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The Formation of Bengal Civilization: A Glimpse on the Socio-Cultural Assimilations Through Political Progressions in Bengal Delta

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1. Bengal Delta
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5. Medieval period

Abstract

The Bengal Delta is a place of many migrations, cultural transformations, invasions and religious revolutions since prehistoric time. With the help of archaeological and historical records, this essay present the hypothesis that, albeit there were multiple waves of large and small scale socio-cultural assimilations, every socio-political change did not brought equal formidable outcome in the Delta. The study further illustrates that, the majority of cultural components were formulated by Indigenous-Aryan-Buddhist assimilations in early phase, whereas the Buddhist-Aryan-Islamic admixtures in relatively forbearing and gracious socio-political background of medieval period contributed the final part in the formation of Bengal Civilization.

INTRODUCTION

The Bengal Delta (i.e. present Bangladesh and West Bengal in India) is the largest delta in the world (Akter *et al.*, 2016). Annual silt of hundreds of rivers together with a maze of river branches all over this Green Delta made it as one of the most fertile regions in the world. Additionally, amazing landscape, profound natural resources, comfortable climate condition as well as 3000 mm rainfall per year have made the Delta perfect for human habitation. Therefore, Bengal has attracted and encouraged migration of many social groups of different ethnicities and religious faiths since prehistoric time. With all the consequences, the delta is presently hosting

one of the most crowded human populations in the world with a density of more than 1100 people per square mile. The physiological features of Bengal delta is completely river based. River has tremendous effect on the formation of landscape, agriculture and other basic subsistence, trade and transport, as well as cultural pattern of its inhabitants. Since the prehistoric time, the Bengal Delta witnessed many migrations, cultural transformations, invasions and religious revolutions. The major socio-political reformation and changes in Bengal have been occurred in Vedic, Kushan, Parsian, Mauryan, Gupta, Pala, Sena, Sultanate, Mughal, European colonial period, and also after the partition of

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India in 1947. Additionally, archaeological and historical records demonstrate international trade and cultural contacts for millennia. The first European colonial encounter with the Orient was also occurred in Bengal Delta. There were certain socio-cultural conflicts and assimilation in every wave of migration and religious reformation in Bengal. However, following the Mauryans, it was mainly the Sultanate and Mughal periods (see: Eaton, 1996) that contributed the most in the formation of its civilization. Previously introduced Buddhism was also a great contributor in the Delta before the arrival of Islam, but the Buddhists were literally vanquished by force of rigidly caste-discriminating orthodox Hinduism in the twelfth-century (Chowdhury, 2011), and therefore, mass people in the delta attracted to more egalitarian and accommodating Islamic way of life in following period. Moreover, the delta was transformed into a cosmopolitan imperial power for over 550 years of Sultanate and Mughal rules.

In a long period of Muslim rules, the Bengali people in medieval period built a civilization of social harmony, religious tolerance, liberalism, and a rich culture with welfare and humanity. On the other hand, during the European colonial oppression for about 200 years, Bengal Delta had to experience volumes of social fractions and religious divisions (see: Chatterji, 2002). Throughout various positive-negative formations and reformations, present Bengal society and culture can therefore be addressed as the product of multi-scale development of socio-cultural assimilations since prehistoric time. This is universal that the level of a civilization indicates the status of common people, their livelihood, social harmony, cultural organizations and institutions that pass from one generation to another, and

every human generation experience the socio-political and cultural background of their preceding generations. In the same way, Bengal Delta has also witnessed this universal norm while developing its civilization. With the testimony of archaeological and historical records, this paper is aimed to explore those experience and socio-cultural transformations in Bengal Delta which were the great promoters to the formation of Bengal Civilization.

