Gaur, but not a single inscription has thus far been found in the Nadia district from the early Islamic period.

With the consolidation of Muslim rule in the eastern and southeastern parts of the region and more particularly with the emergence of a new Muslim capital of Son®rg®'on in the area

known as Bangal, the name Bang®la gradually became more popular. Sult®n Ily®s Sh®h (740-759/1339-1358), for instance, used the title Sh®h-i-Bang®liy®n. Many early fifteenth century Arab historians, such as al-F®si and al-Shibi, used this name extensively. Thus we find that throughout medieval Muslim period, Bang®la (sometimes referred as Diy®r-e-Bang®lah[20] as well) was the widely accepted name for the region. It appears as Suba-i-Bangala (the province of Bengal) in a Sherpur inscription dated 1042/1632 (ins. no. 273), a Churihatta inscription dated 1060/1650 (ins. no. 285), and in a number of other inscriptions after that. The famous Arab Captain Ahmad ibn M®jid (b. 1440) often refers to "Bangala" and "the land of Bang" in his book *al-Faw®'id fi Usul 'lm al-Bahr wa 'l-Qaw®'id* [A Treatise in Oceanography] compiled in 895/1490. These names are also used by Sulaymn ibn Ahmad ibn Sulaymn al-Mahr¬, an early-sixteenth-century Omani sea captain, who provides us with amazingly rich details about the Bay of Bengal and its coast in his books (e.g., *The Tale of Fabulous Seas*, and *A Manual of Seas*).[21]

Hence "Bengal" in historical sense (and particularly in this book) encompasses mainly the areas now known as Bangladesh and West Bengal. Occasionally the term may be extended to cover loosely certain adjoining areas of the neighboring regions such as Arakan (in present Burma) and Tripura, Assam, Bihar and Orissa (in present India). Through a long historical process, these areas altogether have formulated a distinctive regional cultural identity within the greater Indo-Muslim cultural sphere that can aptly be called Muslim Bengali culture.

The Advent of Islam and the Bengal Hinterland

Bengal, once an outpost of the Islamic world, today has the largest Muslim population in South Asia. Linguistically, Bengali Muslims (approximately 150 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. Islam is not only the faith of the majority of the two hundred and thirty million Bengali-speaking people inhabiting 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 none the less played an important role in shaping the history of the Islamic East.

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. 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 emergence of Islam as the religion of axe and plough in the Bengal delta). It seems 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.

It is the regional diversity of cultural expression within the larger framework of unity that makes Islam a rich, vital and great civilization. It is its infinitely complex and creative processes of interaction between the basic religious principles and the necessity of time and space, the ideal and the actual, between innovation and stability that have kept this civilization living, vibrant and dynamic to this day. As its message started

spreading in the remote corners of the old world, Islam faced two challenging issues -- syncretion and indigenization. Though quite often mistakenly used as synonyms, both of these words have somewhat different semantic backgrounds. While in the indigenization process, foreign elements find local and native characteristics in their expression, the term 'syncretism' historically speaking, stems from a more Christian usage connoting essentially the illogical fusion and reconciliation of conflicting beliefs in creolized forms and their uncritical acceptances by the people in question.

Indigenization is one of the characteristics of the regional expressions of the Islamic proselytization process that is to be found everywhere in the Islamic world and Bengal is not an exception. Bengal, as a matter of fact, provides an excellent paradigm of a regional formulation of Islamic community while maintaining its strong ties with the rest of the *ummah*. Ulam®' and sufi shaykhs in general encouraged indigenization as it helped popularize Islamic propagation (*da'wa*) among the masses. In their effort to present Islam to the local communities in a living and popular language, they practiced, sometimes, a certain degree of flexibility in adapting to the local system as long as it was in harmony with the basic Islamic spirit.

Syncretism, on the other hand, was never accepted by the 'ulam®' and sufi shaykhs on the grounds that it did not conform to the *shari'a*. But, occasionally, it did find tacit support among the ruling Muslim elite, many of whom themselves were bearers of the syncretistic tradition of the old Sassanian imperial legacy of Central Asia. But what made the syncretistic traditions popular from time to time was the proselytizing of a particular class of cultural mediators, namely, the *pir*s and the mullas (known by various names such as *s®biqi*s or the traditionalists, *bi-shara'* or non-conformists to *shari'a*, *ib®hi*s or unrestrained ones). Because of their vested social and economic interests, they were always eager to defend the status quo. It may be worthwhile to point out here that there is no significant difference in meaning in the popular or

idiomatic usage between the words sufi, shaykh and *pir*, or for instance between *'®lim* and mulla, and quite often they are used interchangeably or as synonyms for each other. But at the same time, one indeed finds two separate social undercurrents that left a strong impact in the religious transformation of Bengal's common people. While one group of sufi, shaykh, *awliy®'* and *'®lim* always adhered to shari'a and advocated strongly for it, another group -- popularly known as *pir*, *faqir*, dervish and mulla -- served as the bearers of syncretic culture. It is not surprising then to find a deep-rooted tension between shari'a oriented sufi, shaykhs and 'ulam®', and the defenders of the syncretistic traditions *pir*s and mullas. The sufi shaykhs of different *tariqa*s provided spiritual leadership side by side with the intellectual leadership of 'ulam®' (also known as *munshi*, *mawlawi* or *mawl®n®*) and were normally selected on the basis of merits and religious piety. The traditionalist *pir*s, on the other hand, formed a sort of priest class (similar to Brahmin) based on family lineage where succession used to be hereditary. Conservative *pir*s and mullas resisted the reform movements of the later days led by the progressive sufis and 'ulam®'. They stood, for instance, against the peasant uprising under Titumir and the egalitarian movements of 'ulam®' (occasionally described as Mawlaw¬ movements by the early colonial writers).

Much of the consolidation of Islam in the region was possible due to the fact that the Islamic message was conveyed in a popular language often using indigenous religious imageries, but not necessarily in a syncretic form. Unlike the Vedic religion, Islam did not impose itself in Bengal as a foreign agent. Resembling very much the earlier diffusion of Buddhism in the region, it penetrated into the deep Bengali psychic and social life in a smooth, slow transformational way without creating much upheaval or social unrest. In a way, it harmonized well with the natural lifestyles of the native population, many of whom were still nomadic, while many others were in the process of adopting settled agrarian life. It appealed, as the religion of nature (*d in al-fitra*), to the heart of the indigenous people, whose traditional lifestyle had remained

very close to nature for centuries. Thus the spread of Islam in Bengal was very much evolutionary, rather than revolutionary. It became slowly and gradually a rural way of life as agrarian settlement expanded in the delta.[22] Some early sultanate inscriptions, such as the Madrasa-Masjid Inscription Navagram dated 858/1454 (ins. no. 41) during the restored Ily®s Sh®h¬ ruler Maḥmūd Sh®h, clearly indicate the consolidation of shar¬'a (*sha'®'ir al-shar'*) or Islamic way of life with the support of the ruling establishment and the effort of 'ulam®' in the Bengali villages (*khitta rifiyya*).

Bengal experienced great prosperity during the rule of the independent Muslim sultans, whose far-reaching welfare works, such as *siq®ya* (water tanks, wells), helped spread Islam to the furthest corners of the region. Institutions, such as *waqf* and *madad-i-ma'®sh* (endowment and land-grants to support masjid, madrasas and khanqahs), benefited the commoners greatly, regardless of their religion. Islam thus appeared in Bengal as the religion of commoners.[23] Bengal's wonderful 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? Minh®j Sir®j al-D¬n, author of *Tabaq®t-i-Naṣiri*, reports that, when Ikhtiy®r al-D¬n Muḥammad Bakhtiy®r 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 Khalj¬ soldiers) started to wail in the streets, rooftops and corners loudly. The situation was so

embarrassing for Ikhtiy®r that he could not appear in public after that and he soon died brokenhearted.[24] 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 can not rule out the possibility that a limited number of families, particularly spouses, accompanied occasionally the Muslim army to Bengal, it certainly did not happen on mass scale for practical reasons. Female names in epigraphic texts, such as Boa Malati (dated 941/1534-35), and other social and historical evidences strongly suggest that large-scale inter-marriage between the newly settled Muslim male soldiers and the females from the local population occurred at large at different stages throughout the history.

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. However, inscriptions offer many clues. The number of Islamic inscriptions during the Sultanate and early Mughal periods (1204-1707) is fairly large (approximately four hundred), indicating the gradual spread of Islamic culture into the different spheres of Bengali life.

Merchants and the Faith: Early Islamic Contacts with Bengal

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 trades. 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 of 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 in

these regions in most cases as civilization making ideology and finally emerged as a primary regional culture.

Though commercial activities played an important role in disseminating Islamic cultural and ideological influences in different regions; still expansion of Islam can not be reduced to commerce, nor commerce (in the Indian Ocean, for instance) can be reduced to mere Muslim mercantile activities. Factors leading to the diffusion of Islam varied from one region to other. While the Islamic trade and maritime activities in Southeast 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 northwestern land route and the southern sea route of the Bay of Bengal (see map 1) through trade and commerce. Thus, the conquest by Muḥammad Bakhtiy®r was not the first contact with Muslims in the region. Bengal had already come into some kind of limited contact with Muslim traders, merchants, sailors, and sufi shaykhs at a much earlier stage. Minh®j Sir®j al-D¬n, author of *Tabaq®t-i-Naṣiri*, mentions that, when Ikhtiy®r al-D¬n Muḥammad Bakhtiy®r 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.

