# Revisiting the Composite Culture of Seventeenth Century Bengal C. 1659-1707 as Cultural Syncretism

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**Abstract:** *The expansion of Mughal rule into Bengal coincided with the changing courses of rivers. This culminated in the migration of the population from the west to the east, witnessing an expansion of settlement from West Bengal to East Bengal (present Bangladesh). With Mughals, socio-political, economic, and cultural changes came, which were seen in their royal courts and in Bengal Province as well. Even local masses showed signs of syncretism. Thus, the topographical history of medieval Bengal assumed a different position from that of the rest of the country's provinces. Besides contributing significantly to the royal purse, Bengal also synchronised different cultures and practices and promoted composite cultures. This diffusion can be seen in their lifestyles, foods, and literary works, giving an identity to a person and community living in society. Seventeenth-century Bengal society represented itself as a milieu of composite cultures. This paper traces how Mughal nobles and the native population in Bengal assimilated each other's cultures. The aim of the article is not to tread the beaten track but to revisit the cultures of seventeenth-century Bengal with the intention to witness changes or continuity. This study includes the study of primary sources, including Bengali literature and foreign travellers' accounts, in addition to existing modern works.*

**Keywords:** Bengal, Mughal, Nobles, Syncretism, Composite Culture, Seventeenth Century

## INTRODUCTION

The cultures and religious lives in medieval Bengal are closely related to each other and, to some extent, are inseparable. (Raychaudhuri,1953: pp.184-208). Intermixing of cultures gave medieval Bengal a unique valour which till date is very significant.(Chaudhury, 2013: p.1) 'When interpersonal relations are seen in singular inter-group terms as amity or dialogue among civilisations or religious ethnicities, paying no attention to other groups to which the same persons also belong (involving economic, social, political or cultural connections), then much of importance in human life is altogether lost and individuals are put into little boxes' (Sen, 2006: prologue). These cultures give an identity to a person or community in society and thus help in identifying a society as a milieu of composite cultures.

Sufism, Pirism, Nathism, Vaishnavism, Mullaism played an important role in spreading cultural and religious syncretism in Bengal (Rahman, 2018: pp.53-77). The Muslims in Bengal were mainly influenced by Sufis and in turn they were influenced by *Sahajiya* tradition in the delta (Dasgupta, 2015: pp.35-36). 'Islamic institutions during this period proved sufficiently flexible to accommodate the non-Brahminised religious culture of medieval and early modern Bengal (Chatterjee,2009: p.37).

Religion is just a way of life which at some point meets culture. This religion and culture give a person an identity in society, especially in India. The Islamic religion spread extensively in Bengal between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. There was a massive conversion and acceptance of religion. However, this burden of conversion does not completely fall on the shoulders of the Turkish foundation in the province. Owing to the clearing of forests, many poor peasants migrated to this area. People were influenced by cultural mediators like the *pirs*, *gazis*, *Sufis*, etc. People converted to Islam, but could not get rid of their 'Hindu practices'. They continued practising their past cultures and traditions along with Islamic fundamentals. (Eaton,1994: pp.194-95; Chaudhury, 2013: pp.2-3). However, there is a contradiction incident which emerged in this spread of Islam. Islam Khan the provincial governor of Bengal had opposed Islamisation of the local people and even punished one of its official for imposing so (Dasgupta, 2015: p.35).

## THE ROLE OF TOPOGRAPHY, TRADE IN MEDIEVAL BENGAL

Medieval Bengal was agrarian in nature and this has been testified in many Persian sources of the seventeenth century (Fazl, 1869: p.51; Bhandârî, 1918: p.45). Due to shifts in the riverine tracts, agricultural productivity and population growth were witnessed (Majumdar, 1942:

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65-72; Eaton, 1994: pp.194-95). This course of activity coincided with the foundation of the Mughal rule in Bengal (Eaton, 1994: pp.194-95; Chatterjee, 2009: p.37)

This process had already begun under the reign of Sultan Husain Shah (Dasgupta, 2015: p.32). To bring more development to the eastern frontier, Dhaka became the capital of the Mughal in Bengal. Provincial governors granted tax-free lands to industrious individuals who brought undeveloped forest tracts for rice cultivation. This created a group of loyal, political, and economic classes of communities (Dasgupta, 2015: p.34). These industrious individuals were local zamindars who have 'built up the political power of the caste and validated that power through the sanction of the imperial authority' (Chatterjee, 2000: p.213). They obtained grant on a condition that they would build temple or mosque 'to be supported in perpetuity out of the wealth produced on the site' (Dasgupta, 2015: p.34).