BENGAL BEFORE THE MEDIEVAL RULES

Evidences of prehistoric and protohistoric human habitation and culture have been discovered in many parts of the Bengal basin. Recording of 162 lower Palaeolithic sites in West Bengal province in India (Ahsan, 2015) clearly defines the human habitation in Bengal basin since the earliest human occupation in South Asia. Moreover, at least 84 identified Neolithic sites (Ahsan, 2015) in Gangetic Plain and West Bengal indicate the sedentary settlements and well as the continuation of Chalcolithic and urban culture in Bengal Delta. Prehistoric data from present Bangladesh region, especially stone and fossil wood artefacts from the Lalmai hills of Comilla district (Chakrabarti, 2001: 32), Chaklapunji Tea Garden of Habiganj district (Roy, 2002) and Palkichara Tea estate of Moulvibazar district (Siddiq & Habib, 2016) also support prehistoric human habitation in the Delta. Yet, detail information about prehistoric life in Bengal basin because of the unavailability of prehistoric mound or human skeleton.

Albeit physical and linguistic anthropological studies (e.g. Gadgil *et al.*, 1998; Agrawal *et al.*, 2008; Blench, 2008) illustrate that there were multiple wave of migration as well as several ethnic groups inhabited in prehistoric South Asia, no prehistoric objects relate



Figure 1. Location and basic topography of Bengal Delta

themselves to certain regional cultures. Following the Neolithic, there were very rich human occupations in the Delta during Chalcolithic period (e.g. Banerjee *et al.*, 1992) and urbanization in Iron Age.

Evidently, almost all socio-cultural literature on Bengal Delta begins with Vedic period when the earliest written language, 'Sanskrit', started in South Asia. Geographically, Vedic and later Vedic periods were concerned with the northern and middle part of present India and Pakistan, excluding Bengal Delta. However, from the Mauryan period onward, greater Bengal, including Orissa, Bihar, and Assam, became a part of the Mauryan Empire. During this period, states were tribal in origin; kings had no permanent administration due to limited sovereignty and very narrow sources of revenue (Altekar, 1977). Nevertheless, the size of the states in the later Vedic period (1500–1000 BC) increased considerably.

Although, the Gangetic plains had remained out of bounds to the Vedic tribes because of thick forest cover, the use of iron axes and ploughs became widespread after 1000 BCE. Consequently, the jungles could be cleared with ease and the Vedic Aryans started to settle at the western Gangetic plains (Kulke & Rothermund, 1998: 39-40). In the following period, many old Aryan tribes gradually formed comparatively larger political units which were called *Janapads* (small kingdoms). Kings owned the divine status in later Vedic texts (Sircar, 1974) and they were considered the divine owner of their lands and started collecting a regular land tax.

The Mauryan Empire (320-185 BC) was, literary, the first welfare state in India. It regulated the market price of commodities and prevented fraud in their measurement. Producers and traders were also protected by the state through provision of safe roads and warehouses. The state also promoted agriculture by facilitating irrigation. Public hygiene and moral welfare were among the priority considerations of the state. During the Mauryan dynasty, ancient India developed an efficient administrative system that diversified taxes in cash, kind, and labour (Altekar, 1977: 265-266), resembling many principles of modern bureaucracy. Written procedures and record keeping was also a seminal feature of the Mauryan administration. Above all, the Mauryan Empire was an elitist meritocracy. Because of nobility of Buddhism, it is likely that, there was no differentiation between the civil and military positions in the Mauryan administration.

In the post-Mauryan period, political clash was a common culture in South Asia. Local administrative elites often betrayed the king's bidding for their own kingdoms. Later, , the Gupta Empire (AD 300-600)

gained considerable stronghold in Bengal Delta albeit giving some power to the local bodies such as the village *panchayats* (bodies), town and district councils, as well as the local representatives had some decisive power (Altekar, 1977: 341-342). However, the orthodox Brahmanism and its discriminating caste system gained social dominance in this time.

Originated in Bengal (Bagchi, 1993: 36), the Pala Empire (750 to 1162 AD) was the great promoters of classical Indian philosophy, literature, painting and sculpture as well as peace and prosperity after the long civil-anarchy following the Gupta rules in the Delta. The Senas, in contrast, came from the conservative and orthodox Deccan (Chowdhury, 2011) and were not likely to exercise the social liberalism practiced in over 400 years by the Buddhist Palas. In their short period of about 50 years, they brought social disorder and strictly conservative Hindu caste system in the Delta. The previously flourished Buddhist people groups were literally wiped out from Bengal during this period.

