

# A BLAME AT THE HISTORY OF RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERING AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN PRE AND POST- COLONIAL BENGAL

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**Abstract:** The region, which lies in the south east of the Indian Subcontinent, constitutes a single province called Bengal during the British Raj as it had a distinct political or administrative identity during the Muslim rule before the colonization. Bengal has a rich cultural history which is characterized by inter and intra religious diversity that ranges from Vedic, Brahminical religions (*Shiva*, *Vaishnavas* and *Shakta* cults), Puranic cults, Buddhism to orthodox Jainism. This plurality of religions further facilitated the religious encountering of Islam and Christianity at the later stage in Bengali society. Islam made its appearance in 1204 when King Lakh Sen was defeated by Ikhtayār-ud-dīn Muḥammad Bakhtīr Khiljī. As a result of the prevailing religious plurality, same amalgamation of religious beliefs took place. Resulting Islam became transformed it into localized one. Christianity entered Bengal and got foothold with the arrival and coming into power of the East India Company (1757-1857). The East Indian Company's period is marked with the Christian missionary movement in Bengal, that replaced syncretic and pluralistic approach with the western exclusivist often associated with superiority complex, intolerance and enmity toward the other religions. Among the missionaries, contributions of Serampore trio and Alexander Duff are worth mentioning.

**Keywords:** Religious Pluralism, Syncreticism, Serampore Trios, Dharma culture

## 1-Introduction

The name 'Bengal' or 'Bangla' that represented a single geographical entity

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with distinct political, cultural and religious ideologies lack unanimous consent of scholars regarding its historical origination and derivation. According to some this territorial area consisted of many independent states like Gaura, Varebdra, Pandora, Samatata, Radha, Samoa, Vanga, Harikela, karnasuvarne [1]. And among these, the two kingdoms of Vanga or Banga appear to spring the name Bengal or Bangala [2]. Some credited the coinage of the term Bengal to Marco Polo (1298 CE) while others traced the political tract term with the Muslim ruler Mughīthud dīn Tughral (1268 CE). This lateral opinion has been mentioned in the work of Zia-ud-dīn Bārānī. Britishers latter on also used the term Bengal for this area that appeared to support the argument that Britishers might inherit this term Bengal from Muslims [3]. It is however clear that whatever course the present day Bengal took to acquire its name, it seems to be a result of a quite long historical process, which started with a few independent states and reached the final phase of a unified identity of Bengal in the history. This cultivating land of Bengal appeared distinct in its fertility for multi-religious and multicultural society.

#### 2.1-Religious Diversity and Religious Encounters in the pre-Colonial Bengal

Little is known about the history of Bengal before it became a part of the Muarya Empire during the reign of King Ashoka (269-232 BC) [4]. Though Ashoka was converted to Buddhism, but Buddhism attained the status of the official religion of Bengal during the Pala dynasty (8<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries CE) established by Gopala, a *Khashtriya* tribal chief of Varendra [5]. The socio-religious makeup of the Pala dynasty witnessed the diverse religious composition. That varied from the Vedic religious practices to the reformed *Brahminical* religion of *Shiva*, *Vaishnavas*, *Shakta* cults to Puranic cult and even orthodox Jainism was not out of its domain. This diversity was the friendly and harmonious encountering, devoid of envy and jealousy [6]. As Pala rulers were quite respectful towards the people of other faiths [7]. Their patronization and generousities to other religions melted the barrier of prejudice and opened the door to syncretism [8]. In the eleventh Century, the Pala's (earlier enthusiastic Buddhists) started favoring the cults of two gods: *Vishnu* and *Shiva* [9]. This syncretism and the emergence of the *tantric* cults profoundly transformed Buddhist religious ideas. The same *tantric* ideas also pervaded different *Brahminical* sects and radically changed their views and practices. But Jainism succeeded in maintaining its orthodox

identity against such impulsive waves. This period of inter-religious harmony was followed by the conservative and orthodox Sena kings (South eastern kings) who were the stakeholders of *Brahmanical* system. They started to partition the Bengali society by raising artificial barriers of high and low caste not only within Hindu society but also promoted such outlook for other religious communities [10].