Indian sources also refer to early Muslim contacts with Bengal. A Sanskrit inscription of Ratnapala (3rd-4th/9th-10th century) mentions "Tajikas"[25] 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.[26] In a Sanskrit inscription dated 1206 found

near the city of Gauhati in Assam, the name *Turaxka* (people of Turkic origin) is used for the Muslim forces in the area.[27]

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 southeastern 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 Bahr 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 Tsan-da-ya (340-346/951-957) defeated one Thu-ra-tan (Arabic sult®n) and erected a victory memorial at Tset-ta-going (Chittagong).[28] 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 *sult®n*.[29]

Chittagong was visited by Ibn Battuta during the reign of Fakhr al-D¬n Mubarak Sh®h (739-50/1338-49), who described it as a port near the mouth of the Ganges, as do the Chinese

accounts of the fifteenth century, and Abu '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 *Sh®ti' al-Gang®* (the bank of the Ganges) or later *Shati-J®m* (e.g. Sulaym®n ibn Aḥmad ibn Sulaym®n,*'Umdat al-Biḥ®r*). The expression gradually assumed the local form (of Bengali dialect) Sadkawan, Chitagang or Chatgaon. Through Ibn Baṭṭuṭa, 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-D¬n Mub®rak Sh®h of Sun®rg®'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" (see map 1), inhabited mainly by rich Muslim merchants from Arabia, Persia and Abyssinia. 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. Naturally, the growth of such a prosperous Muslim community must have taken time. Early Islamic maritime literature provides us with valuable information about Baḥr Shal®hat (the Strait of Malacca) and the neighboring islands such as Jazira al-Ramn¬ or Jazira al- R®m¬, which was most likely the city of L®mur¬ on Sumatra).[30] Jazirat al-R®m¬ may also refer to the kingdom of Rame, which is mentioned by the English traveler Ralph Fitch, who visited Bengal in 1585-86. 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 neighboring 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 Khud® Bakhsh Kh®n, an administrator of the area who established himself as its ruler toward the end of the Husayn Sh®hi period.[31] 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. 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 neighboring areas. It was, however, limited in nature, as it failed to establish the Arab Sh®fi'¬ culture that commonly prevailed along the coastal belt in the Indian Ocean perhaps due to its very liberal attitude in day to day matter (for example no restriction on any kind of seafood).

During the sultanate period, particularly after the coming into power of a Bengali Muslim sultan Jal®l al-D¬n Muhammad Sh®h (r. 818-836/1414-1433) from the house of Ganesh, economic integration of Bengal with the wider world of Islam provided the region with 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-root level even in the low, marshy land of the southern delta, Bengal was integrated further into the world trade and commerce system. Islam, as Eaton sees, entered in this delta as a civilization-building ideology.[32]

The Muslim Conquest of Bengal and 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 Gh®zi Masjid Inscription in Dinajpur, Dated 865/1460). The first Islamic inscription from the reign of Sultan 'Al®' D¬n 'Al¬ Mard®n 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 Abu 'l-Mu affar (victorious), convey the same message.

It was on 19 Rama¥®n 601 (10 May, 1205)[33] that Ikhtiy®r al-D¬n Muʱammad Bakhtiy®r, an adventurer from the Turkish Khalj¬ tribe of mountainous central Afghanistan (known as Khaljist®n), defeated Lakh˜mana 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 R®ṟa and Barindra in an amazingly short time. This sudden Muslim victory was very surprising since Lakh˜mana Sena was considered a powerful king of eastern India who had previously conquered many neighboring areas and towns such as Kalinga, Kamarupa, Puri (Purushattam-Kh˜etra in ancient days) and Prayaga. He was, in fact, quite appreciated by a contemporary Muslim historian, Minh®j Sir®j al-D¬n, 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. It seemed to be a military victory achieved through superior tactics and the swift mobility of the Muslim cavalry, as depicted in some of the earliest beautifully minted commemorative gold and silver coins of Bakhtiy®r and Sultan 'Al®' al-D¬n 'Ali Mard®n Khalj¬ both at Gaur and Delhi.[34] One of the underlying factors 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 original inhabitants of Bengal -- the Senas were Brahman Kshatriya (one of the highest Hindu castes) and worshipers 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 fief in Barindra, in northern Bengal.[35] 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 strong Mech tribe in the north, according to *Tabaq®t-i-N®siri*) to cooperate with the Muslim conquerors identified by the Aryan (Vedic) Hindus as *Yavana* (originally Sanskrit word meaning polluted outsiders/aliens). 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. No wonder if this factor played a key role when Bakhtiy®r moved his seat of rule to the further north in Devikot, inhabited mainly by the local tribes to this day rather than preferring Lakhnot or Nawdah (the present Mahdipur village and its adjacent areas), the heartland 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*) inhabiting the foot hills of the Himalayas in the north of Bengal.[36] The newly converted Muslim 'Al¬ Mech, an influential tribal leader, played a key role in guiding Bakhtiy®r Khalj¬ 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 toward a settled agrarian life.[37] Another factor contributing to the diffusion of Islam in this region was the role of religious personalities (e.g. *q®d¬s*, 'ulam®', and sufis) and traders who interacted successfully with the Bengali peasants (see map no. 2 and 3).

One of the earliest Islamic literary works in Bengal, *H aw¥ al-H ay®t* ([The Spring of Life], originally an Arabic translation of a *yoga* manual entitled *Amrit-Kunda* [The Eternal Lake]),[38] describes such interactions quite clearly. It tells us about Bhojar Brahmin, a famous Hindu Yogi from Kamrup and a Hindu scholar of considerable fame at that time, who went to the Bengali capital of Lakhnawti during the reign of 'Al¬ Mard®n (1210-13) to inquire about the faith of this newly conquering force. It was in the j®mi' masjid at Friday prayer that he met Q®¥¬ Rukn al-D¬n Samarqand¬, a leading °anaf¬ jurist of the time, and debated religious issues. Bhojar Brahmin finally accepted Islam and after going through formal training in religious curricula, he eventually reached the stage of a *mufti* (deliverer of formal legal opinions). In this early Hindu-Muslim encounter, Hindu holy scriptures are described as sacred literature coming from the Abrahamic tradition, which were, according to the language of *H aw¥ al-H ay®t*, "the *mashaf* of the two Brahmas, namely, Abraham and Moses."[39] Thus, the Hindu scripture of Veda as well as the Aryan Vedic religion were comfortably fitted by the early Muslim scholars of Bengal into the wider context of Islamic world view (more precisely the concept of *risala* or divine revelation). This assimilating approach had a profound effect, for it granted the non-Muslim majority (Hindus and Buddhists) in this newly conquered land the status of *mush®bih bi-ahl al-kit®b* (similar to the status awarded to Christians and Jews in an Islamic state) who would

enjoy clearly defined legal rights as *dhimmi* (free non-Muslim
subjects in an Islamic state). This little noticed but important
act, however, was not new in South Asian Islamic history.
Occasionally referred to as *sulh-e-kull*, or peace for all (lit.,
truce with all) in sufi literature, Muhammad ibn Q®sim
adopted very much the same policy exactly five hundred years
earlier in Sind, which eventually turned into another Muslim-
majority region. Identifying Brahmas as the symbol of Prophet
Ibrahim (Abraham) and Mus® (Moses) by Muslim 'ulama' of
Bengal was the first step in creating a bridge of understanding
between the two most important religious communities --
Hindu and Muslim -- which had a long way to coexist in the
coming ages. On religious level, the interaction thus began with
interfaith dialogue between Hindu and Muslim scholars at a
very early stage.

        The use of indigenous religious imagery and metaphors
in order to simplify the message of Islam to the local population
was, however, not limited to Bengal as Gujarat and several
other regions went through the same historical experience. This
interesting feature continued finding an expression in medieval
Muslim Bengali poetry (*puthi*).[40] This particular conversion of
a Brahman Yogi to Islam was symbolically quite important as it
implied that the conversion process started at a quite early stage
of Muslim rule in the region and it affected all strata of the
population, from the Brahmins to the Mlechchhas. It is also
important to note that most of the early 'ulam® in Bengal, such
as Q®¥¬ Rukn al-D¬n Samarqand¬, came from Central Asia.
Since they were followers of the °anaf¬ *fiqh*, their influence led
to the wide acceptance of the Hanaf¬ *fiqh* among the Bengali
Muslim masses. Interestingly, it was only certain Hanaf¬
jurists in the Subcontinent who considered Hindus as
mush®bih bi-ahl al-kit®b, (akin to the people of book) while the
Sh®fi'¬ and other *madh®hib* (different Islamic legal schools)
in general considered them as mushrikun (polytheists). The
liberal attitude Hanaf¬ jurisprudence, that soon prevailed in the
region, treated Hindu, Buddhist, and other religious
communities on equal plain same as Muslims, and hence
demanded equality for everyone before law under Muslim rule.

Many Muslim jurists such as Ibrahim al-Nakh®¬ (a famous student of Ibn Mas'ud who served as a q®d¬ in Iraq, died in 95) promoted this view since the early days of Islam, particularly in Iraq (and other newly conquered regions in the East. Some of them went as far as recommending repentance as enough punishment or no punishment at all for apostasy. Historically speaking, Bengali Muslims always looked towards Iraq and Khurasan, the original seats of ºanaf¬ school of jurisprudence, with great reverence as well as a source of spiritual and intellectual inspiration.

