

Bengal Society before the Advent of Islam

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Before the Muslim conquest of Bengal in the beginning of the thirteenth century A.D. Bengal was ruled by the Sena dynasty, which supplanted the Pala dynasty in the last quarter of the eleventh century A.D. The Buddhist supremacy during the Pala regime was replaced by the Hindu Brahmin ascendancy during the Sena period.

The first definite evidence of the prosperity of Buddhism in Bengal is furnished by the accounts of Fa-hien who visited India in the first decade of the fifth century A.D. But unfortunately the only place he visited in Bengal was Tamralipta, where he found twenty two monasteries with resident monks. Fa-hien stayed there for two years, and he describes Buddhism to be in a flourishing condition in this sea port of south Bengal. About 637 A.D he gives us a fairly good idea of the condition of Buddhism in Pundravardhan and Samatata. The establishment of the Buddhist Pala dynasty in Bengal about the middle of the eighth century A.D. and the long period of Pala rule for nearly four centuries saw the heyday of Buddhism not only in Bengal but probably also over a large part of eastern India. Bengal played an important role in the international sphere of Buddhism.

The Buddhist Universities of Nalanda and Vikramsila, though not situated in Bengal, had yet close association with Bengal, because they were situated in territories which formed an integral part of the Pala Kingdom, and several eminent sons of Bengal like Silbhadra and Atish Dipankar were head of these great educational-cum-religious establishments. In Bengal proper, the flourishing state of Buddhism is indicated by the establishments of a large number of famous monasteries and temples like Paharpur Bihar and Mainamati Bihar, etc. Royal patronage was extended to Buddhism between 750 and 1150 A.D. The Tibetan sources reveal that Tantric Buddhism flourished in Bengal under the Chandras and that King Gopichandra, who is associated with a particular form of mysticism, is said to have been born in the royal house of that place.

The Sena, coming from the conservative and orthodox Deccan, and upholding the Brahmanical system, were unlikely to perpetuate the social liberalism which had been encouraged during the Buddhist Pala period. The society the Senas created raised artificial barriers among peoples, high and low and thus inaugurated a social system which was diametrically opposed to the Pala society.

As a result the Buddhists fell victims to a systematic policy of persecution pursued by the Brahmans. Before the coming of the Muslims, Buddhism had been severely crippled. The persecution rose to its height in a village named Gajpur in the district of Hoogly. According to Vivekananda, the Buddhists were oppressed by Mumaril, Sankaracharja, Rananuja and Madhab to establish Brahman hegemony. Kumaril also was responsible for killing several thousands of Buddhists through the help of a King of Maharastra. "The way in which the low caste Hindus embraced Islam to escape from Brahmanical torture", R. C. Dutt remarks, "was a sad reflection on Hinduism." This mass conversion has also been reported by a European traveller Barbosa of the 14th century. This mass conversion to Islam took place obviously to escape from the tortures of the Brahmans and to enjoy the fruits of Islamic equality and justice. The Buddhists and the lower caste Hindus hailed the Muslim conquest of Bengal as deliverance from the high caste Hindu domination and persecution. That Buddhists in large number preferred Islam to Hinduism was because of the liberal and tolerant spirit of Islam, which accorded equal dignity and opportunities to the new converts along with its old votaries. This equality was unthinkable in Hindu society. That is why the Buddhists became inclined to Islam and their affinity with the Muslims in respect liberal outlook brought them closer to Islam.

Ibn Batutah, the fourteenth century Muslim traveller, in his account of Ceylon, writes about the Buddhists that they show respect for Muslim dervishes, lodge them in their houses and give them to eat, they live in their houses amidst their wives and children. This is contrary to the usage of the other Indian idolators who never make friends with Muslims, and never give them to eat or to drink out of their vessels.

The Tibetan Buddhist monk Taranath who visited Bengal in the 16th century, left an account of the Brahmanical tyranny of the Buddhists in the Sena period. He observed that the persecuted Buddhists welcome the Muslims and helped Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji in the conquest of Bengal.

But before the advent of the Muslims in Bengal some Buddhists, to escape from the massacre, accepted Hinduism and were merged with the Hindus and gradually the original character of Buddhism underwent a change. Apart from these facts, Buddhism had been suffering since long from its own inherent drawbacks. It is generally believed that Buddhism declined because of the destruction of Buddhist monasteries of Uddandapur, Vikramsila and Nalanda by the Muslim conqueror Bakhtiyar Khalji and also on account of the withdrawal of patronage and financial assistance of the Buddhists Pala Kings after their fall. It may be argued that destruction of some monasteries cannot obviously bring about extinction of a religion. There are, of course, some strong and plausible reasons which led to the liquidation of Buddhism from Bengal and some parts of India.

Buddhism declined when it surrendered to the rituals and practices which were denounced by Buddha. And as it bowed to beliefs and practices which were not inculcated by Buddha, it became practically indistinguishable from popular Hinduism.

The germs of the destruction of Buddhism lay with itself. Buddha, himself a devout soul, renounced worldly life and took to seclusion and monastic life and he dedicated his life to the development of Sangha or monasteries. He did not try to develop a social system, nor did he formulate laws or prescribe norms applicable to everyday practical life. Secluded monastic life is not suitable for all and sundry. So, Buddhism had no peace in the life of the common people. That is why Buddhism had no strong footing among people, who were only engaged in the worship of Buddha image and relics, and when patronage of the Pala rulers was withdrawn, Buddhism was badly affected, being parasitic by nature having no strength of its own. In striking contrast Islam has been endured and embraced within its fold innumerable votaries throughout the world, inasmuch as Islam has a definite and clear code of life for the observance of Muslims. But the Buddhists have not followed any uniform pattern of life and ideal. The learned Buddhists were engaged in philosophical discussions and reflections on the problems of life, whereas the illiterate common folk gave way to worship of deities and frivolous enjoyments.