Simultaneously, Bengal became the land for commercial activities, viz. the Dutch and the English. Earlier, the Portuguese settled for trading purpose at Satgaon port and later at Hugli, and dominated the trade till 1632 (Fazl, 1869: p.51; Pelsaert, 1925: p.8; Lahori, 1868: pp.433-34; Manrique, 1926: pp.27-30; Campos, 1919: p.53; Karim, 1974: p.43). This trade fostered the growth of urban centres which in turn led to the beginning of the exchange of cultures. Bankers, mercenaries, and *firangi* traders, including officials of European companies, were influenced by the Mughal culture.Most of them imitated the lifestyle of Mughal nobles.(Aquil, 2020: p.7).

Food habits, dress, and love for vernacular language were all influenced by Indo-Persian culture which emulated all sophistication (Aquil, 2020: p.7). The nobles at the Mughal court were adventurous eaters who encouraged the discovery and invention of new dishes and delicacies. Shah Jahan (c.1628-1658) was once served sweet confectionaries prepared in European style. It was prepared by slaves who had stayed in Portuguese at Hugli. Bengal had developed into a 'place for good comfits, especially in those places where the Portuguese are, who are dexterous in making them, and drive a great trade with them'. The *khichari* prepared out of lentils and rice formed the staple diet of the rural peasants and the urban artisans, and when introduced into the Mughal kitchen, it became richer and more sophisticated. Manrique (c.1628-41) was served *khichari* flavoured with 'almonds, raisins, cloves, mace, nutmeg, cardamom, cinnamon, and pepper. It was a sort of costly *khichari* which was served in Bengal during the feasts (Collingham, 2006: pp.24,31-34).

## MUGHAL NOBLES AND CULTURAL SYNCRETISM

The coming of Turkish rule in Bengal, the local Hindu population, and the newly converted population enabled Islam to strike its roots deep in society (Chaudhury,2013: p.5). The history of syncretism in Bengali culture can be traced through an incident where the hunter Kalketu was helped by hired workmen who offered their labour to build up the city of Gujarat (*Nôgôrsthapôn*) irrespective of their religion. (Mukund, 1993: p. 63).

Both the local masses and the Mughals officers recruited in Bengal assimilated into the culture of society. Muslims came to the land of the Hindu people. Through mutual understanding, both seek a new life which leads to the path of cultural development, that is, a mixture of Hindus and Muslims. These two religions were identified as two streams of rivers flowing side-by-side (Chaudhury, 2013: p. 8).

With Mughal, socio-political, economic, and cultural changes occurred, which were reflected in the royal courts in the province. (Chaudhury,2013: p.8). Akbar tried to weave many ethnic and religious communities into one through his political system (Eaton, 2020: p.159). Even the judiciary under Mughal was non-communal. I. H. Qureshi states 'The Mughal Empire had large numbers of non-Muslims as its subjects; hence, in accordance with the shar itself, Muslim law could only be applied to non-Muslims within certain well-defined limits.The Hindus had their own personal law, and the provisions of the shar' were applied, in so far as it was feasible without injustice, to disputes arising between Muslims and non-Muslims' (Qureshi, 1967: pp.189-190). Like Akbar, Murshid Quli Khan also appointed Hindus in administrative services during his reign (Rahman, 29).One of them was Darpa Nârâyan, an accomplished *sadr qanungo* who was later appointed as the secretary to the department of the crown lands. (Karim, 1962: pp.109-110).

In Bengal, Mughal conferred non-Muslims with a corporate identity. Several Hindu officers stood by Mirza Nathan, who protested against the governor, Islam Khan. Some of them were imprisoned to show loyalty towards him. Baikuntha Das, the Bakhshi of the Mirza was interrogated by the governor for this behaviour (Eaton, 1994: p.177). He replied, ' God forbid!No rebellion will ever be raised by either Ihtimam Khan or his son. But as from my childhood, my father, at the request of his father, has given me to serve him and as I have been equally sharing his prosperity and adversity from my early life, so I cannot leave his company' (Nathan, 1936: p.153). From the highest authority down to the lowest servant, all were bound together by mutual obligations articulated through the ideology of 'salt' (namak). During the oath ceremony, the imperial corps were sworn in by the officers' religious identities. The Muslim officers took an oath by placing a hand on the Qur'an, while the Hindu officers swear the oath in the name of the Lord Vishnu. Islam was not perceived as a religion of the state. (Eaton, 1994: pp.162,178).

Azeem us Shan (c.1697-1712) also adopted the practices of the Hindu religion. He participated in the festival of Holi and wore a saffron turban. This news when it reached Emperor Aurangzeb (c.1658-1707), he in anger reduced five hundred horses from his *mansab* and wrote him that he was tarnishing the name of the religion and the beard which he kept (Hussain, 1902:pp.246-247). Even during Siraj-ud Daulah's reign, the festival of Holi was celebrated in the garden of Motijhil in Murshidabad (Hussain, 1902: p.4). To an ardent follower of Islam, these practices are considered un-Islamic and can drive one out of the circumference of the religion and would no longer remain a believer of the former religion (Chand, 1936: p.137).