The military success of Bakhtiy®r Khalj¬ in Bengal resulted in the creation of a strong Muslim presence in the eastern hinterland of the Subcontinent. It also generated zeal for further expansion among the new ruling class. Had Bakhtiy®r'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, Bakhtiy®r's successors continued a policy of expansion in almost all directions, though with limited success. The early rulers, such as ºus®m al-D¬n 'Iwa¥ Khalj¬ and Mugh¬th al-D¬n Tughril, led a number of military campaigns in eastern Bengal. In the first half of the fourteenth century, Muslim troops penetrated into Sukn®t (Sylhet), K®mru (Kamrup) and Assam, crossing the Brahmaputra river in the east and northeast, 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 Sonargaon and Dhaka in the east and S®tg®on in the southwest, 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 Sasanid-Persian legacy. But at the same time, Central Asian 'Ulam®', *mash®yikh* and sufis, particularly from Khurasan (e.g., Mu   ffar Shams Balkh¬) 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.[41] A number of the earliest Islamic inscriptions in Bengal (including the first Islamic inscription in the reign of Sultan 'Al®' al-D¬n Khalj¬ [1210-1213] and the third Islamic inscription in the reign of Balk® Kh®n Khalj¬ [1229-1231]) were inscribed in Persian. The highly Persianized ruling elite obviously favored Persian as the court language. Though Arabic maintained its superiority in religious discourse, as we find in a khanqah inscription dated 1221 (ins. no. 2), sufis such as Nur Qutb al-'Alam (d. 1459?) freely used Persian for their writing, especially of *malfu   ®t* (mystical tracts) and *maktub®t* (letters). One also notices the spread of a few *raw¥a*s (shrines associated with the veneration of saints) in this early period.[42]

The Emergence of the Independent Sultanate and the Spread of Islamic Culture

Sultan 'Al®' al-D¬n Khalj¬, the second Muslim ruler of Bengal, proclaimed himself sultan (see ins. no. 1, pl. 1) 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 Muhammad ibn Tughluq of Delhi, Bengal came to be ruled

by Fakhr al-D¬n Mub®rak Sh®h at Son®rg®'on, 'Al® al-D¬n 'Al¬ at Lakhnawti in the northwest, and Qadr Kh®n probably in S®tg®'on. In this power struggle, it was Hajj¬ Ily®s Sh®h (740-59/1339-58) who finally emerged as victorious in S®tg®'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 Ily®s Sh®h¬ rulers who successfully established a real independent sultanate around the middle of the fourteenth century. Under this dynasty, Islamic art and architecture flourished, and commerce in Bengal's textiles and agriculture rapidly increased. In the beginning of the fifteenth century, Ghiy®s al-Din A'zam Sh®h strengthened cultural links with China, Persia, and the Arab world. The port of Chittagong served as an important center 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 *hajj* (see map no. 1).[43] Many Arab voyagers, travelers, traders and religious personalities visited Bengal during this period. Among the Makkan 'ulama' who visited Bengal during this period were, for instance, Ahmad ibn Sulayman ibn Ahamd al-Taruji (a scholar and traveler from Alexandria, Egypt; d. 812/1410) who found this country very prosperous. [44]

As with most of the other parts of the Islamic world, the relationship between the ruling class and the 'ulam®', 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. 'Ulam®' 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, Nur Qutb al-'Alam, who resisted the growing political influence of Raja K®nsa (probably a misspelling of Sanskrit Gane˜a), was the most vocal. A powerful Bengali Hindu landlord of Bhaturia in Barindra, Raja K®nsa seized power around 1414 and again during 1416-17, but finally lost his bid to impose high caste Hindu Sanskrit culture in the land, as his son Jadu embraced

Islam through Qutb al-'Alam. After the enthronement of Jadu, who took the name of Sult®n Jal®l al-D¬n Muhammad Sh®h (r. 1414-1433), Bengal looked to Makkah, Madinah, Damascus, Cairo and the other cultural and intellectual centers 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 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 a Bengali Islamic culture. In his successful pursuit of formal recognition and nomination as am¬r by the Abbasid caliph in Cairo, Sultan Jal®l al-D¬n sent his envoys to Sult®n B®rsb®y in Egypt with royal gifts. He also sent generous endowments to Makkah and Madinah to build two madrasas there which became famous as Bengali madrasas. This renewed age-old Arab-Bengal relation helped the Bengali Islamic culture draw closer to important religious centers in Arabia. Though this Bengali Muslim dynasty did not last long (as the former Ily®s Sh®hi 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 traveled as far as Cairo and Herat on their diplomatic missions. It maintained ties with both East and West. The restored Ily®s Sh®hi dynasty ruled Bengal until 893/1487, when the leader of the *Habashi*s or the black palace guards (originally slaves from Africa), the eunuch Sult®n Sh®hz®da, murdered the last Ily®s Sh®h ¬ sultan Fath Sh®h and seized power. After a brief period of anarchy, order was eventually restored. But the power gradually passed over to Sayyid 'Al®' al-D¬n Husayn Sh®h in 898/1493 who claimed to be a descendant of a Sayyid family of Arab ancestry. This new dynasty further strengthened the Islamic traditions by building a series of mosques and other religious

edifices. So far, more than seventy mosque inscriptions (see table of inscriptions) have been discovered from the Husayn Sh®h ¬ 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 *Mah®bh®rata*, were translated into Bengali at this time. The public projects of many of the sultans (such as digging wells, construction of water-fountains, roads, dams, causeways and bridges as recorded in a large number of inscriptions) made a positive impact on the vast number of non-Muslim subjects and contributed to the rapid spread of Islam in the region.

The Husayn Shahi dynasty finally came to an end when the Afghan chief Sh⚥r Sh®h Sur ¬ took over Bengal and used it as a base from which to eject the Mughal emperor Hum®yun from India. From then on, Bengal's independence was thwarted. Once the Mughals were firmly reestablished in Lahore and Delhi and the Afghans defeated, Mughal influence began to be felt in Bengal. Sulaym®n Karr®n ¬ (r. 971-980/1564-1572) -- the former governor of southern Bihar and later on, the ruler of Bengal -- acknowledged the suzerainty of Emperor Akbar.

From Syncretistic Tradition to Islamic Reassertion: The Mighty Mughals and the British Raj

After a long effort, Bengal was finally subdued by Akbar toward the end of the sixteenth century, and soon after was incorporated into the Mughal empire. Henceforth, it became one of its *suba*s or provinces.[45] 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 firm administration, the region continued witnessing 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 Islamization of region. There is a popular expression in Bengali about the old landscape of these marshy lowlands which says: *J®le Kumir Dangai B®gh* (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 the 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 Maḥmudpur (a *pur* or settlement founded by Maḥmud) in Satkhira, Mulla Tero Gharia (a settlement of thirteen families under a mulla) near Kushtia city, and Baro Gharia (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 with every minute detail of the area on elaborate maps were prepared. 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 Diy®r (meaning habitation in Arabic and Persian; Diy®ra in local dialect) settlement where the settled population claimed to be the descendants of the Afghan soldiers during Muslim rule.[46]

Overall, Mughals 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'®sh*, but they also occasionally supported Hindu institutions such as mandirs and temples.[47] 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 'Al®' al-D¬n Khalj¬, which refers to *kh®s* (elite) and *'®m* (commoners). It became more apparent during the 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 *atraf* (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 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.

Ironically, it was during the time of the British colonial period that popular Islamic movements created a greater awareness among Muslims of their Islamic identity, and 'ulam®' started asserting social leadership more vigorously than before. While Bengali 'ulam®' often looked towards North Indian Islamic institutions and 'ulam®' for their intellectual and scholarly direction, they were more successful than their counterparts elsewhere in carrying out their mission to the grass-root level in the rural areas of Bengal. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries witnessed many social, intellectual, religious and political movements in the region. For the Muslims, it was an era of self-assertion, reformation, regeneration, and perhaps reorientation also.

The nineteenth century Muslim struggle against colonial power, particularly the *jih®d* movement, drew substantial support from the rural masses. However, it antagonized many *ashraf*s as well as a large portion of the traditional *mulla*s, whose vested interests were hurt by the movement, as it rejected the age-old syncretistic tradition. Led by the 'ulam®' of the madrasas, this movement found its frame of reference in Arabia. The egalitarian nature of the movement necessarily resulted in class conflict between the Bengal Muslim peasantry and the elite class of both Muslim *ashraf* and Hindu *bhadrolok*. But at the same time, it strengthened the Islamic identity of the Muslim masses in the vast rural areas of Bengal, many of whom were still Muslims by name only.

The Jih®d movement (sometimes branded as the Mawlaw¬ Movement) had a profound impact as a large number of the Bengali followers of Sayyid Aḥmad Shah¬d (1786-1831) and his disciple Sayyid Isma'¬l Shah¬d (1779-1831) traveled to many remote regions of Kashmir and the North West Frontier Province to participate in jih®d. Some of these *muj®hidun* (freedom fighters) went as far as Yaghistan and Chamarqand in Afghanistan, for training and safe refuge.[48] Mawl®n® 'In®yat 'Al¬ (1792-1858), the brother of Mawlan® 'Wil®yat Al¬ (1790-1852) and one of the deputies of Sayyid Aḥmad Shah¬d, spent almost twelve of the last years of his life as an Islamic activist deeply engaged in *da'wa* (Islamic propagation) in various parts of Bengal. The village of Hakimpur in Jessore served as his headquarters at one point. The movement, referred to sometimes as ṭar ¬qa Muḥammadiya, gained popular support particularly in the western and northern districts of Bengal. Many of its followers became known later on as Ahl al-Ḥad¬th because of their strict adherence to the Qur'®n and Sunna. They are still numerous in certain parts of those areas.

