

## The Muslim Conquest of Bengal

By Professor Emeritus Dr AKM Yaqub Ali

Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji sacked and reduced Udantapur *Vihara* in the year preceding the conquest of Nadiya, then capital of King Laksmāna Sena. Possibly after the subjugation of *Vihara* or Bihar he met Qutb al-Din Aibak at Badayun with presents which earned for him the legal sanction of the latter in his move towards the country of Lakhnawati. Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji in his first adventurous expedition to Bihar was not possibly sure of his success. So he did not think it wise to have the prior sanction for the military action from Qutb al-Din Aibak, the lieutenant of Mu'izz al-Din Muhammad b. Sam, and not to Qutb al-Din Aibak as his utterance acknowledging Muhammad b. Sam as the Sultan testifies. But as soon as the fame of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji after the subjugation of Bihar reached the ears of Qutb al-Din Aibak the former possibly to avoid antagonism of the latter invoked his permission for further conquest with presents. Qutb al-Din Aibak was pleased with him and sent him *khil'al*. This exchange of presents and *khil'al* between Qutb al-Din Aibak and Bakhtiyar emboldened the latter to take adequate steps for the conquest in the east.

The Mongol inroad into central Asia made many Khalji warriors and soldiers seek their fortunes in India. They got in Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji an able leader, and the people of his tribe from all parts of Hindustan gathered round him for the betterment of their lots. It is, therefore, reasonable to hold that after the sack of Bihar, the Khalji warriors and fortune seekers swelled in number around Bakhtiyar Khalji who requisitioned their services for some perilous expeditions. It is stated that the conquest of Bihar by the Turks (Khalji) under the leadership of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji unnerved the neighbouring Hindu rulers, specially Laksmāna Sena, whose capital was at Nadiya. He sent people (spies) to investigate into the matter, and they reported back confirming the rumour.

The circumstantial evidence of the emigration of the Brahmins and other higher class people towards *Bang* (eastern Bengal), *Sankanat* (Samatata) and *Kamrud* (kamrupa) makes one think that Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji did not sit idle for a complete year after the conquest of Bihar, rather he made possible preparations for the expedition. The scheme of his preparation possibly included the finding out of favourable march route and sending of men for intimidating the King Laksmāna Sena and the nobles. Laksmāna Sena was aware of the possible invasion of the Muslims. He was a shrewd ruler and hence he garrisoned the Teliagarhi pass near Rajmahal hill, which was the

only possible route to enter into Lakhnawati territory. Nudia of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* identified with Nadiya of present day was possibly a temporary headquarters of the King. It was quite at a safe distance from the Teliagarhi pass and, therefore, the King did not apprehend the quick attack of the Muslim army covering a long distance. But Jharkhand, the enormous land of hill and jungle on the south of Teliagarhi pass was possibly chosen by Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji, on the report of his informers, to attack the temporary seat of the Sena King at Nadiya.

He started from South Bihar with an army divided into several small detachments for strategic reasons, and crossing the way through Jharkhand appeared before the gate of Nadiya at noon time with a band of eighteen horsemen, apparently seemed to be horse-dealers and the rest of the army was to follow him. Nadiya was conquered almost without any fighting, as possibly the troops of the King were posted at Teliagarhi. Laksmana Sena fled towards Vikrampur in *Bang*. The *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* and other Muslim chroniclers did not mention the date of this conquest. So the modern scholars differ in their opinions as regards the date. On the scrutiny of various sources, the year of the conquest of Nadiya seems to have been A. H. 600/ A. D. 1204.

Nadiya, a place in Radha which was subjected to inundation was desolated by Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji in favour of Lakhnawati on the strategic ground because his soldiers and nobles mainly of Khalji extraction and Turkish origin were more used to dry land than the inundated one. This was possibly one of the reasons which made them abstain from following the King Laksmana Sena in the low and inundated place of *Bang* or eastern Bengal. This factor also stood as a hindrance on the way of expanding his territory on the east and south-west Bengal. It is not clear whether Nadiya remained under the domination of Bakhtiyar Khalji or it had fallen in a sort of no man's land like that of south-west Bengal over the conquest of which in later time the Ganga Raja Anangabhin III and the Muslim Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Iwad Khalji engaged in battle. *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri* makes a vague statement as regards the territorial expansion of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji's kingdom.