The entry of the Mughals in Bengal brought socio-political, economic, and cultural changes both in the court

and in the province itself (Chand, 1936: p.137). Manrique (c.1629-1643) observed that the Muslim kings sent holy water from the river Ganges to the royal court and the same water was used at the time of coronation ceremony of the king (Manrique, 1926: p.77). Islam Khan, subahdar of Bengal (1617-1623), an Iranian by origin had built a replica of the imperial court of Jahangir at Dhaka based on the notion where Indian kings or Hindu deities were presented for public viewing.Akbar through his policy incorporating of Rajput men and women in army and harem respectively assimilated Rajput rites and rituals i.e *jauhar* into the imperial court. Similarly, in Bengal when Qasim Khan, the Mughal governor, was defeated in Dhaka, he beheaded his chief wives and many of his comrades (Eaton, 1994: pp. 160, 166).

The Mughal army at Bengal practiced rituals of attaching political superiors to certain cults or deities which were practised by the zamindars and rajas in the province (Chatterjee,2009: p.34). Mughal officers in Bengal preferred Ayurvedic medical therapy. Islam Khan on his death bed asked for Hakim Qudsi to treat him (Chaudhury,2013: p.8). The *dîwân* and the *bakhshi* informed Emperor Jahangir (c.1605-28) that Zafar Khan, the governor of Bihar, was paralysed because of an illness, the then Emperor sent to "Messiah like Indian physicians" for his quick recovery. Even the author, Mirza Nathan, who did not sleep for twenty-one days had sent for *kabiraj*, who treated him with appropriate drugs which provided relief to him. (Nathan, vol.1, pp.262, 323; Chaudhury, 2013: p.8). Thus, the preference for Ayurvedic treatment over Unani medicine clearly indicates that Indian values and culture had penetrated Mughal culture (Chaudhury, 2013: p.8).

The architectural styles prevalent in Bengal became a part of Mughal architecture.(Chatterjee, p.15). Under the Bengali Sultans, Mughal architecture also showed a native influence, and the royal court gave patronage to the local language and literature. The mosques adopted 'local structural elements and motifs: single-domed brick buildings with engaged corner towers, curved cornices, and extensive terracotta ornamentation.Curved cornice appeared in Bengali architecture for the first time. (Eaton, 1994: pp. 112-113).

## LANGUAGE AS A SYMBOL OF CULTURAL SYNCRETISM

Mahuan (c.1433) observed that Bengali was 'the language in universal use' (Eaton,1994: p.66; Chaudhury, 2013: p.7). Regional music traditions were admitted into the newly evolving Hindustani classical music (Chatterjee, 2020: p.15). Ramprasad depicts a perfect example of Hindus living in a free environment knowing no boundaries. He wrote, 'Vocal and instrumental music are practised in every house. The people never speak except in verse; even a cowherd sings samkirtana so that an outsider could hardly distinguish between a pandit and a peasant' (Karim, 1962: pp.375-376). Ramprasad noted in his poem that temples and higher institutions were established everywhere in the province. Learners from Bihar, Banares, Orissa, and South India gathered in the province. *Patshalas* were maintained by the villagers. To sum up 'Such an ideal state was difficult to achieve, but that there was fair provision for the Hindu education' (Karim,1962: p.376).

The Mughal emperors were often praised by local poets and Hindus. They are sometimes endowed with divine attributes (Rahman, 2001: p.25). Akbar was refereed was 'Ekbar Badshah, Arjuna Avtar' in *Mangalchandir geet* (1640). He rules the land like a Ramchandra in the Kaliyug (Rahman, 2001: p.15; Chatterjee,2020: p.34). Shah Jahan was also praised by Gangadhar, the poet of *Jagat Mangal*. He was the king of kings who ruled the land for 15 years with righteousness and justice. (Rahman, 2001: p.25). Similarly, Aurangzeb was compared to 'Ram raja' by a Hindu poet Krishnaram Das (Rahman, 2001: p.15; Chatterjee, 2020: p.24). 'This picture is different from the received impression of the Mughals as an alien, foreign regime, interested only in exploitation and oppression and unconnected in any other ways from the mainstream life of the region'.