The institution of the ḥajj provides an ideal occasion for Muslims all over the world to interact with each other. It played a key role in re-centering the Muslim world after the onslaught of the Mongols and the demise of the Baghdad caliphate. The pilgrims in the Holy Lands imbibed the original teachings of

the Prophet and his companions, and then returned to their homeland to serve as beacons of the "true Islam" to peoples at the edge whose Islam, in strict interpretation of *sunnah* (according their opinion), was dangerously encrusted with local custom and syncretic belief. For many, it was also a rare opportunity for exposure to different pan-Islamic and revolutionary movements such as the Wahhabi (more accurately Salaf¬) movement in the Arabian peninsula. Muslim activists such as Hajj ¬ Shar ¬'at Allah, a pioneer of the Far®'idi movement (a symbolic reference to *far¥* or fundamental religious duties and obligations), and later on, his son Dudu Miah were profoundly influenced by the movement of Shaykh Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahh®b in the Arabian peninsula as well as the Jih®d movement. T¬tum ¬r (Sayyid M¬r Nith®r 'Al¬, 1782-1831), an anti-colonial Islamic activist and leader of peasant uprisings in Bengal, was another forerunner of these movements. Influenced by Sayyid Ahmad Bareilliw¬ in Makkah while on the hajj, T¬tum¬r called for a revival of the original teaching of Islam stripped of the influence of syncretic culture and tradition. A pioneer of the Bengali egalitarian 'ulam®', T¬tum ¬r called for a kind of class struggle (misunderstood by Karl Marx, who regarded it as merely a sort of religious fanaticism[49]) firmly based on Islamic ideology which continued in different forms and under various names to our own times, such as the political movement led by the peasant leader Mawl®n ® Bhasani (d. 1976).[50] While analyzing the social and religious history of this period, we also have to note a new development in society, that is, the spread of religious debates known as *bahth* or *muna ira* between the traditionalists (S®biq ¬) and the reformists (known by various names linked to different movements such as the Ta'yyuni school[51] of Mawl®n® Kir®mat 'Al¬ [1800-1873]) which contributed indirectly to a greater religious awareness in society, for in the remote rural areas many Muslims had still not been exposed to formal Islamic teaching and were Muslims in name only. All these different elements played almost the same role as a relatively modern Islamic movement -- the Tabl¬gh ¬ Jam®'a -- is playing today.

Until the end of the eighteenth century, lower Bengal, and more particularly its southern areas, were sparsely populated. In 1793 for instance, only 60% of Bengal was cultivated. But in 1900, Bengal became one of the most densely populated cultivated areas in South Asia with a rapid increase in its Muslim population. Until the mid nineteenth century, Bengal was, somehow, considered to be inhabited largely by low-caste Hindus -- described as "semi-amphibious aborigines of Bengal", by H. Beverly, author of the very first census report of Bengal -- who were, according to him, "merely the hewers of wood and drawers of water for a set of masters in whose eyes they were unclean beasts and altogether abominable."[52] However, the census of 1872, the first of its kind in the region, produced an unexpected result. Surprising as it was to the colonial power, it was found that Muslims constituted more than one-third of the total population of Bengal, most of them farmers. This census, however, was not a perfect one, since the Muslim population did not participate in it wholeheartedly, as they were suspicious about the intentions of the British colonials in conducting it. Many of them thought that listing their names in the census report as Muslims was not free from danger since it could be used to identify them as potential participants in anti-colonial struggles such as the Jih®d movement. However, the census process itself contributed indirectly in making the Muslim rural population aware of their Islamic identity. Faced with new challenges and growing pressure both from colonial rule and local Hindu land-lords, a sense of solidarity grew among the Muslims which made them realize that they were part of the *umma* (a traditional concept of one Islamic nation) that stretched beyond any geographic boundaries. The next few censuses, especially those held in 1881, 1891 and 1901, produced more accurate results, as the Muslims began to understand that the census process was not a plot against them. The growing cooperation of the Muslims in the census made the later census reports more accurate and reliable, and they reported a rapid growth in the Muslim population. Of these, the 1901 census produced the startling demographic development that Muslims had become the

overwhelming majority of the rural population, particularly in eastern, southern and northern Bengal.

At different times, Bengal played an important role in shaping the political destiny of the Muslims in South Asia. It was in Dhaka -- the capital of the province of East Bengal and Assam in British India -- that the Muslim League was founded around 1905. Its leaders as well as the masses took part in the struggle for Pakistan. Its role as the most populous Pakistani province, and later on its secession from Pakistan to become a fully independent country, is a long and interesting story, but one beyond the scope of this study.

Royalty and Ruling Establishment

The history of Muslim rule in Bengal is full of events and developments. Bengal witnessed major changes during this period in almost every sphere of life as Islam started spreading in different corners of this region. Sources such as *Riy®¥ al-Sal®tin* offer an opportunity to look into the inner story of the royal palaces, the public and private lives of the rulers, their interests and day to day activities, ethnic background, legal and actual positions, patronage of art and culture, religious leanings, contact with the outside world and many other facets of the ruling class. The foundation as well as the continuity of Muslim rule was not an easy process, for some of the rulers were actually born outside of the region and thus could be viewed as foreigners in the land that they ruled. Even if they were born in the region, they inherited an ancestry that originated outside most probably in Khurasan (particularly in the present region of Afghanistan) or Central Asia. The problem of legitimacy, henceforth, could undermine sometimes their claims as a rulers. Moreover, very few of them had royal ancestry in a strict sense. In fact, the very foundation of the Muslim ruling establishment of Bengal was laid by those who rose to higher ranks in the army from an ordinary and humble background (such as slaves). The difficulties, that many of them faced, were enormous; the challenges in front of them were quite often countless. Yet the Bengali Sultanate prospered from time to

time, and lasted for two centuries (740-944/1339-1538). The civilization and culture that grew up under the patronage of these sultans were not only fabulous, but were also all-embracing. They stimulated not only Muslims of different ethnic origins and background from various regions of the Islamic world and more particularly from the Persian world of Central Asia, but they also encouraged the participation of the local population, many of whom were Hindus. A very interesting aspect of the Muslim rule in Bengal is the Hindu-Muslim relation itself. The non-Muslims in general lived in harmony with the Muslims to which the ruling class belonged. Their rights were normally well-protected. Seldom was there any destruction of their temples occur in peace time.

The deeply-rooted Persian culture of the Muslim capitals influenced almost every aspect of the elite's lives, from titles to the court language. The rulers and administrators were sometimes eager to create new urban centers and cities as symbols of their authority and power. They over-guarded their interests, typical of the ruling class. A few of them were absorbed in pastimes or were obsessed with sensual pleasures. Some of them kept large harems. Many were inspired by philanthropic ideas as they carried out numerous welfare projects for the general public as well as the elite (*khayr kardah dar ḥaqq-i-kh®s '®m*, as expressed in Persian in the very first Islamic inscription [ins. no. 1] of Bengal). During their reign, many important educational institutions (e.g., madrasa) and hospitals (*bīm®rist®n*) were established. These welfare activities played a crucial role in the diffusion of Islam.

In spite of many glories and successes, these rulers in general failed to achieve some basic developments at the nation and state levels. Their reign witnessed very little progress in science, engineering, advanced scholarship, higher education and most importantly mass education. In spite of Islam's encouragement of education for everyone, the idea of mass education was never given any serious consideration during the Muslim rule in Bengal. Hence this new civilization making process failed to earn popular participation in real sense.

From the point of long term defense policy, very few Bengali rulers were able to create a strong naval force in this riverine deltaic region that could protect them from potential naval attacks coming from the Bay of Bengal in the south. Thus during the Mughal rule, the southern part of the region became an easy target for the Magh pirates of Arakan, the Portuguese and the other European naval powers. The lack of advancement in military technology was one of the prime reasons for their loss of power finally to the East India Company.

Commerce and Maritime Activities

Commerce and trade played an important role in the formation of an international system in the Old World. In spite of many setbacks from time to time, these traditional methods of trade continued in the Muslim world for centuries. Sayyid Mujtaba Ali, a famous Bengali writer, provides in his remarkable travelogue *Deshe-Bideshe* (Bengali text) a lucid eye-witness description of these thriving caravan routes in Afghanistan in the early part of the twentieth century which once connected Central Asia with many neighboring countries including Bengal. These commercial links were the natural outcome of traditional societies based on need and supply, rather than the aggressive marketing policies through highly organized professional networks, which were yet to be introduced by the Europeans in the consecutive periods. In spite of having little or sometimes no support from ruling establishments in the Islamic world, these traditional trade-links and commercial activities flourished for centuries. They declined only after losing ground to their aggressive European rivals, who did not hesitate to use their far superior naval power to monopolize Asian commerce and maritime trade routes.

There are a few important sources in Arabic, Persian and Turkish as well as in South Asian languages that provide us with details about the Muslim maritime activities. For example, both the remarkable works of the early sixteenth century Omani captain Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad ibn Sulaymān -- *al-ʿUmda al-Mahriyyah fi Ḍabt al-ʿUlūm al-Baḥriyyah* and *al-Minh®j al-*

F®khir fi 'Ilm al-Baḥr al-Z®khir -- discuss in detail the maritime routes, the tides, waves, currents and the directions of winds in the Bay of Bengal and also the effective ways of using these elements in sailing. These were the secrets of the successes of Muslim sailing activities in the Indian Ocean, which were yet to be passed to European sailors before they could actually set out for Asian maritime adventures.

Mosques: The Nucleus of Islamic Society

Map 2: Diffusion of mosques in medieval Bengal

In his famous *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun observed that architecture is the most powerful visual expression of *al-'umr®n* (civilization). Islamic civilization attached great importance to architecture. Rulers are often tempted to treat architecture as a

symbolic act for legitimacy, power and grandiosity. The mosque -- the key to Islamic architecture -- is a natural expression of Islamic society and the nucleus of the religious, spiritual, and social life of the community. As its root *sjd* (meaning prostration) indicates, *masjid* (mosque) is a reality where the relation between architecture and Islamic belief is clearly visible. It is here that one feels that the very form of the mosque, its minaret, minbar and different other architectural vocabularies communicate a powerful visual language of Islamic culture. The long arcade on the both sides of *sahn* (courtyard) leading finally towards the vast space of the *qibla* hall reminds its visitors about the transition of earthly life to the eternal life. The direction of every mihrab towards *qibla* (i.e., Ka'ba) symbolizes the unity of *ummah* (Muslim people) and conveys the powerful message of *tawhid* (Divine unity). The mosque has undoubtedly much stronger appeal to its community members than for instance a temple in the non-Muslim world for it attracts a large gathering many times a day, not to mention the Friday congregation of *Jum'a* prayer. Thus it integrates the overall life of Muslims.