SOCIO-CULTURAL FORMATIONS BEFORE MEDIEVAL ERA

Regional variations impacted by local resources are likely to be common in Bengal since prehistoric period. Especially, the combination of thick rainforests, rivers, plains and hills encouraged people to develop a way of life that was different than central, north and western parts of South Asia. Contemporary archaeological discoveries of West Bengal in India and Bangladesh (see: Gupta, 1962; Chakrabarti, 2001; Ahsan, 2015; Jahan, 2016) have furnished evidence of a comparatively advanced pre-Aryan culture and civilization in Bengal. On the other hand, during its long eastward march of over one thousand years, Aryan culture had lost its virility by the time it reached Bengal (Chowdhury, 2011). Moreover, Aryan tradition functionally could not able to cross the western part of the Bengal region. Evidently, the eastern and south-eastern parts of the Delta never felt attraction to the Aryans due to their material and religious richness.

Family was the central unit of social and political organization in ancient period. The family was both patriarchal and matriarchal type where the eldest male or female was considered the head of family. Through the examples of presently survived pre-Aryan people groups such as Santal (e.g. Khan *et al.*, 2012), Munda (Siddiq & Habib, 2016), and Khasia (e.g. Khan *et al.*, 2010), it is evident that the kinship was normally hereditarily basis. Tribe and chiefdom also played significant roles in overall social structure and tribal head or chiefdom played significant role for ensuring social stability, disciplines and solidarity. There was no

caste system or social classification in pre-Aryan Bengal. Conversely, the introduction of the concept of tax based state, orthodox Hindu religious idea, and social classification (caste system) according to religion and creed can remark the arrival of Aryan tribes in Bengal.

Different archaeological records indicate that religion was a central institution in socio-cultural structure in Bengal since prehistory. Consequently, every political change brought certain religious transformation in the Delta as well as heavily influenced and transformed social institutions and life pattern of mass people. The Aryan tribal states could not bring considerable religious change in major part of Bengal (Chowdhury, 2011) as pre-Aryan norms were rich in humbleness and strong in their roots. While the social system was experiencing its optimum pressure, disorders and divisions because of gradual expansion of different Aryan tribal estates in the later period, it was Mauryans who first brought genuine peace and prosperities in a common ground with the help of their centralized administration as well as the teaching of tolerance, equality and middle way of Buddhism. The major ancient archaeological remains in Bengal Delta still do not represent pre or post Mauryan Brahmin culture originated from Aryan tribes, but Mauryan and post Mauryan reigns when Buddhism was the central religion in the formation of Bengali society and culture. The massive archaeological sites such as Mahasthangarh (Hossain, 2006), Wari-Bateshwar (Haque, 2001), Paharpur (Chowdhury, 2015a), Bhitagarh (Jahan, 2015), Mainamati (Rashid, 2015) in Bangladesh or distinguished Nalanda (Sastri, 1986) in West Bengal are some noble marks of Mauryan and post-Mauryan Buddhist social formation in Bengal Delta.

Following decline of the Mauryans, the Iranian originated northern Indian Aryan orthodox Brahmanism eventually took its deep root in Bengal with intense patronization of Gupta Emire (and later in the short period of Sena rules). Since then, the society was divided into caste groups. Worship of different natural power was commonly practiced in pre-Aryan period; however, the systematic rituals and worship of presently known orthodox deities in Bengal were actually introduced since the Gupta rule in the Delta.

Natural resources like wood, soil, reed and bamboo were among most common architectural materials. Until the Mauryan rules, mud bricks were commonly used to build wall, buildings, and religious structures even in large cities. Fired brick become popular from Gupta Empire and following period. Brick architectures were common all over the Bengal during very long period of

Pala Empire (Bagchi, 1993). Because of scarcity, stone was not an architectural material albeit it was popular imported material used for making sculptures of different gods and goddess since ancient period. Along with the weavers, potters and handcrafters, all common people were associated with agriculture which was the main source of economy and basic subsistence in the states. Trade was religiously discouraged mainly from late Gupta period. The women perhaps did not enjoy very high social status as only few epigraphic sources hardly mentioned the name of king's mother or wife. Institutional education system was not very wide in pre-Muslim rules in Bengal. Very few religious centres have been archaeologically discovered which were serving the teaching and practices, mainly of Buddhist philosophical sects until Sena rule. Among them, Paharpur Mahavihara (Chowdhury, 2015a), Nalanda Mahavihara (Sastri, 1986), Shalban Mahavihara (Rashid, 2015), numerous Buddhist religious centers in Dinazpur district, and Savar, Dhaka (Hoque *et al.*, 1996) are notable.