The development of the Persian language in Bengal can be seen as a development of composite cultures. Court ceremonies and rituals all began to be articulated in Perso-Islamic terms Chatterjee,2020: p.42). Persian became the court language, and the sultans of Bengal gave patronage to the poets who produced literature in the local language. The production of *pâncâlî* involving retention of the epics or the Puranas into Bengali'. The Bengal sultans and their officials supported and promoted Bengali literature in court (Sen, vol. 1, 1940: pp.98-99. Sen, 1979: pp. 60, 132; Chatterjee,2020: pp. 42-43). This promotion was partly motivated by the interest and entertainment of the officials and partly to provide entertainment for their subjects (Chatterjee, p.43). For specific purposes, Arabic was inscribed on coins and inscriptions belonging to the Hussain Shahi dynasty (Subrahmanyam, 2005: p.55; Chatterjee,2020: p.43). *Hathayoga* a Sufi work on bodily and spiritual discipline was first translated into Arabic and later into Persian in the fourteenth century in Bengal (Pollock, 2003: pp.148-49).

There was a close cultural contact between Bengal and Arakan, as the latter was dominated politically by Bengal and its external affairs were controlled by the ruling governor in Chittagong (Sen, 2006: p.149). The Roshang court inculcated Persian political culture, although they were Buddhists (Chatterjee, 2020: p.143). Poems in Bengali based on Persian literary works were produced in the seventeenth century. Âlâol (1607-80), the sufi poet had the knowledge of Persian and Sanskrit and translated several Persian literary pieces in Bengali (Sen, pp.153-156; Chatterjee, 2020: p.44). He was well versed in the works of Nizami and translated many Persian literary works such as *Haft Paikar* and *Sikandarnamah*. Other translated works were *Padmâvatî* and *Saiful-mulk badiuj-jamâl* (Sen,2006: pp.154-55). The contents of these works were inspired by either the lives of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) or holy *pirs* (Chatterjee, 2020: p.40).

Muhammad Sadiq, a poet official residing in Dhaka (1629-1650) informs about the presence of the Iranian antecedents in eastern part of the country. They were officials who acted as carriers of Persian culture in Bihar and Bengal.(Chatterjee, 2000: 223). Many Shi'as who were artists, poets, and administrators migrated from Gilan, Qazvin, Taliqan, Shiraz, Herat, and Ispahan. This also suggests that provinces with urban *ashraf* claimed Iranian ancestry, despite being born in North India (Eaton,1994: p.168). In addition, many bankers, financials, and entrepreneurs came from north India in the train of the

Mughal army, and some managed to secure revenue rights and thus established themselves in Bengal's aristocracy. Some were well versed in the Persian language and some used Hindavi or 'Nagari'. Thus, both Persian and Hindavi were framed together as 'linguistic /literary and cultural influences' and came to be associated with the Mughal political power.

In Bengal, Persian was considered a language emancipating from northern India. The spread of the Persian language in Mughal Bengal spread much among the 'landed aristocracy', in comparison to Sultanate Bengal. (Chatterjee, 2000: pp. 223-234). Although there was a spread of Iranian elites in the province and this was accompanied by mercantilism in the Bay of Bengal between 1400-1700, that this spread was accompanied by a partial Persianisation of comportments and of conceptions of statecraft and that it can be linked without too great aa difficulty to the rise of a sort of 'mercantilist' ideology in states of the Bay of Bengal (Subramanyam, 2005: p.76).

## CONCLUSION

The Turkish conquests of northern India and the arrival of Persian nobility in the early twelfth century led to the advent of Persianate political and cultural influences in Delhi and further east. When historians speak of much talked about 'Ganga-Jumna Tehzeeb/culture,' the focus is mostly on northern India, Delhi, to Awadh. The eastern part of the Mughal empire, considered a periphery, is not really spoken of much in this context. Thus, the analysis conducted in this study leads us to a different version.

Historically, the seventeenth century was full of political, topographical, social, and cultural events in Bengal. By the time Bengal came under the Mughals during the reign of Akbar, they had earned a reputation for tolerating socio-religious practices. Akbar, Jahangir, and Dara Shikoh emerged as champions of 'Ganga-Jumna tehzeeb'. Prince 'Azeem us Shan adopted the Hindu traditions and celebrated the festival of Holi, and wore saffron turban depicting 'composite culture' in the province. Even the nobles in the province were influenced by the local traditions and customs and had an inclination towards them.

Although this paper is confined to the seventeenth century, the features of composite cultures can be traced back to the Sultans of Bengal. Craftsmen from all over the country provided help to each other, irrespective of their castes and religion. Religion knew no boundaries and conveyed a message of harmony and toleration. In popular narratives, mughals are often remembered for violence, blood-shedding, and despotism in the country. However, the practice of adapting local customs and traditions presents a different perspective.

The native Hindu population and the newly converted Muslims had stepped up an attitude of tolerance towards each other, as is apparent from the works of many academicians. Thus, one can easily conclude that the soil of Bengal not just assimilated people from all walks of life irrespective of their caste, colour, creed, and religion, but simultaneously people exhibited cultural harmony by inculcating a sense of tolerance towards each other.

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