

# Advent of Islam in Bengal: An Epigraphic Approach\*

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**Abstract.** A hinterland in the old world of Islam, the early history of diffusion of Islamic civilization in Bengal is shrouded with mystery. Though the maritime and trade contacts between Arab world and Bengal can be traced during the early period of Islam, the religious and cultural interaction between these two far-fetched lands started growing only after the Muslim conquest of the region in the early 13th century. After the establishment of Muslim rule in the region, the mass conversion to Islam took place over centuries in different forms and phases. The article attempts to make a major breakthrough in constructing an early religious and cultural history of Bengal using the substantively rich and hitherto untapped archaeological materials, namely epigraphic sources (i.e., Arabic inscriptions), scattered abundantly all over the region.

**Keywords:** Islam, Bengal, Epigraphy, Inscriptions.

## 1. Introduction

Historically speaking, Bengal played an important role in South Asia as well as in the old world. Its famous cotton fabric “Muslin” used to export in different parts of the world. The first Oriental encounter with European colonialism also started in this region. But it was the advent of Islam that left the deepest impact on this region, which the focus of this paper.

## 2. The Land

The early account of the spread of Islam in Bengal is 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 earliest Islamic sources from before the conquest of Bengal do not refer to this land by the name of Vaṅga or Bangala; they call it the kingdom of Ruhmī [1], 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 Ruhmī [2] Rahma[2] and Dahum[3] Of these, the closest to Bengali is Dharma (a spelling used by Sulayman al-Tajir[1]), a possible reference to a famous Bengali king Dharmapala (769-801). Sulaymān al-Tajir also noticed correctly Dharmapala's non-aristocrat i.e., humble origin. According to Ibn Khurradadhbih[1], Ruhmī was a vast kingdom which probably included in its frontiers the Kanja (Ganges) river and Abbina, was bordered by Kamrun (Kamrup) not far from Tibet and China, and was bountifully supplied with elephants, buffalo and Indian aloe wood. Its coast, according to Hudud al-‘Alam[4] included areas such as Nimyas, Samandar, Andras, Urshin (Orissa) and Harkand (ancient Harikela near Chandradvipain South Bengal). The port of Samandar which was presumably located somewhere in the Chittagong coast from Karnafuli estuary to the Choto Pheni estuary[4] (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.[5]

The kingdom of Ruhmi, according to most of these early sources, fought constantly with its neighbours, Ballaharā (Raja Ballahraya of the Rastrakuta 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

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in Shati'-jam (Chittagong) and Samandar. The recent discovery of two Abbasid coins in Bangladesh, one from Paharpur dated 172/788 from the time of Harun al-Rashīd (170-193/786-809) and the other from Mainamati minted during the reign of Abu Ahmad 'Abd-Allah al-Muntasir billāh (247-248/861-862), attests to this early Arab - Bengal trade link which undoubtedly speeded up the consolidation of Islam in the region.[4]

### **2.1. 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 40 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 as well as ethnic group in the Islamic world after the Arabs, if not first. Islam is not only the faith of the majority of the approximately two hundred and forty 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.

### **2.2. 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 cannot 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 north-western land route and the southern sea route of the Bay of Bengal (see map 1) through trade and commerce. Thus, the conquest by Muhammad Bakhtiyār 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. Minhaj Siraj al-Dīn, author of *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, mentions that, when Bakhtiyar 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.

After Islam was introduced in the coastal area of Bengal, it spread into neighbouring 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 Khudā Bakhsh Khan, an administrator of the area who established himself as its ruler toward the end of the Husayn Shahi period [1]. 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 neighbouring areas. It was, however, limited in nature, as it failed to establish the Arab Shafī'ī 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). In spite of the continuous European onslaught on Arab maritime activities in the Indian ocean that began in the early sixteenth century, Arab ships continued to sail from different ports to Bay of Bengal, particularly from Oman, trading mostly in the fine Bengali cotton fabric of Muslin until eighteenth century.

### **2.3. 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 Ghāzi Maṣjīd Inscription [no. 56] in Dinajpur, dated 865/1460; ins. no. 56). The first Islamic inscription from the reign of Sultan 'Alā' Dīn 'Alī Mardān 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-Muttafarr (victorious), convey the same message.