MEDIEVAL BENGAL WITH ITS WELFARE STATES

Medieval period in Bengal is marked with the arrival of Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji, a central Asian Turkic military general of Qutb al-Din Aibak in 1203 AD (see detail: Eaton, 1996; Chaurasia, 2002). Besides the political power, Muslims came to the region with two other major identities; traders and religious preachers. With their humble and extraordinary philosophical activities, these traders and saints also contributed shaping socio-cultural institutions in Bengal even before the establishment of Muslim rule.

The sultans brought a wide socio-economical change in Bengal rejuvenating many welfare based institutions. Some of them were even maintained in Mauryan Empire (see: Eaton, 1996). In developing their administration, the sultans of Turkic origin at a time followed the administrative procedures from the Abbasid caliphs to maintain Islamic tradition as well as continue the indigenous systems to secure the welfare and social justice. Yet, the real credit of Turkic rulers in Bengal was to give equality to every citizen in the Delta. People from all religions enjoyed social security and state facility. For example, the prime minister (wazir) during the reign of Husain Shah was a Hindu. It is noteworthy that, in medieval India, the Wazir was responsible for all the civil servants and the controller-general of finance of the military department (Qureshi, 1971: 80-81). The list of several welfare and state departments indicates considerable increase in public service during Turkish

sultanate period. Alongside of the routine administrative services, there were departments for social charity, agriculture, record keeping, public relations, market regulation, and a separate police service for preserving law and order and executing judicial decisions (Chaurasia, 2002: 135-139).

The Mughal administration, in the second half of medieval Bengal, perhaps was the most successful and most centralized administration in the history of Bengal and India as a whole. The Mughals came from the Central Asian region and brought their past administrative experience with them and utilized it to build and run the vast Indian empire. The Mughals attempted to conquer India several times, but finally succeeded under the leadership of Babur, the founder of the Mughal dynasty (Karim, 1995; Edwardes & Garrett, 1995: 1-22). Babur was known as a master tactician and a great warrior. His forefathers included legendary warriors like Tamerlane and Chengiz Khan.

The unique contribution of the Mughal administration was the introduction of a unified grading structure called the *mansabdari* system (Edwardes & Garrett, 1995: 158). The civil and military services were integrated under the *mansabdari* system. Personal ranks varied with the importance of job responsibilities. Meritorious persons were awarded higher rank than their actual contingent strength. The *mansabdari* system made the Mughal administration a bureaucratic organization which was followed by the colonial British rulers (Karim, 1995). The Mughals also established checks and balances at every level of the administration, which helped them ensuring good governance (Edwardes & Garrett, 1995). Moreover, citizens of all religions and cultures enjoyed equal social status. Regardless of socio-cultural background, anyone with skill and quality was able to take higher position.

Several rulers are praised and glorified by historians in all parties; however, the Turkic origin Husain Shah in sultanate period, the Afgan origin Sher Shah of Sur dynasty, and the Iranian origin Shaista Khan in Mughol period, are perhaps the notable ones who contributed the most to shape socio-economy and culture in medieval Bengal.

Alauddin Husain Shah (1494-1519)'s reign is considered as the golden period of Bengal. His tolerance and liberalism was so praised by all social groups that even contemporary Hindu poet Vijaya Gupta mentioned him as the incarnation of lord Krishna (Chowdhury, 2015b). Husain Shah strongly patronized art, literature, Sufism, thousands of charity organizations, and overall social liberalism in all across the Delta. He even patronised Hindu religious movement (O'Connell, 2011). Moreover, the Bangla version of Mahabharata,

one of the two holiest Hindu texts in Bengal was prepared under the patronage of his two governors. The institution of jiziyah (security tax for non-Muslims) did not prevail in Husain Shahi Bengal (Chowdhury, 2015b). Therefore, it is likely that Husain Shah and his successors have strengthened the foundation of the state on the basis of the support and sympathy of social groups regardless of creed and status.