One may be surprised to note that the number of mosques in Bengal as well as in many other Muslim countries still remains higher than for instance the number of primary schools. One of the underlying reasons for this kind of development is that among the multi-faceted functions of mosques in Islamic societies, until very recently they continued to serve as *maktab* or primary schools for their communities. In urban settings, sometimes we find a shopping arcade or market place added to the mosque complex, which is again symbolic of the fact that the activities of daily life are not divorced from the practice of religion. Thus, mosques are built for the continuous flow of the surrounding population towards them.

In a way, every new Islamic settlement in Bengal evolved around a congregational mosque. Construction of public places such as markets, inns, caravansaries, hospitals, fountains, wells, and ponds around the central mosque in the city center not only created a bridge between the religious

domain and public domain, but also helped spread welfare activities on a popular level that ultimately helped in the Islamization process of the region. This is particularly true in Bengal, where the construction of mosques and welfare activities of the Bengali sultans played an important role in introducing Islam to the local population. Quite a few early Islamic inscriptions refer to these public works.[53]

Among the Islamic inscriptions of Bengal dating from 1204 to 1707, mosque inscriptions constitute the largest (more than two hundred in number), a phenomenon that points to the important role mosques played in the overall religious, social and cultural life (**see chart no. 2, and also map no** 4).[54] Like elsewhere, mosques evolved as a powerful social institution and a symbol of new settlement in Bengal. At times, they served as meeting places for Muslims and the local population, both intellectually and socially, and contributed to the diffusion of Islam. We come to know through the earliest surviving Islamic literary work in Bengal, *Haw¥ al-Hay®*, that non-Muslims were welcomed to visit mosques, to inquire about Islam and even to debate religious issues.[55] Opening the gates of masjids and *j®ni*'s to non-Muslims must have had a positive effect on the popular sentiment in a land where entrance to mandirs and temples was often restricted to upper castes in Aryan Vedic culture. In some rare cases, even wealthy and influential Hindus supported mosque construction as a part of public work.[56]

In Muslim capitals such as Gaur and Pandua, and sometimes in important regional centers such as Bagerhat in the south, the imposing massive architecture of mosques effectively pronounced the message of the grandiosity of the Bengali sultans. Both the Adina mosque of Pandua (founding ins. dated 776/1374) and Shait Gumbuj masjid of Bagerhat (founding ins. dated 863/1459) are still considered among the largest mosques ever built in South Asia.

While royal patronage helped construct hundreds of mosques in and around the capitals and other big cities and

occasionally in small towns, a very simple form of vernacular mosque, often with a thatched roof resting on mud walls (somewhat similar to the original Masjid al-Nabaw¬, the earliest mosque of the Prophet) and drawing its architectural vocabulary from local tradition, spread all over the rural areas of Bengal, often serving as the nucleus of Bengali Muslim villages across the region. Most of the mosques in Bengali villages are still built in this traditional way often with the collective resources of the poor rural folk (and in most cases with the active support of religious laymen in the area). Quite often, an artificial pond is attached to the mosque to serve as a place of *wa¥u* (ablution), which at the same time helps create an aesthetic effect on the landscape of the surroundings. Interestingly, the simple vernacular mosque architecture in the rural areas of Bengal bore, until very recently, a striking similarity with the hypostyle rectangular planning of the original Prophet's mosque in Madinah. In some remote rural areas where palm-groves are abundant such as in the Arabian desert or the villages of Northern Bengal, even palm-grove pillars can be seen supporting the roof of the prayer hall. *Saḥn* (courtyard) is another legacy of the Prophet's mosque that can be seen in many mosques in a great part of the rural area in Bengal. It is interesting to note that many of these architectural legacies of mosque design have been followed ages after ages merely traditionally, without any conscious effort to associate them with the original Prophet's mosque. Thus in its basic characteristics, there is a continuity in mosque architecture from the time of the Prophet to this day.

This simpler form of prayer place also contributed to the easy acceptance of Islam by rural folk. While most of the urban mosques were constructed under the patronage of sultans, members of the royal family, viziers, officials and wealthy men and women (e.g., the generous lady Boa Maloti of Purulia in Gaur [see ins. dated 941/1534-35]) of the cities, rural mosques came into existence either due to the common efforts of community members, or through the individual initiatives of religious personalities such as sufi shaykhs, 'ulam®' and even petty religious laymen. These rural mosques helped in the

formation of new settlements through clearing forests, particularly in the southern part of the Bengal Delta and eventually consolidation of Islam in the region.[57] Quite often, these mosques received tax-free land grants. The revenue generated through the cultivation of these lands supported the maintenance of mosque as well as of the people attached to it, and particularly its caretakers. This particular institution of endowment, known as *madad-i-ma'®sh*, provided material support to religious institutions, such as mosques, madrasas and khanqahs, as well as to those who were attached to them, such as im®ms, sufis, 'ulama' including the poor and destitute commoners attending those institutions (see Inscription at Bahr®m Saqq®' Shrine, dated 1015/1606-07; and Brarakatra inscription, dated 1055/1645).[58] Sometimes these land grants were awarded directly to the pioneers who founded mosques in far remote areas which were inaccessible and previously uninhabited, such as forests and newly emerged lands in the delta caused by the changing patterns of the courses of rivers in Bengal. The District Collectorate Record Rooms of Bengal, particularly in Noakhali, Sylhet and Chittagong still preserve a number of Mughal land deeds (*Sanad*), mostly in Persian, that refer to the establishment of such mosques with endowment lands granted by local administrative authorities.[59]

During the late Sultanate and Mughal periods, the institution of *madad-i-ma'®sh* played a key role in the massive growth of mosques everywhere in Bengal (see Nayabari ins., dated 1003/1595). Mosques thus played a very important role in new human settlements and the formation of agrarian societies in the sparsely-populated lower delta and the forest areas in eastern and southern Bengal as new villages started emerging around the newly founded mosques supported by *madad-i-ma'®sh*.

The Role of 'Ulam**a**' and Madrasa**s** *in the Transmission of* Knowledge

Map 3: Growth of madarasa institution in medieval Bengal

Madrasas, as recorded by a number of inscriptions, played a pivotal role in diffusing education and in creating a class of 'ulam®' who spread Islamic education throughout the region (see map no. 3) together with sufis, most of whom were also great Islamic scholars. Madrasas were necessary for providing a large pool of educated professionals for fulfilling various social and government ranks such as *q®¥ī*s (justice), lawyers, jurists, im®ms, teachers, etc. Thus they played in the past the same role that the modern educational institutions such as universities and colleges play in our modern period. Quite often, the educated elite from madrasas assumed various

different roles and responsibilities simultaneously in society. Thus, *q®¥i*s would also act as teachers and im®ms, while 'ulam®' would also be engaged in trade and commerce or in medical practice. Minh®j al-D¬n Sir®j gives us some information about the establishment of madrasas in Bengal by the early Muslim rulers.[60] Inscriptions offer information on the locations, dates of construction, names of patrons, and so on and help us identify centers of learning. In some cases, this information sheds light on links between the institutions, the transmission of ideas, student-teacher connections, and intellectual genealogies.

There were many famous madrasas, *madrasa-b®ri* and *dars-b®ris* (i.e., school; *dars* means lesson, *bari* in Bengali means house or building) throughout the country where learning flourished. Congregational mosques often served as centers of higher learning and masjids often functioned as *maktab*s, as they still do in many cases. An early inscription from Naohata from the reign of Balk® Kh®n (626-28/1229-31) records such a mosque that also served as an academy for the area where scholarly subjects were discussed. Epigraphic texts suggest that the capital Gaur evolved as one of the earliest intellectual and cultural centers in the north. It had numerous mosques (more than 50 mosque inscriptions have been discovered in the area), madrasas and khanqahs as early as the thirteenth century. Another early capital of the north, Hadrat Pandua (similarly rich in inscriptions), also became a prosperous cultural center where many mosques and madrasas flourished. In eastern Bengal, Son®rg®'on (near Dhaka) became a famous educational center after the arrival of a famous °anbal¬ scholar Shaykh Sharaf al-D¬n Abʋ Taww®ma there in the middle of fourteenth century. Abʋ Taww®ma's fame attracted many students to Son®rg®'on madrasa from the four corners of the Islamic world. Shaykh Sharaf al-D¬n Yaḥy® Maner¬, who became a well-known sufi figure of the Subcontinent, also attended this madrasa. Tandah, Rajmahal, Murshidabad and Jahangirnagar (today's Dhaka) became noted centers of learning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In northern Bengal, Ghoraghat, in the present district of Dinajpur, attracted many 'ulam®' and students during the Mughal period.

In southwest Bengal, Tribeni and Chota Pandua (in the present district of Hooghly) had a number of madrasas (the earliest one, D®r al-Khayr®t, was established around 713/1313 **according to an early inscription**, during the Sultanate period. The town of Mangalkot (in the present district of Burdwan), not far from Tribeni, also earned fame as a great seat of learning, a reputation it maintained until the nineteenth century. In the southeast corner of Bengal, Chittagong evolved as the main educational center where the Madrasa Muhsiniyyah in the nineteenth century and the Hathazari madrasa in the twentieth century played a crucial role in spreading Islamic education, as did the Calcutta madrasa (later on Calcutta 'Alia madrasa, which still functions). Most of these madrasas were supported by endowments.