A century or so before the advent of Islam in Bengal Buddhism had deteriorated into the Dharma cult, which as represented in the Sunya Puran, shows some of the essential features of the Mahayana creed shrouded in popular superstitions. When Buddhism declined in India and the idea of a higher life, inspired by a keen sense of morality and introspection, which was the dominant spirit of Buddhism, declined in to scepticism and sensuality, mystic rituals of Tantricism ruled Buddhist and Hindu communities all over India. In this Pre-Chaitanya age Zantrikism degraded into wanton vices and immorality; the Bramachari Zantrikism perpetuated the most heinous crimes in the name of religion and thereby they upset the moral fabric of society. The Sahajiya cult, which maintained that sexual love was the door-way to salvation, debased society and both the Sahajiya Vaishnavas became extremely demoralised. According to Satindra Mohan Chatterjee, Vaishnavism gave free rein to sexual enjoyments with women other than wives, which the Vaishnavas term as 'Parakiya prem'.

The Sahajiya cult owes its origin to the Bramachari Buddhist, and Kanhapada, a Buddhist scholar, who lived in the latter part of 10th century, was the first apostle of love songs of the Sahajiya cult in Bengal. This love is not a legitimate affair sanctioned by society with one's wife and it could not, according to this creed, reach a high degree of perfection. D. C. Sen observes, "It goes without saying that in their earnest efforts to attain salvation by worshipping young and beautiful damsels, many a youth turned moral wrecks in this country." It was Srichaitanya who condemned romantic sexual love, the prevailing practice of Sahajiya, and he was very strict with those who showed any imprudent tenderness towards young and beautiful women. Like Chaitanya Adwaita, Haridas and other devotees, who followed him, were unsparing in their hostile attitude to the Sahajiya Vaishnavas. In fact the Vaishnavas became debased to the extreme and produced disastrous results on the Vaishnava community.

In the context of this social, moral and religious decadence, the Muslim advent in Bengal is to be understood. In this perspective mainly the success and expansion of

Islam in Bengal is quite patent and clear. There is no denying the fact that Islam found a congenial soil in India as well as in Bengal on account of the general Hindu resentment against the prevailing social structure. In Bengal the members of departed Buddhism were still hot when the Muslims came. This is recorded in the ballads and legends of this period. The Muslim conquerors came as the champions of religion or dharma, in order to rescue the masses from oppression. The ballads and legends prove that a large section of people were ready to accept or welcome the Turkish or Pathan conqueror of Bengal. This fact also explains the large proportion of Muslims in the population of Bengal, even though it was far removed from the centre of Pathan or Mughal power.

Besides Brahmanical tyranny, Islam's demolition of artificial barriers of birth, rank, caste, colour and fortune attracted the down-trodden masses, who never could enjoy in practical life the benefits of equality and justice, although the Vedas and the Upanishads preached the Brotherhood of man which at best remained an article of faith, divorced from the realities of life.

"Supervicious beliefs and derogatory practices," Sukumar Sen observes, "were slowly destroying the initiative spirits of the people both high and low.....The gulf between the higher and the lower classes was widening. The Muslims in fact struck a stunning blow to the self complacency of the ruling classes and of the priesthood. The Muslim rulers and particularly Sufi saints worked for the emancipation of the common people from every kind of bondage and for inter-racial harmony and concord. In consequence a healthy and broad outlook of life pervaded the minds of the people and the whole society was morally and ethically elevated. "There are many evidences to prove," D. C. Sen observes, "that in the earlier days of Mohammedan conquest, the Hindus tried to assimilate the best elements of Islam in their religion. Some of the Mohammedan Pirs and Fakirs especially a band of Aulia who came from Arabia, Iran and other Muslim regions lent their support in bringing about this happy union in the 15th and 16th centuries."

About the role of the Sufis in creating understanding between Hindus and Muslims in their country, Atindra Nath Bose observes, "Islam knocked on the western gates of India, and the Sufis, inspired by the Islamic idea of equality, came as the torch bearers of a liberal folk philosophy.....Their spirit was free from these superstitions and rigidities which caused stagnation among the classical Indian and Islamic schools. Against the sterility of the orthodox systems, the new popular appeals awakened a fresh spiritual fervour and let loose great creative power which so long lay dormant. A new philosophy grew up based on the material of human values, it trusted in latent divinity of the human soul in universality of love, and in the dynamic power of mention. It released powerful spiritual energy hitherto pent up by social barriers among the dumb millions of the soil..."

Regarding the advent of the Muslim mystics in India and the impact their doctrine and teaching produced on Indian society and life, Rabindranath Tagore said, "The simple doctrine of Fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, the Mohammedans introduced in India appears to have stirred the people to its depths, for we found in

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in the fourteenth century in almost every part of India religious reformers rose in protest against the dry intellectualism of the Brahmanic orthodoxyand the poets of the age poured out emotions, social and religious in language which is as simple as it is fervent.

(Source: "The Advent of Islam in Bengal: It's Socio-Cultural Impact" by Muhammad Ghulam Rasul; published in *Society and Culture in Islam* edited by M. Inamul Hoque, Chittagong University, Department of Islamic History and Culture, 1986.)