Sher Shah (see: Matta, 2005), the founder of the Sur dynasty in Eastern India, established peace and order in the empire. He offered loans to farmers to encourage agriculture and assured the land right of the general people for the first time by introducing the system of Patta (deed of right) and Kabuliyat (deed of agreement). The police system was improved and the village headmen become responsible for the maintenance of peace in their respective areas. Sher Shah made liberal grants for charitable purposes, opened free public kitchens for the poor, founded madrasas, mosques, erected hospitals and laid out gardens. Within a short period of only five years (1540-1545AD) in his office, a network of excellent roads with sarais (inn), mosques, temples, advanced communication was came into light in Bengal. His most important road was the Sarak-i-Azam (Grand Truck Road) which ran for 3000 miles from Sonargaon to Multan via Agra, Delhi and Lahore, with shade-giving trees on both sides. This road came to be known as the grand trunk road in the Colonial period.

As a Mughal subahdar, Shaista Khan ruled Bengal for 24 years, between 1664 and 1688 AD (Karim, 1995). He basically promoted trade and commerce, and made the roads and rivers secured from robbers. He also granted the foreign companies privileges albeit the European companies sometimes abused their privileges. He was also a promoter of development and prosperity in Bengal Delta. Archaeological remains such as Chhota Khatra, Boro Khatra, Lalbagh fort, the tomb of Pari Bibi (fairy lady), the Chawk Bazar mosque, Seven Domed Mosque, the Khizrpur mosque also signify the prosperity in his reign (see: Hasan, 1987b). Contemporary and later historians have praised Shaista Khan for his superb generalship, his administration of justice and promotion of the welfare of the people. They have also emphasized on his liberality, charity and religions pursuits. During his time, the price of grain was extremely low and living was so accessible for mass people.

SOCIO-CULTURAL ASSIMILATIONS IN MEDIEVAL BENGAL

Medieval rulers in Bengal gave priorities to establish social cohesion and higher achievement of people. Those who are really competent, they got their social

position according to their merit and quality. The Muslim nobles constituted an influential powerful class in the society. However, it was not happened by exploiting others. Every person was treated both socially and economically as a citizen, not by religious or ethnic identity.

Women were not equal to men in the society, albeit they enjoyed honourable and sometimes very powerful positions in state. Social status of women was quite honourable during Mughal period. Many mosques and monuments are still in existence which were built by or in the memory of noble ladies. There were also some noble women who cultivated arts, literature, music and sciences. The system of 'sati', in which - widows were burning alive along with their cremated dead husbands, was widely exercised by Hindus (Bhat, 2015), albeit rulers in different period took initiatives to prevent 'sati' system. As like other parts of the world, slavery was also common in Bengal since early stage of medieval society (Mukherjee, 2009). The slaves were traded in different urban markets. Albeit the life of slaves was completely controlled by their masters, any slave with skill could hold higher social status. In medieval Bengal, even many sultans were slaves in their early life, yet slavery was socially discouraged in the later period of Muslim rules.

Besides of helping the farmers providing loans and state help, many types of irrigation system and canals were created to secure agricultural production. Land was cultivated by the peasants who contributed the largest share of the revenue of the state. Paddy, wheat, sugarcane, indigo, tobacco, cotton and silk were the main agricultural products in the Delta. Besides, market controlling and ensuring the fairness of product price was a major success in the prosperity of medieval life. The prices of almost all of the commodities were low. Life was so accessible that, during the reign of Shaista Khan, about 150 kg (8 maund) rice could be bought with just 1 taka (Karim, 1995). Along with agriculture, trade became a major part of state economy. National and international voyage was a common part of life in Bengal. Monetary system was very strong as every ruler introduced either silver or gold coin in this period. Over 15 mint towns (Eaton, 1996: 317-322) in clearly indicate that Bengal has never witnessed any rich and strongest economy as like medieval period. Industries also developed to a considerable extent. The state encouraged various industries such as textile industry, the dyeing industry, sugar industry, metal industry, stone and brick works and the paper industry.