The cultural interaction of the Bengal sultanate often surpassed the political and geographical boundaries of South Asia. Many 'Ulama' and sufis came and settled in Bengal from Central Asia, Asia Minor and the Arab world. Some of the madrasahs and khanqahs that they established attracted students from other regions. Sultan A'zam Shah had two madrasahs built during 813-14 (1410-11), one near Umm al-Hani gate (situated on al-Rukn al-Yamani or Yamani corner) of al-Haram al-Makki (the Grand Mosque) at Makkhah,[61] and the other near B®b al-Sal®m (the Gate of Peace) of the Prophet's mosque at Madinah. He also endowed a large property to support these two institutions which were considered among the topmost seminaries in the region during that period. Renowned scholars, such as Shaykh Taqi al-Din al-Fasi (775- 832/1374-1428), a pioneer in the field of epigraphy, taught Maliki school of *fiqh* (jurisprudence) at the al-Madrasa al-Sultaniyyah al-Ghiyathiyyah al-Bangaliyyah (named after its Bengali patron al-Sultan Ghiyath al-Din A'zam Shah) in Makkah. Construction of this madrasa began in the month of Ramadan in 813 (1411) and was finally completed in 814 (1412). A number of scholars from the family of Shibi (who became famous through their education and scholarly activities in Makkah during fifteenth century) taught at this madrasah. A few prominent Makkan scholars attached to this madasah, as

mentioned by al-Fasi, were, Qadi Jamal al-Din Muhammad ibn
'Abd Allah al-Qarshi (d. 817/1414), Shihab al-Din Abu 'l-
Khayr Ahmad ibn Muhammad al-Saghani (d. 825/1422), Qadi
Muhy al-Din 'Abd al-Qadir al-Husayni al-Fasi (d. 827/1424)
and Shaykh Abu 'l-Hasan 'Ali ibn Ahmad al-Mardini al-
Haskafi (d. 825/1422).[62]

        Among the most prominent mentors and academics,
who taught at the Bengali madrasa in Makkah, The syllabus of
this madrasah covered *fiqh* of the four famous schools of
Islamic shar¬'a, which, in a way, indicates the liberal policy
and religious tolerance that prevailed in Bengal. Sultan Jal®l al-
D¬n (r.1414-33) also sent generous endowments to Makkah
and Madinah to establish two madrasahs there which were as
well known as al-Madrasah al-Bangaliyyah over time.

    Bengali students often traveled for their religious training
in famous centers of learning in Jaunpur and Delhi, and
sometimes as far away as Khurasan, Central Asia, and the Arab
world. The D®r al-'Ulum in Deoband, Ma   ®hir al-'Ulum in
Saharanpur, Madrasa Rahm®niyya in Delhi and Nadwat al-
'Ulam®' in Lucknow attracted many students from Bengal
during the colonial period and afterwards. Many of the
'ulam®', who graduated from these madrasas, returned to
establish their own madrasas in Bengal, a tradition that still
continues. Though most of these madrasas followed a
curriculum known as *Dars-i-Ni   ®mi* (after Mulla Ni   ®m al-
D¬n of Aurangzeb's time), by the end of nineteenth century a
new curriculum was also introduced under government
patronage, where secular subjects such as Bengali and English
language and literature were added to theology. The
government sponsored madrasas which taught this new
curriculum were known as '®liya madrasas (literally: higher
institutes). Though initially they failed to earn popularity from
the mainstream rural Muslim population as they received
support from the British raj, slowly and gradually '®liya
madrasas spread all over Bengal and at present, thousands of
students graduate from these institutions every year.

Sufi Shaykhs and Khanqahs: The Spiritual Dimension of Bengali Muslims:
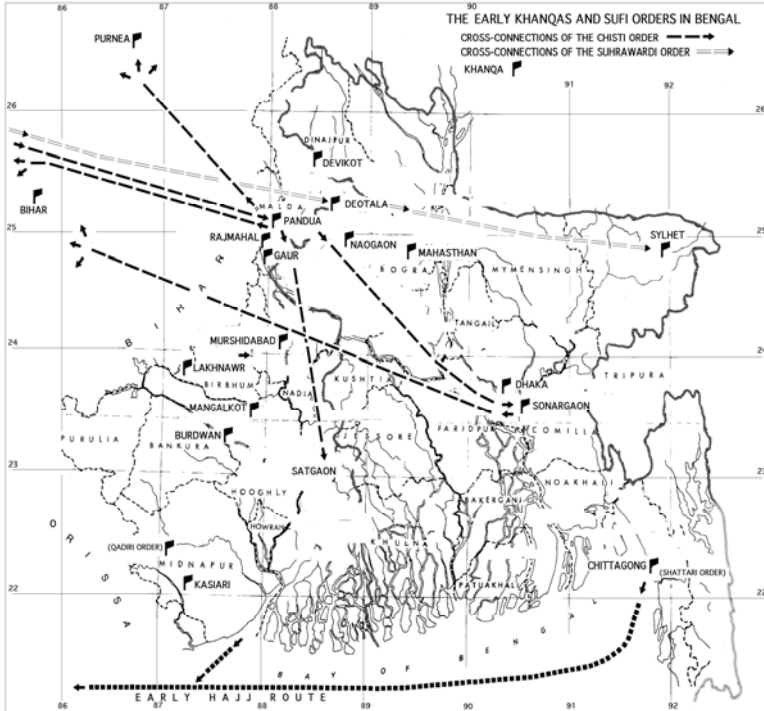
Map 4: Early hajj routes, khanqahs and advent of sufi orders, in medieval Bengal

A total of thirteen inscriptions have been discovered, so far, that date from between 1205 and 1304, the first one hundred years of Muslim rule in Bengal. Six of them commemorate khanqahs, indicating the importance that this institution played in the religious life of Bengali society at that time (see map no. 2). Besides disseminating spiritual teachings,

khanqahs also served as centers of learning on a par with the madrasa. The Sian inscription dated 618/1221 (the second oldest Islamic inscription in Bengal) is the first record of a khanqah dedicated exclusively for sufis. It was not far from Lakhn r, an early Muslim administrative center, in the northwest R®r region (in the present Birbhum district of West Bengal). All these evidences suggest that the region was exposed to Muslim mystic movements at a very early stage which successfully appealed to the indigenous population.

In general, Sufis played various important roles in shaping Islamic society, sometimes silently, at other times quite articulately and expressively. Quite naturally, the degree of their influence and the intensity of their activity have not been the same in every time and space. In Bengal particularly, their influence can be felt not only in the spiritual domain, but also in different aspects of political and social life. Thus, many sufis were active participants in historical events. A great majority of them actually lived in mainstream Islamic societies strictly adhering to *shari‘a* and maintained a harmonious relationship with the ‘ulam®’. Though most of the stories regarding their role in waging holy war against the local people, particularly the non-Muslim rulers, are nothing but popular legends, some of them indeed came to this far remote hinterland solely for *ji h ad*.

As the Muslims gradually grew in the region as a community, the prime goals and priorities of many of the successive generations of sufis slowly started changing. A growing number of shrines, popularly known as *dargah*, *raw¥a* and *ma ar* (shrines) started emerging in Bengal, while the original mission of the sufis and khanqahs namely *da‘wah* or the preaching of Islamic messages -- gradually began to fade. In course of time, these shrines became popular places for syncretistic traditions which attracted common people for the veneration of saints. In this process, most of the sufi traditions lost their emphasis on moral virtues and spiritual training. Eventually, a new class of Muslim saints, popularly known as *pir*s, gradually started appearing. They sought devotion from

the uneducated rural folks whose approach towards Islam was more of a pantheistic nature. Many *dargah*s actually turned into a lucrative source of revenue for the *pir*s. It did not take a long time for this new class to pass through the stage of khanqah into the stage of *tariqah* (various spiritual brotherhoods) and finally to the stage of *t®'ifah* (sectarian denominations). Many of these changes happened due to the close relationship of the p¬rs with the ruling establishment because they accepted various economic favors from the state such as *in'®m*s or *madad-i-ma'®sh* (land-grants) at the cost of their own independent status.

One also discovers a historical tension between the reformist sufis/'ulam®' and the traditionalist dervishes or *pir*s. While the early sufis left a great impact on the common people and to a lesser extent on the ruling class, the *pir*s of the later periods were themselves influenced by local traditions, namely religious trends and cults, such as the Bhakti movements, math (Hindu monastery), and the guru-disciple relationship of Hindu tradition. Under the pretext of the *sulh-kul* (peace with all; harmony with everything) principle occasionally endorsed by some minor *tar ¬qa*s, some of the later p¬rs absorbed local non-Muslim practices and eventually turned into mere cults. In a way, the later tradition of saint veneration defeated the very purpose of the original sufi movement, which emphasized the spiritual dimensions of religion such as *taqwa* (religious piety, God fearing) rather than ritual obsession and *riy®'* (eye-service of rituals).

Interestingly enough, syncretistic traditions did not necessarily bring the Hindu and Muslim communities any closer together than they were in reality. The famous Bengali writer Sharat Chandra Chattapadhdhay, in his widely read novels and short stories, depicts the true ethos of Bengali villages of the early twentieth century, where Hindus and Muslims shared the same space for centuries, yet retained a clear dividing line that distinguished their religious and cultural life, although interactions did take place on various planes.

Many of the early sufis were spiritual mentors on the one hand, and 'ulamā' and *muhaddith* (a recognized scholar of the Prophet's traditions) on the other hand. Some of them played a leading role in popularizing the teaching of hadīth in the region. Many of them were influential in both politics and society. Ibn Battutā in his *Rihla* mentions meeting a number of celebrated Muslim saints even in remote places such as Sonārgā'on and Sylhet. He also mentions a faqīr named Shaydā who revolted against Fakhr al-Dīn Mubārak Shāh (r. 739-50/1338-49), the ruler of Sonārgā'on, and was killed in the struggle. Sufis, such as Nur Qutb al-'Alam (d.1459 according to his tomb inscription [no. 49]), played an important role in the politics of their time. Both the 'ulamā' and the sufis were successful in communicating with the common folk and conveying the Islamic message in a simple language understandable to the rural masses. Many of them contributed significantly to Islamic literature, established madrasas and hospitals and actively participated in the overall welfare of the common people. Also interesting is the fact that many of the early conquerors with charismatic personalities, such as Khān Jahān 'Alī in Bagerhat in the South, were gradually elevated to the position of pīrs after their death in the folk tradition and their graves were turned into shrines.