The most powerful and prominent king of the Sena was Vallala Sen (1158-1178), a zealous proponent of *Brahmanism*. He introduced the practice of *kulinism*[11] within Hinduism and religious intolerance towards Buddhism. His supporters converted Buddhist temples into the alter house of Hindu temples. These temples were made the seats of Hindu sacrifices where they intentionally performed their religious sacrifices to scare away the Buddhist monks. But this persecution of the Buddhists for the delight and amusement of the *Brahmins* [12] continued till the appearance of Islam in Bengal through a Muslim conqueror Muḥammad Bakhtīar Khiljī [13]. He belonged to a Turkish Khiljī Tribe who defeated the King Lakh Sen in 1204 [14]. Thus the political Islam made its arrival with the period of the Delhi Sultanate, during which Persian, Turk, and Afghan Muslims started settling in this region. The wave of Islamization of Bengal reached its peak under the reign of Jilal al Din Muhammad [15]. As discussed above, before the arrival of Islam Bengal was not a land devoid of religions. However, in contrast to the previously existing religions in the region, Islam was taken sometimes as a foreign religion, or the religion of the invaders.

### 2.2- Arrival of Islam as a Foreign Religion in Bengal

The socio-cultural behavior of this “foreign” religion (Islam) was distinct and unique. The Islamic doctrines appeared as the antithesis to the prevailing regional Hinduism. The centripetal force of the Muslim society resides in the simple belief of equality of human beings, all of them considered to be Allah’s creation. They neither recognize the priesthood nor acknowledge caste based differentiations regarding food, drink, dress, marriage and other social and religious rituals [16]. The Hindu society was divided into four classes, the *Brahmins* are the most privileged and upper strata, while the *Shudras* were considered to be impure or unclean and therefore made up the deprived lowest class. Many *Shudras* found in Islam a refuge against the system of socio-religious discrimination against them created and maintained by *Brahmins*, as Islam teaches equality and

brotherhood of mankind. The mass conversion took place against the *Brahmins'* authority on the one hand, and served as the beginning of the indigenization [17] of Islam on the other hand [18].

The intentions of these masses converts were multifarious. To some this conversion was a “desire to seize a strategic opportunity to move upwards within the existing social hierarchy [19]. To others, it was an escape from tax, some found in it the worldly gains from Muslim rulers and according to some others it was simply a matter of spiritual preferences. Moreover, *Sufi* saints were considered responsible for the mass conversion because for these *Sufis* the conversion of the non-Muslims to Islam was their primary spiritual objectives in Islam. They migrated to these areas to fulfil the commands that they received in their dreams to preach Islam to the heathens [20]. In fact, all of the above mentioned factors had probably contributed in the conversion of Hindus to Islam and then in the eventual localization of Islam.

#### 2.21- Reasons of Emergence of Localized Bengali Islam

This localized Bengali Islam embraced some non-Islamic religious beliefs and practices as it adopted some local ceremonial and societal practices. In the sixteenth century, it also paved the way to syncretic [21] developments [22] in the *Sūfism* that transform the orthodox *Sūfism* into heterodox mysticism due to the influence of Hindu *yogis* and *tantrikism*. The offshoot of this heterodox mysticism is named as *pīrism*[23]. In 18<sup>th</sup> century CE, a huge literature also grew up in Bengal on *Satya* cult. The central figure of *Satya* cult was referred by Muslim writers as *Satya pīr* while Hindus called him *Satya Narayana*. The apparent difference remained only in the usage of the term *pīr* by Muslim devotees and *Narayana* by Hindu devotees. *Satya* cult is one of the examples of Muslim and Hindu syncretic practices in Bengal [24].

The above mentioned new religious practices of *pīrism* took the road of extension by inclusion of the innovations like reverence of the footprints of Holy Prophet (peace be upon him) and reverence for *Panch Pīr* (the five Pīrs). These *pīrs* also adopted some practices of Hindu asceticism. Besides these above mentioned developments, the growth of a particular priestly class in Bengali Muslim society is worth mentioning. Usually this class is given the epithet of *Mullahs*. It could be noticed from the contemporary Bengali literature that *Mullahism* was an offshoot of *pīrism*. The term *Mullah* was used to denote someone who was fairly well-versed in religious

## RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERING AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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principles and daily practices of Islam. Due to supposed access to Islamic knowledge, a *Mullah* used to be consulted by villagers in Muslim society and he was paid for his services. The principle of equality with regard to religious authority in Islamic societies was influenced by the Hindu system of *Brahmin* priesthood. Just like *Brahmins* in Hinduism, *Mullahs* acquired the status of a priestly caste in the Muslim society [25].