Like all other periods, the highest ranking people were the richest and lived luxurious live. The middle class

was constituted mainly by the traders, merchants, bankers, businessmen and the physicians. This middle class people generally led simple and moderate lives. Mainly the cultivators and handcrafters constituted the base of the society. They often had to struggle with the hardships, caused by flood, famine, and other natural calamities albeit there were initiatives from the state (see: Chaudhuri, 2008). On the other hand, the relationship between different religious groups was harmonious and cordial. It is undisputed that the cultural unity during medieval rules, especially in Mughal period was the greatest success in Bengal Delta has ever experienced.

Two types of institutions perhaps contributed the most in education, philosophy, social liberalism and equality, humanity, cultural innovation, and eventually in the formation of Bengal Civilization in medieval period were Madrasah and Khanqah (for detail: Eaton, 1996: 268-303). Madrasah was introduced in Bengal during the early stage of Turkic rules. Many large and popular madrasahs were founded all over the Bengal Delta during both in Sultanate and Mughal period. Madrasahs was the foundation of the first systematic, advanced, and universal education in Bengal. Some medieval rulers prepared curriculum for madrasah education which remained effective for over a century. In the early period of medieval era, education was based on language, theology, Islamic law and philosophy; however, Mughal madrasah education was very advanced with the scientific disciplines like astronomy, mathematics, human physiology, medicine, geography and biology.

Khanqah, on the other hand, was the house or abode of Islamic saints known as sufis and dervishes in Bengal (Eaton, 1996: 71, 228). First introduced in the 13th century by the Persian sufis, *khanqahs* played an important role for the social and cultural development in medieval Bengal. Contemporary historical records illustrate that every rulers built many mosques, madrasahs and *khanqahs* in their reigns. Khanqahs were so important that, six of the thirteen inscriptions of the first one hundred years of Muslim rule in Bengal (1204-1304) bear the testimony of *khanqahs*. The Sian inscription (dated 1221 AD) is the first epigraphic evidence of a *khanqah* in Bengal, which is also the second Islamic inscription in the region (Waiz, 2015). Khanqah was a spiritual institution based on human understanding and feeling. Every khanqah had a *langarkhana* or free kitchen attached to it that provided food to the poor and the needy. People of all religions, races, caste and creed in medieval period used to visit *khanqahs* for spiritual healing and satisfaction, which

truly enabled the Islamic saints to reach the common people and understand their feelings and attitudes.

During the medieval period, there was a revolution in Bengal art, architecture and literature. The sultans primarily tried to follow the basic principle of Islamic architecture; however, they eventually established an architectural pattern with the mixture of Indo-Arabic flavour in the rainy Bengal. Architectures were built mainly with brick and clay. In the later period, the Mughals brought the total innovation and renaissance in art and architecture. They started massive architectural pattern with the admixture of Persian and central Asian flavour in previously practiced Indo-Arabic Islamic architecture in Bengal. It is also evident that medieval rulers also built and patronised temples and shrines all across the Delta (Eaton, 1996: 228-266). Hundreds of mosques and terracotta mosques (Hasan, 1981), temples and shrines (see: Ghosh, 2005), monuments (detail in: Hasan, 1987b; Alamgir, 2011), bridges and culverts (Alamgir, 2015), cities (e.g. Hasan, 1987a; Khatun, 2006; Roychoudhury, 2012) and mint towns (Eaton, 1996: 317) all across the Bengal still glorify the medieval golden age. Medieval Bengal is also praised for its contribution in Bangla language and literature, as because modern Bangla language took its form during this time. Many of the rulers had a famous poets, foreign travellers and historians in their courts. Many ancient Sanskrit texts and important were also translated into Bangla, Arabic and Persian language.