It was on 19 Ramaṣān 601 (10 May, 1205)[2] that Ikhtiyār al-Dīn Muhammad Bakhtiyār, an adventurer from the Turkish Khaljī tribe of mountainous central Afghanistan (known as Khaljistan), defeated Lakhmana 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 Raṛa and Barindra in an amazingly short time. This sudden Muslim victory was very surprising since Lakhmana Sena was considered a powerful king of eastern India who had previously conquered many neighbouring areas and towns such as Kalinga, Kamarupa, Puri (Purushattam-Khētra in ancient days) and Prayaga. He was, in fact, quite appreciated by a contemporary Muslim historian, Minhaj Siraj al-Dīn, 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 Bakhtiyar and Sultan 'Alā' Dīn 'Alī Mardān Khaljī both at Gaur and Delhi[6]. Marshal sports, such horse riding was never a part of popular culture of Bengal, nor did cavalry ever play any meaningful role in the defensive line of Bengal army. Another underlying factor 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.

The earliest recorded conversion to Islam took place among the indigenous tribe of Mech (most likely an abbreviated form of the Sanskrit word *Mlechchha* close to the ancient Greek idea of *Xenos* [ξένος]) inhabiting the foot hills of the Himalayas in the north of Bengal[6]. The newly converted Muslim 'Alī Mech, an influential tribal leader, played a key role in guiding Bakhtiyar Khaljī 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 [6]. Another factor contributing to the diffusion of Islam in this region was the role of religious personalities (e.g. *qadis*, 'ulamā', and sufis) and traders who interacted successfully with the Bengali peasants (see map no. 2 and 3).

### **2.4. The Emergence of the Independent Sultanate and the Spread of Islamic Culture**

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 travelled as far as Cairo and Herat on their diplomatic missions. It maintained ties with both East and West. The restored Ilyas Shahi dynasty ruled Bengal until 893/1487, when the leader of the *Habashis* or the

black palace guards (originally slaves from Africa), the eunuch Sultan Shahzada, murdered the last Ilyas Shahi sultan Fath Shah and seized power. After a brief period of anarchy, order was eventually restored. But the power gradually passed over to Sayyid ‘Alā’ al-Dīn Husayn Shah 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, nearly one hundred mosque inscriptions (see table of inscriptions) have been discovered from the Husayn Shahi 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 *Mahabharata*, 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.

### 3. References

- [1] s.v. “Ruhmī.”
- [2] Ahmad ibn Abī Ya‘qub, *Ta’rikh Ya‘qubi*, ed. M. Th. Houtsma (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960), 106.
- [3] Al-Hamadani, *Kitab al-Boldan*, ed. M. J. De Goeje (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 15.
- [4] *Sharaf al-Zaman Tahir Marvazi on China, the Turks and India*, ed. and trans. V. Minorsky (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1942), text 35.
- [5] Sulayman al-Tajir and Abu Zayd al-Sīrafī, *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.
- [6] *Kitab al Masalik wa ’l-Mamalik*, ed. M. J. De Goeje (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967), 63-67.
- [7] Trans. V. Minorsky (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 87.
- [8] 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.
- [9] M. Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*, vol. 1A (Riyadh: Imam Muhammad ibn Sa‘ud Islamic University, 1985), 33-35.
- [10] *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd. Ed., *ibid*, s.v. “Ruhmī.”
- [11] Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal*, 1: 225.
- [12] 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 Bakhtiyār’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 Bakhtiyar Khiljī’s Occupation of Gauṛa,” *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.
- [13] 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.
- [14] Minhaj Siraj, *Tabaqat-e-Nasiri*, ed. W. N. Lees (Calcutta: 1863-64), 149-53. Mech and various other tribal people still inhabit in the northern area of Kochbihar (about 25 mile from Alipur), West Bengal and occasionally support local insurgent groups aiming to regain old political identity, such as Kamrup and Kamta lands, that survived long side by side with Bengal sultanate.
- [15] See also Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, pp. 195-227.