The situation of Bengali Muslim society became worst when Muslims not only got divided on the basis of their lineage, but also started to adopt Hindu inter caste marriages rules to preserve their identities. This resulted in the dichotomy of *ashrāf* and *atrāf* on the basis of ethnic origin. The former claimed to come from central Asia, Afghanistan, Persia, Arabia, and North India while the latter were indigenous converts. The immigrant Muslims were hardly prepared to admit these indigenous converters to a position of equality. Hence, these converted people faced the same aggression of social customs, tribal restrictions, and unchangeable rules of marriage and inheritance even in the Muslim society. The stratification of the Bengali Muslim society on the ethnic and cultural basis divided the society into Arab or *Azam* on the top of the social ladder who restricted themselves to marry others. The next group consisted of the genuinely *sharīf* [26] who had contracted marriages with non-*sharīf*. Third category included those who were the products of mixed marriages, but succeeding in contracting marriages with the daughters of genuine *ashrāf*. The fourth category was those who were non-Arabs immigrants to Bengal and contracted marriages with local converts. Lowest in the social scale were those local converts who failed to establish connection with the recognized *ashrāfs* [27].

It is evident that much fusion of Islamic and Hindu principles and practices took place in the history of Bengal. But it would be an exaggeration to believe that the above mentioned heterodoxy became part and parcel of these two major religions of Bengal. The true picture of Bengali society could be traced in the statement that neither the whole Muslim community adopted the *Pīrism* or *Satya pīr* cult nor all Hindus subscribed to Chaitanya's *Vaishnavism* or *Dharma* cult [28].

Therefore the above mentioned condition was the situation in Bengal for several centuries. Then a relatively sudden period of significant social and religious awakening started in the nineteenth century Bengal. But what stimulated this awakening process? The answer takes us to the second

religious influx (Christianity) in the history of Bengal with the arrival and coming into power of the East India Company (1757-1857) in Bengal. This development facilitated the activation of Protestant missionaries that were uniquely shaped by the endeavors of Serampore trio[29] and Alexander Duff (1830-1840) [30].

### 3.1- Christianity under East India Company as a Second Religious Influx in Bengal

The East India Company was the greatest mercantile organization [31] whose reason of ultimate formation in England in 1600 could be traced in the fourteenth century European conditions [32]. Since the birth of the company, it was motivated by three guiding principles. Firstly, its main focus was maintenance of its monopoly in the Eastern trade regarding its rights and privileges against other English merchants. Secondly, it worked hard to implement its plans to throw out its rival mercantile benefit of the eastern trade. Thirdly, it aimed to secure from Oriental governments the special and exclusive privileges for itself in order to receive merchandise at least at the rates from the buying countries [33]. For executing its principles the East Indian Company first appearance in India was noticed in 1608 through its representative William Hawkins in the court of Mughal emperor Jahāngīr [34]. In the beginning, of course, the Company's primary aim was to secure a permanent establishment in India to extend its commerce and to consolidate its position against its European trade rivals [35]. The achievement of this aim demanded Company to transform it from commercial enterprise to political administration [36]. Thus, in 1757 the mercantile East India Company, which raised armed forces as well [37], became victorious at the battle of Plassey by defeating Nawāb Siāj-ud-daullah of Bengal. That resulted not only in the accomplishment of the company's desire to attain supremacy over Bengal but also in making this land the center of all religious, cultural and intellectual activities for the next two centuries[38]. The earnest desire of the Company was rooted in the advancement of commerce in Indian society through their advanced technology and reformed measures. They implemented their core desires in the domain of economic improvement objects, educational and legal reforms. All these were implemented under the policy of toleration and non-interference in religious matter of the Bengali people. This policy of toleration and non-interference appeared as a barrier in Christian

## RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERING AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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missionary's preaching activities. This resistant behavior of the Company to missionary activities was due to Company's fear that such missionary activities would provoke a reaction from the Indians. Despite this wise neutral religious policy, the East India Company could not reach until 1857 and the British home government took the responsibility of India [39].