BENGAL IN COLONIAL AND POST-COLONIAL RULES

It is Bengal that was too unfortunate to give European the colonial ground in South Asia as the colonisation brought the actual chaos and rapid destructions in cultural variations and long rooted traditional socio-cultural and economical practices in the Delta. The colonial period certainly created wide gap between state and its common citizens which is still in effect. The officials in colonial period were recruited only from the noble Englishmen (?), granting them much greater power, status, training, and pay (Misra, 1980). The beginning of British bureaucratic absolutism was virtually a process of depoliticization whereby the bureaucracy took up the power. The old aristocracy was on the wane and a new middle class group emerged in the society based on trade, commerce, and European education. This new class generally collaborated with the colonial administration (Misra, 1980: 314-315) and helped the colonial continuation. These emaciated old aristocracy along with the submissive and opportunist middle class helped the colonialists to play a definitive role in the affairs of the society (see: Joshi, 2010). Mughal administration was basically an urban-based

administration; in contrast, the British deliberately replace the traditional land ownership with a root level administrative authority. This expansion also brought the fractions in traditional social institutions and brought social disorders.

Previously enjoyed liberal life, especially of the mass people, was shattered the new system of land distribution and revenue collection. European colonialists never settled down in India and never adopt the local culture. Therefore, there was always a major distance between Europeans and local people in Bengal since the beginning. In the early stage of their rule, the British created a landlord (*Jamindar*) class who were the mediators between government agents and the locals (see: Joshi, 2010). They decided the rate of revenue in their territory and become the absolute controller of mass people. Consequently, there were inevitable gaps between state and common citizens. Colonial revenue system adversely affected the communal character of the village. The self-sufficient economy and communal social life and changed the nature of village administration. The colonial rule also brought the concepts of industrialization and urbanization which worked as the factors for the growth of new social classes with new social values. This led to the change in the pattern of social stratification in the society.

Albeit badly affected by colonial reformation, on the other hand, the Bengal Delta at least enjoyed a hundred years of supremacy hosting the colonial capital of Calcutta in the region. Providing that, many nobles in Bengal become the prominent figures and as well as many socio-cultural tradition in Bengal spread all over India. Due to the rapid infrastructural improvement like railway system, local products also reached comparatively extended region than before. It was also possible for the peasants to sell their commodities in long-distance markets, and therefore, agriculture gradually became commercialized (see: Chaudhuri, 2008). One important impact of the British rule was felt in the increase of mobility among the common people. The system of better communications actually gave the people opportunity to move from one area to the other, albeit the great majority of wagers were still born and died in their village.

While the overall intention of British rule in India was concentrated to get profit from the administration and business, none of colonial state policies was indented to contribute positive cultural construction and social solidarity. To achieve their goal, the British eventually came to trigger the religious division. Aiming this, they attempted build the image of Muslim rulers (whom they overthrew) as the destroyers of Hindu society in one hand, and glorify the previously established Buddhist

era with an over glorified and over prosperous era contrasting the image of medieval period. Contemporary archaeological research initiatives (see: Chakrabarty, 2009) and historical books (e.g. Stewart, 1813) written by mainly the British writers, clearly witness this intention. They divided the history of India into three major periods - Ancient, Mohammedan, and Modern. The 'Modern' was described with the virtual conquest (?) by English; the 'Mohammedan' was the whole period of Islamic rule which has been showed as the 'invasion' and with a similar illustration of chaotic European medieval; and the 'Ancient' was whole period of India before the Islamic rule, albeit there were different religious practices and significant socio-political progressions since pre-Aryan period.