It is stated therein, "he (Bakhtiyar Khalji) brought the different parts of that territory (Rae Laksmana Sena) under his sway." It is likely that Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji for his own interest did not try to extend his territory to Radha. He had sent Muhammad Shiran Khalji to Lakhnor (in modern Birbhum district) and Jajnagar with a portion of his forces at the time of his Tibet expedition in order to hold in check Jajnagar during the period of his absence from the capital. Shiran's expedition did not produce any tangible result. Had it been under his control he would have been possibly more interested to retire to a safer place like Lakhnor in Radha than to Masida Santush in present Rajshahi district after being ousted from Dewkot.

The establishment of the capital at Lakhnawati and at Dewkot by Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji and his expedition towards Tibet traversing a vast tract of land with about twelve thousand soldiers without being opposed by any power to the north and north-east of Lakhnawati lead us to presume that the early Muslim domination extended from Lakhnawati in the west to the river Karatoya in the east. The opposition of the King of *Kamrud* (Kamrupa) on the other side of the river substantiates the contention. The names of places and *Iqta*'s such as Narkuti or Narangoe, Masida Santush, Barsul, Bardhankot and Dewkot indicate their having been dominated by the

Muslims. The identification of these places by the modern scholars brings to light the fact that Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji's principality was limited to a small tract of land round about Lakhnawati with Dewkot in the north, the rivers Tista and Karatoya in the east and south-east, the Padma in the south and the Ganges in the west. Bihar was under his possession, but his preoccupation with the affairs of Lakhnawati, Dewkot and Tibet distracted him from its major events. The reconquest of Nadiya by Mughith al-Din Yuzbak indicates that possibly Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji had lost his control over it. However, the territory of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji's principality was mainly confined to the tract of land known as the Barind (Varendra).

What kind of impact did his conquest have on this area? First, this conquest brought Muslims of foreign origin, specially of Khalji extraction, to Bengal and many of them settled in the important stations of the territories conquered by Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji. Dewkot as already referred to, was populated by the families of the soldiers and nobles of Khalji tribe. The flight of Izz al-Din Muhammad Shiran Khalji after his defeat at the hands of Qaymaz Rumi, towards Masida Santush makes us presume that possibly Shiran Khalji's partisans had their habitations in this place. Narkuti being the *Inta* or fief of Ali Mardab Khalji was possibly inhabited by a number of his Khalji supporters. It is, therefore, reasonable to hypothesize that Muslim population grew up in the various administrative headquarters of his dominion. Moreover, Muhammad Bakhtiyar's advance towards Tibet through this area unopposed shows that with the fall of Nadiya, this strip of land had fallen in his possession. Besides the administrative arrangements of the conquered territories, Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji took some measures necessary for the growth of the Muslim society on a sound basis.

The establishment of *masajid*, *madaris* and *khanqat* at Lakhnawati and adjoining parts is an indication of the determination of Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji to lay foundation of a Muslim society in this part of the subcontinent. Bakhtiyar Khalji could correctly realize that without these three institutions initiated by the Prophet Muhammad (sm.) at Madinah, a Muslim society could not flourish. Therefore, the foundation of a mosque for prayer, a *madrasah* for the dissemination of learning and a *khanqah* for the *sufi*-preachers were an urgent necessity for the establishment of Muslim society in Bengal. We may presume that the *masajid*, *madaris* and *khanqat* were also established in other important administrative centres such as Dewkot, Narkuti and Mahisun (Masida Santush) identified with Mahisantosh of present Rajshahi district. It may, therefore, be assumed that this conquest besides establishing the military power of the Turko-Afghans in this area, paved the way for the establishment of Muslim society and culture.

**Source: A. K. M. Yaqub Ali, *Aspects of Society and Culture of the Varendra, 1200-1576 A.D.* Rajshahi: M. Sajjadur Rahim, 1998, pp. 99-103); reproduced by Muhammad Mojlum Khan for BMRI website.**