The Company received no thanks from Christian missions for giving any helping hand in their missionary activities [40]. This situation came to an end in 1813 in favor of missionary activity. However a certain amount of the collaboration could be noticed between the Government and mission before the approval of this charter. Firstly, Lord Wellesley appointed William Carey, a professor of Bengali and Sanskrit language in the College of Fort William in 1800. Secondly, this team work came to light when the Government took advantage of the Mission printing press in Serampore to print the Indian language in their own script. These collaborative works made the Government to switch from the strict rule of refusing every missionary landing in India to the policy of amicability [41].

The other reason of the Government's flexible attitude towards missionary activities could be seen in the missionary new policy. Missionaries replaced their old policies of (preaching the Bible and polemical debates), and introduced missionary rational and logical educational program for cultivating Indian minds under the umbrella of Christian and secular philosophy. The change in mission policy was due to the unfruitfulness of the previous missionary activities. Christian missionary failed in achieving the satisfactory numbers of Indian converts in spite of their tireless efforts in the period of two hundred and seventies years [42]. During this whole period, missionaries succeeded in converting very few locals from the lowest caste, out caste and tribal groups. But upper-caste Hindus were seemed to be unaffected by missionary efforts. The reason of the failure according to the missionaries was embedded in the prevailing Indian religious system. Among these the most important were the institution of caste and the native psychological attachment of the Hindus to their religion [43]. These missionaries were convinced that Indian's lack of intellectual, critical and creative appraisal was due to their local educational system.

Missionaries' past experiences had made it clear to them that getting converts from the mature Bengali minds was an uphill task for them [44]. The Missionary started working for gradual and systematic change in stages

that according to them would bring revolution. These missionaries were preparing the young Hindu minds like the fields. These Missionaries were trying to cultivate the words of Christ by introducing secularization and rationality to these Hindu pupils and leaving no room for Hinduism.

Among these missionaries William Carey (1761-1834) could be seen as a flag holder of this missionary education. He arrived in India in 1793 and invested his time in the translation of the Bible into the vernaculars of India. His triumph of winning the actual converts from Hindustan was not due to these translations. His success was rather due to his schools, literature and newspaper with the help of which his teachings penetrated with the Indian spirit. But it would be impossible for him to make his work varied and effective without his two colleagues Marshman (1768–1837) and Ward (1769–1823). These three people differed greatly from each other, but in such a way that they complemented each other's deficiencies that enable them to constitute the famous Serampore trio [45].

Joshua Marshman (1768-1837), who took his inspiration from the Lancaster's monitoring system. Initially they brought the words of God in the reach of the Bengali people by translating it in the local vernacular. This action of the trios opened the door to their second strategy of preaching the teachings of Christ. That was followed by their third and last strategy of establishing schools and colleges to inculcate the native missionaries in India. In 1818 they opened Serampore College with a broadly designed curriculum which included western science and oriental languages [46].

William Carey and his team believed in the creation of Christ's kingdom that would be completely devoid of all heathen social abuses. They exercised much influence on the Government to investigate [47] social practices of throwing children to the Ganges by mothers for the fulfillment of their vow to dedicate their firstborn in the holy river. It was Carey's efforts that made Wellesley to prohibit this practice. Similarly, on the issue of *sati* the Serampore missionaries' article *The Friend of India* was reprinted in other Calcutta newspapers and England to mold the public opinion and the Government against *sati*. This whole scheme resulted in the acknowledgement of Carey as Bengali translator who later on translated the Bentinck's ordinance prohibiting the practice of *sati* into the vernacular in December 1829 [48]. And this was the point when "Christian" press began to emerge. The sole purpose of this press was not only to save souls with the



## RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERING AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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message of Christ [49]. They concerned themselves with these heathen social practices partly in a spirit of humanitarianism and partly as auxiliary to achieve their main purpose of converting Indians to Christianity. They concentrated on proclaiming the central doctrines of Evangelical Christianity, trying to convince their hearers that their salvation lay in Christ alone. So they criticized both Hinduism and Islam. Missionary's activities were succeeding when they succeeded in impressing the Indians on account of the Christ's love for the redemption of mankind. The missionaries also got to agree Indian consent that the Gospel was a good book but failed to win the trust of the masses that Christianity was the only means of salvation. Their translations of the Bible at that stage appeared imperfect. Despite these problems, the missionary achievement in the fields of social reforms, literature and education in awakening Bengali intellectuals could not be ignored [50].