Khanqahs had a strong influence in rural Bengal at the grass-root level. The people attached to the khanqahs, including the poor commoners living in the vicinity of the khanqah, were often supported by endowment, particularly the one known as *madad-i-ma'āsh* (see Bahrām Saqqā' Inscription, Dated 1015/1606-07). Some of the khanqahs had public facilities attached to them, such as kitchens and free hospitals. Thus khanqahs also played an important role in the formation of new Muslim villages in many sparsely populated areas, particularly in the lower delta in eastern and southern Bengal.

Notes and References

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2   *Tabaq®t-i-N®siri¬*, ed. ‘Abd al-ºay ºabib¬ (Kabul; 1342 A.H.), 425-67.

3   Dilip K., Chakrabarti, *Ancient Bangladesh: A Study of the Archaeological Sources* (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 2001): 25

4   Niharranjan Ray 1994. *History of the Bengali People* (*Ancient Period*), trans. with an introduction by John W. Hood. (Calcutta: Orient Longman Ltd., 1994): 84.

5   For details on Sundarban, see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., s.v. "Sundarban."

6   Ibid., s.v. "Ruhm¬."

7   Ahmad ibn Ab¬ Ya‘qub, *Ta’rikh Ya‘qubi*, ed. M. Th. Houtsma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), 106

8   Al-Hamadan¬, *Kitab al-Bold®n*, ed. M. J. De Goeje (Leiden: E. J Brill, 1967), 15.

9   *Sharaf al-Zaman Tahir Marvazi on China, the Turks and India*, ed. and trans. V. Minorsky (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1942), text 35.

10   Sulaym®n al-Tajir and Abu Zayd al-S¬r®f¬, *Akhbar al-Sin wa ’l-Hind* (237/851), ed. and trans. J. Sauvaget, *Relation de la China et l’Inde* (Paris: Sociētē ‘ēdition, 1948), text 13-14.

11   *Kit®b al Mas®lik wa ’l-Mam®lik*, ed. M. J. De Goeje (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 63-67Æ

12   Trans. V. Minorsky (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 87.

13   Shahnaj Husne Jahan,   *Excavating Waves and Winds of
        (Ex)change: A Study of Maritime Trade in Early Bengal*
        (Oxford: British Archaeological Reports (BAR), John and
        Erica Hedges Ltd., 2006): 43-50.

14   M. Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*, vol. 1A
        (Riyadh: Im®m Muħammad ibn Saʿᴜd Islamic University,
        1985), 33-35.

15   *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd. Ed., s.v. "Ruhm¬."

16   For details, see Dinesh Chandra Sarkar, "Mainamatir Chandra
        Bangshiyo Tamra Shasantroy," in *Abdul Karim Sahitya
        Visharad Commemorative Volume*, ed. Mohammad Enamul
        Hoque (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan, 1972).

17   A place by the name of Sakanat appears in a map in an early
        European work, *His Pilgrims*, by Samuel Purcha.

18   Minh®j Sir®j, *Tabaq®t-e-Naṣiri*, edited by W. N. Lees
        (Calcutta: 1863-64), 148-53.

19   It is a compound Persian name meaning new village (*naw*
        means new, and *deh* or *diyah* means village[s]). The name
        itself bears a great sociological implication as it symbolizes
        the new settlements that started taking place in this hinterland
        right after Bakhtiyar's campaign. The more accepted form of
        spelling in Bengal --Nawdiya (Navadipa in Sanskrit) -- can
        also be interpreted as new lamp which is quite interesting as it
        symbolizes the advent of light (Islam) in the Bengal frontier
        with its conquest by Muslim forces.

20   From it, the land on the both sides of the river Padma
        (Ganges) in Chapai Nawabganj, Mushidabad and Malda
        districts became gradually known as Diyaṟ, and the Muslim
        population of the area as Diyaṟa, and occasionally as
        Sh ⁴ |rshabadiya referring to their ancestral link to Afghan
        soldiers of Sh ⁴ |r Sh®h Surᵞ in the region. It may possibly
        have been also as a reference to the Muslim inhabitants of the
        area known previously as Sh ⁴ |r Sh®h Ab®d Parganah. Their
        Bengali dialect is heavily influenced by Persian (e.g., the

Persian adjective *khasta* [tired] in Bengali verb form to render the meaning of getting tired).

21   Sulayman ibn Aḥmad ibn Sulayman al-Mahr¬ *al-Minhaj al-Fakhir fi 'Ilm 'l-Baḥr al-Zakhir*, ed. Ibrahim Khuri (Damascus: 1970), 16-27; idem., *'Umda al-Mahriyya f i Dabt al-'Ulum al-Ba ḥriyya*, (Damascus: 1970), 113-120.

22   See also Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 308-13.

23   Some of the royal titles in the early Islamic inscriptions, such as *mal®dh al-war®* (shelter of mankind) *Rukn al-Dan®* (Support of the commoners) in the madrasa inscription at Zafar Kh®n Masjid in Tribeni dated 698/1298 (no, **12**), indicate this trend.

24   Minh®j Sir®j, Ṭabaq®t-e-Nasir¬, edited by W. N. Lees (Calcutta: 1863-64) 149-53.

25   *JASB* 47 (1898):116.

26   Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*, 1:36.

27   Mohammad Yusuf Siddiq, "An Epigraphical Journey to an Islamic Land," *Muqarnas* 7 (1990): 83-108.

28   *JASB* 13 (1844): 36.

29   Muhammad Enamul Haq, *Purbo Pakistane Islam* (Dhaka, 1948), 17; M. A. Rahim points out, "Reading of term *Thu-ra-tan* as *Sult®n* cannot be dismissed as fantastic." He thinks that it is reasonable to suggest that the term *surtan* is an Arakanese corruption of *sult®n* since such a word did not exist in Arakanese or Buddhist tradition. The *sult®n* 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 *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, vol. 1, 1201-1576 C.E. (Karachi, 1963), 44.

30   Abu 'Abd Allah Y®qut al-ºamaw¬, *Mu'jam al-Buld®n*, vol. 4 (Cairo: Matba' al-Sa'®da, 1906), 213; Gabriel Ferrand,

Relations de Voyages et Textes G ⁴bographiques Arabes, Persans et Turks (Paris, 1913), 180-81.

31   Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*, 1: 225.

32   *The Rise of Islam*, p. 308.

33   This date can be confirmed based on numerous beautiful gold and silver coins that were superbly struck in the mints of Gaur and Delhi in the consecutive years of Bakhtiy®r'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 Bakhtiy®r Khilj¬'s Occupation of Gau¥a," *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, nos. 1-4 (1976): 104-6; John Deyell, *Living without Silver: The Monetary History of Early Medieval North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), 364-367, coin no. 298.

34   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*, (Aldershot, U.K. Variorum: 1990), XVII 195-208; Parameshwari Lal Gupta, "Nagri Legend on Horseman Tankah of Muhammad bin Sam," ibid., 209-212; Parameshwari Lal Gupta, "On the Date of the Horseman Type Coin of Muhammad bin Sam," ibid., 38 (1976): 81-87; *Delhi Museum Catalogue* 6, Coin 3a.

35   Niharanjan Roy, *Bangalir Itihas* (Calcutta, 1359 Bengali year), 501.

36   Minh®j Sir®j, *Tabaq®t-e-Nasir¬*, ed. W. N. Lees (Calcutta:1863-64), 149-53.

37   See also Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, pp. 195-227.

38   "Haud al-Hayat", ed. Yusuf Hussain, *Journal Asiatique* 213
      (October-December, 1928): 291-344. The original Sanskrit
      manual was probably compiled by Kanamah, a Hindu Tantrik
      Yogi. This work was based on a Yogic Tantric concept of
      mystic physiology with esoteric significance attached to
      nerve-plexuses, veins, limbs, breath control and retention of
      semen which seemed to arouse scholarly interest among a
      number of sufi scholars of South Asia.

39   In South India, a renowned sufi shaykh Mirza Ma   har J®n-I-
      J®n®n also declared Veda as a revealed book.

40   Haji Muhammad, *Nur Jam®l* (Dhaka University Library MS.
      no. 374, sl. 260), fol. 6 mc.; Saiyid Murtaza, *Yoga-Qalandar*
      (Dhaka University Library MS. no. 547, sl. 394), fol. 1a.; 'Ali
      Raja, *In®na-s®gara* (Dhaka University Library MS. no.
      146b, sl. 9), fols. 109, 215, 216.

41   This influence can be felt more strongly in certain local
      Bengali dialects used by the rural Muslims of North Bengal,
      such as the Sh ⁴ rshabadi clan, in and around early Muslim
      capitals such as Gaur and Pandua. On the other hand, Arabic
      linguistic influence can be observed more in the Bengali
      dialects of the Chittagong divisions of southern Bengal.

42   For instance, see Raw¥a Inscription in Barahdari dated
      663/1268 (no. **7**) and Raw¥a Inscription in Mahasthangarh
      dated 700/1300 (no. **13**).

43   Mu   affar Shams Balkh¬ (d. 1400), for instance, used this
      port with the permission of Sult®n Ghiy®th al-D¬n A'   am
      Sh®h (r. 1389-1410) to embark on a trip from Chittagong to
      Makkah; see Mu affar Shams Balkh¬, *Maktub®t-i-
      Mu   affar Shams Balkh¬*, 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.

44   Taqi al-Din al-Fasi, *al-'Aqd al-Thamin*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dar al-
      Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1998), 26.

45   C. E. Bosworth, *The Islamic Dynasties* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh
        University Press, 1967), 194-95.