A new era of the missionary education began with the arrival of Scottish missionary Alexander Duff to Bengal in 1830 who adopted quite different methodologies [51]. He was the first one who felt the essentiality of the English as the official language of education. He was lucky enough to secure the support of the men like Charles Trevelyan, Lord Macaulay, and of Governor General Lord Bentinck. These all felt that the transformation of the Indians would be impossible without English language. But this issue was not as simple as it appeared rather the issue of preferring English on Sanskrit was the source of enmity between Orientalists and Anglicists. These two groups differed regarding English language, but this issue was resolved in 1835 when the Lord Bentinck announced his decision in the favor of Anglicists' support of English language [52].

Duff after obtaining success in his first policy regarding English language started work on his second policy that aimed at educating the high class *Brahmins* rather than orphans and the poor. He hoped that the influential minority would affect the majority [53]. His next plan was to give a good education in secular subjects with the aim of moral and intellectual regeneration of the universal mind. In other words, it was most effective manner for Duff to penetrate deeply into Hindu minds to impress the entire body of the Hindustan [54]. Alexander Duff provided a description in his *Indian and Indian Missionary* (1839) that's how he came to know that modern literature and science could help him in shaking the foundation of

Hindu Shastara. He recounted that during his class which he was conducting in junior section he explored a new technique. He asked a simple question, what is rain? In reply he got an interesting answer from his Hindu student. The student replied him that rain came from the trunk of the god *Indra*. When, Duff further inquired him about the source of his knowledge. The student replied that he learnt this from Shastara (a Hindu text) by his *guru* (teacher). Instead of rejecting his student Duff explained him the whole process of rain scientifically from evaporation to rain falling. Duff's scientific explanation of rain compelled this boy to rethink the authenticity of his Shastara. He surprisingly uttered the words that what he was thinking about rain. And if Duff's scientific explanation was corrected one, then what would be the future of Hindu Shastara? This student's statement revealed the truth to Duff that the destruction of Hinduism was embedded in the teaching of geography, general history and natural philosophy. The knowledge of these subjects would crack the foundation of the Hindu religion by substituting the authenticity of Shastara with skepticism [55]. Duff further incorporated these subjects for the Hindu youth in two departments of Calcutta school for attaining his objectives. Alexander Duff strategies proved successful when, after two and quarter years his young Bengali pupils were ranked first class not only on the basis of the their intelligence and sound general knowledge. But they also stood equal in comparison to the educated youth of the England in knowledge of the evidence and leading doctrine of Christianity [56]. Though western education had doubtlessly awakened and enlightened the Bengali minds by corroding their Hindu beliefs. But the result of this awakening was not according to the missionaries' expectation of Hindu mass conversion to Christianity. The reasons of this failure appeared multi-facets. The peculiarity of the Indian religion did not let its followers to escape from its spell because westernized educated Bengalis were not ready to choose a Christian religion. Rather the rationality and intellectually of these Hindus offered them different options of experimentations. They tried to reform Hinduism to make its survival possible in a Christian environment [57].

### Conclusion

The pluralistic Bengali society witnessed the religious encountering of native Indian religions from the tolerant Buddhist Pala dynasty to the proponents of the Bramminical Sena king. The latter were not only the flag holders of

*kullinism* but were also prejudiced towards Buddhist worships and temples. This chapter of Buddhist persecutions came to an end with the arrival of Islam in 1204 when King Lakh Sen was defeated by Bakhtīr Muhammad Khiljī. As a missionary religion, Islam attracted the mass conversion of the natives. This conversion, further paved the way for syncreticism in the form of heterodox mysticism and also social stratification of Muslim society into Ashrāfs and non- Ashrāfs that is against the Islamic teachings of equality of all races. This syncretical approach was replaced by Christian missionary exclusivist approaches who criticized other religion generally and Hinduism particularly to maintain the Christ domain. Among these missionaries the contributions of Serampore trio and Alexander Duff are worth mentioning. The formers, switched to translate the Bible into the local vernacular, established schools and colleges to inculcate in order, a knowledge and principles of western civilized the native people Missionaries who worked to ban the heaten social practices like *sati* on humanitarian grounds. While Alexander Duff employeed the scientific and rational approaches to shake the authenticity of the Hindu Shastras to extend the domain of Christ.

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## RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTERING AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

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27- Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906 a Quest for Identity* 8-9.

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