46   Descendants of the Afghans and other immigrants from
        Khurasan and Central Asia gradually assimilated with the
        local population (e.g., through marriages) and hardly
        maintained their separate identity in the long run. However,
        there are still some traditional families which have retained
        their ancestral family names (i.e., surnames such as Kh®n,
        Paththn, Yusufzai, Loh®ni¬, Afridi and Pann¬) 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 in the
        village of Gopalganj near Sujnipara railway station in
        Murshidabad district which claims its ancestry from
        Khuras®n region that originally bore the surname of Kh®n at
        the beginning though the surname was dropped somewhere
        down the line. The family tree runs as follows: 'Usama> ibn
        Yusuf> ibn Muj¬b al-Rahm®n> ibn 'Abd al-Ghan¬> ibn
        Ayyub ºusayn> ibn Hajji Shah®dat Mandal> ibn Bul®q¬
        Mandal> ibn Niz®m al-D¬n Mandal> ibn 'Abd al-Karim
        Mondol> ibn ºaydar 'Al¬ Kh®n. 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: Kulthum Bibi > ibn Mawl®n® 'Abd al-Rah¬m>
        ibn º®j¬ Qalandar ºusayn> ibn Shih®b al-D¬n Kh®n> ibn
        la'al Muhammad Kh®n> ibn Sh⁴|r Kh®n Pesh®war¬. A
        family line of a female from the same clan in the village of
        Ambhua is: Kulthum Bibi> bint M®jida Kh®tun> bint Taplu
        Kh®n> ibn Sam¬r al-D¬n Kh®n> ibn Dam¬r al-D¬n> ibn
        Nakb¬r Kh®n Pathth®n. All these three families pioneered a
        religious movement, known as Ahl al-ºad¬th, in their
        respective localities, and supported Jih®d movement against
        colonial rule in one way or other.

47"   Register of sanads," Sylhet District Collectorate Record
        Room, 17:75, 243; 18, nos. 94, 154, 158, 279; 19, nos. 334,
        618, 619; 20, nos. 851, 853, 959; nos. 397, 400.

48   The name *Y®ghist®n* (lit.,"the land of the rebels" *y®ghi¬*
        "rebel", *ist®n* "region"]) referred to different sanctuaries used
        by Muj®hid, for Muslim freedom fighters against the British

authorities in the 19th and early 20th centuries, in the various independent tribal areas, mainly inhabited by the Pakhtuns, in the hinterland of what became the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) of British India such as Mahmand Agency, Bunair, D¬r, Swat, Kohistan, Hazara and Chamarqand (extended both in the Kun®r province of Afghanistan and Bajor in NWFP). A popular term rather than a formally recognized one, the name was in use long before the British colonial period, historically referred to as Y®ghist®n al-Qad¬m, and sometimes as Riy®sat-h®'i-Y®ghist®n.

Though Y®ghist®n comprised mainly mountainous terrain, the Muj®hidun carefully selected their centers around fertile valleys, lakes and rivers in order to be self-reliant as regards agricultural products and to find hideouts to support their guerilla warfare. With the rise of Muslim resistance, firstly to the Sikh rule in Punjab and Kashmir, and then to the gradual British colonial expansion in South Asia to the cost of Muslim rule there, the Muj®hidun from different regions started gathering in Y®ghist®n. In spite of their initial success under the charismatic leadership of Sayyid Aḥmad Barailiw¬, the movement had a tremendous setback in Balakot on May 6, 1831, in which Aḥmad Barailiw¬ and most of his companions were killed by the Sikhs. During the first Afghan-British war (1839-42), the Muj®hidun leader Mawlaw¬ Naṣ¬r al-D¬n sided with Dost Muḥammad by sending a contingent of fighters from Y®ghist®n to Kabul and Gaznah. After him, the leadership of the Muj®hidun gradually passed over firstly to Mawl®n® Wil®yat 'Al¬ (d. 1852), and then to his younger brother Mawl®n® 'In®yat 'Al¬ (1858). Through an effective network which extended as far as Bengal, the Muj®hidun regularly received fresh recruits, money and moral supports in their frequently changing centers in Y®ghist®n such as Sit®na, Mulka and Ambila. The Y®ghist®ni Muj®hidun always kept close contact with their supporters, and at times, they used secret messages in code. Though most of the jih®d centers in Y®ghist®n were attacked and destroyed by the colonial army during the second half of the 19th century, the resistance of the Muj®hidun continued under such leaderships as Najm al-D¬n Hadda Mulla (d. 1902) and Sa'd-Allah Kh®n Mulla Mast®n (branded as Mad Mulla by his opponents; d. 1916).

In 1902, the Muj®hidun leader 'Abd al-Kar¬m ibn Wil®yat 'Al¬ chose Asmast in Bunair near Swat valley as his headquarters. During the First World War, a rival center slowly grew up and prospered in the Afghan part of Chamarqand, where leaders such as Mawl®na Muḥammad 'Al¬ Qaṣur¬ (see his book *Mush®h¬d®t-i-Kabul wa Y®gist®n*, Lahore: Id®ra Ma'®rif-i-Isl®m¬, 1986), Mawlaw¬ 'Abd al-Kar¬m Qannuji (d. 1922), Mawlaw¬ Muḥammad Bash¬r (d. 1934), º®jj¬ Tarangza'¬ (d. 1937) and Mawlaw¬ Fa¥l 'Il®h¬ Wazir®b®d¬ (d. 1951; see his book *Kaw®'if-i-Y®ghist®n*, Gujranwala, 1981) led a number of skirmishes against the colonial army in Shabqadar, Chakdah, Mahmond Agency and many other places in NWFP. At times, the Y®ghist®ni Muj®hidun also developed alliances with a number of other anti-colonial movements such as ºizb-Allah, Jun,d Rabb®niyyah, ºukumat-i-Muwaqqata-i-Hind and Jam'iyyat al-Ansar. In order to curtail revolutionary influences of the Muj®hidun in the other regions, entry into Y®ghist®n was regulated by permits during the British period, a system abolished only in 1959.

With the independence of Pakistan in 1947, Y®ghist®n gradually became part of the historical past. The original Jih®d movement also lost its impetus, although the independent character of certain Pakhtun tribes (e.g., the Afr¬d¬s) and their systems (i.e.,*Jirgah*) in these areas, are still recognized by Pakistan. Many tribal Muj®hidun and the activists of the Jih®d movement took part in the war of independence of the Kashmiri Muslims against India in 1948 and thereafter, and subsequently in the popular Afghan uprising against the Soviet Russian supported communist regime in Kabul in the 1980s. The same region also served lately as sanctuaries for the Afghan T®lib®n and the Arab al-Q®'ida movements (led by Mulla 'Umar and 'Usamah ibn L®din). For details, see *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2nd. ed, s.v. "*Y®gist®n*;" Mawlan® 'Ubayd Allah Sindh¬, *Sarguzasht-i-Kabul* (Islamabad: Qawm¬ Idara Bar®'i Taḥq¬q wa Thaq®fat, 1980; Muḥammad K̲h̲aw®ṣ K̲h̲®n, *Ru'id®d-i-Muj®hidin-i-Hind*, Lahore, 1983; Muin-ud-Din Ahmad Khan, *Selections from Bengal Government Records on Wahhabi Trials*, Dacca, 1961; Sayyid Muḥammad 'Al¬, *Makhzan-i-*

Aḥmadi, Agrah, 1881; Qeyamuddin Ahmad, *The Wahhabi Movement in India*, New Delhi: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhay, 1966; Colonel John Adye, *Sitana: A Mountain Campaign on the Borders of Afghanistan*, London: Richard Bentley, 1867; M. Asadullah Al-Ghalib, *Ahl al-Ḥadith Andolon*, Rajshahi, 1996.

49   *Notes on Indian History* (Moscow, n.d.), p. 152.

50   *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2nd. ed, s.v. "T¬tum¬r."

51   Ironically religious movements, such as Ta'ayyun¬ of Mawl®n® Kar®mat 'Al¬, that did not advocate *jih®d*, were not only tolerated by colonial power, but were often favoured.

52   *Report of the Census of Bengal*, 1872, para. 525.

53   For example, J®mi' Masjid inscription (no. **9**) from Lakhisarai dated 697 (1297) refers to these activities by the phrase *z®da khayruhu* (May his benevolence increase).

54   The influence of mosques is referred to in the phrase *a'l® ®h®r al-masjid* (lit., who has exalted the influence of the masjid) in 'Al® al-Ḥaq Masjid inscription dated 743/1342 (ins. no. **19**).

55   *Journal Asiatique* 213 (October-December, 1928): 291-344.

56   "Kanun Daimer Nathi," Chittagong District Collectorate Record Room, no. 7, bundle 62, case no. 4044, and also no. 138, bundle 63, case no. 4044.

57   Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, pp. 229 - 67.

58   The institution of *madad-i-ma'ash* still exists in Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia.

59   See, for instance, "Kanun Daimer Nathi," Chittagong District Collectorate Record Room, bundle 62, case no. 4005 for a thatched mosque established in 1735 in Sundarpur, Fatikchhari Thana; bundle 29, case no. 1808 for a thatched mosque in Lohagara, Satkania Thana; and bundle 51, case no. 3329 for another thatched mosque in Dabra, Hathazari Thana.

For plans and other details of these mosques, see Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, pp. 241 - 43.

60   Minh®j Sir®j, Ṭabaq®t-e-Naṣir¬, edited by W. N. Lees (Calcutta: 1863-64), 151.

61   Ever since, Umm al-H®n ¬ gate of the Grand Mosque at Makkhah became the gathering place of Bengali pilgrims during the daily prayers, a tradition that still exists.

62   For details, see Taqi al-Din al-Fasi, *al-'Aqd al-Thamin fi Tarikh al-Balad al-Amin*, (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1998).