Crimes and corruption became rampant in British rule. Inequality, discrimination, oppression were the fundamental output of the colonial ruling policy. Old order of the rural Bengali and tribal groups in every corner was in complete decline (detail in: Hasan & Gupta, 2004). In only 200 years of British administration, there have been tremendous changes and fractions in harmonious social and cultural practices in Bengal Delta. Except for the jute industry and two universities, there is nothing that the colonial rule has contributed which can signify the Bengal Civilization. The Europeans in India never adopted the local norms and values which could help cultural assimilation. Instead, the British administration became an important vehicle of colonial aggression and unique way of torturing and pressuring common citizens, causing significant economic, social, cultural, religious and philosophical fractions and divisions in Bengali society. The negative consequences of 'divide and rule' policy of British rulers in India, the harmonious Bengal society, which was developed in long and balanced medieval social liberalism, faced its ultimate fraction with the issue of the Partition of Bengal (BongoVongo) in 1905 and its re-unification in 1911 (see: Johnson, 1973). British were successfully able to divide the Bengal society, and in their concluding stage, Bengal Delta was eventually divided into two societies basing mainly on Islam and orthodox Hindu communalism (detail in: Chatterji, 2002). The division became more evident following the formation of India and Pakistan in 1947 as civil wars, social clashes and regional grouping were spread all over in South Asia. Eastern part of Bengal Delta became the East Pakistan and Western part of the Delta remained a provincial state of India. Later in the Pakistan period, and following the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, social division of religious and regional identity has been a focused issue in both West

and Eastern part of Bengal Delta. Affected by the values of religious majority and current political boundaries, the two sides of Bengal seem acting as two separate nation states in present history, albeit all people groups in Bengal Delta has been sharing a common geographical, economical and socio-cultural value for millennia.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Aryanisation was the first landmark in the formation of the new 'personality' of non-Aryan indigenous cultural character. It is evident by various Neolithic and Chalcolitic settlements that pre-Aryan population of Bengal built sophisticated, organized and civilized life (see: Banerjee *et al.*, 1992; Chakrabarti, 2001; Ahsan, 2015). Later, the Aryan tradition gradually spread its roots in Bengal albeit facing local resistance and modifications (Chowdhury, 2011). A major part of Bengal population, especially in the East, literally remained uninfluenced by caste based Aryan culture and afterwards widely accepted the moderate way of Buddhist tradition during Mauryan period. Although there were some cultural conflicts in early period of Gupta era, until the orthodox extremism during comparatively short-lived Sena rule, on the ground of the indigenous tradition, the common people of Aryan and Buddhist philosophy, norm, rituals, art and architecture assimilated through time and developed the a tradition which has been the symbolic form of Bengal Civilization. They were the root level people in the Bengal Delta, who later welcomed and embraced the egalitarian Islamic norms and tradition at the hands of Muslim saints and teachers (*sufis*).

As like Aryans, the Muslims also came in South Asia with the aim of settlement and spread of the faith. However, contrasting the Aryans, the principles of equality and social liberalism in Islam earned great influence over the root level people who were facing various socio-cultural oppressions in that time. Therefore, Islam has been the most widely accepted and culturally rooted foreign religion in Bengal Delta.

As the rulers adopted the local culture by settling down in Bengal, essentially there was tolerance in cross-religious faiths, and administration was basing of welfare (Karim, 1995; Eaton, 1996; Matta, 2005; Chowdhury, 2011). Consequently, in the period of over 550 years, Aryan, Buddhist, and Islamic norms and philosophy naturally experienced some positive admixture and influence on one another. Besides of the life-way, thoughts, and customs, the process of mutual assimilation also appears in architectural, numismatic, and various archaeological, historical, and literary sources in medieval Bengal. Alongside their

contribution to mass people, the philosophy and methods of Muslim sufis and saints had strong effect on non-Islamic religions as well as in the formation of some religious movements in Bengal, especially the Bhakti movement (the Neo-Vaishnavism) led by Sri Chaitanya (O'Connell, 2011). Similarly, local philosophical thoughts also influenced the Islam in Bengal. For example, the worship of Buddha's footprints was transformed into veneration of the holy Prophet's footprints (qadam rasul) and the concept of panch-Pir (five saints) in eastern Bengal (Chowdhury, 2011) is thought to be inspired by the five Bodhisattvas (five development stage of Buddha). In this way of transformation and adoption, Muslims in medieval Bengal developed an (Bengali) Islamic way of life, which was different in form and practice than the Muslims in other regions in India, central Asia or Arab world. With some admixtures, both Sultanate and Mughal rulers in Medieval Bengal were the greatest promoters from whom the Bengal Civilization achieved its mature stage.

The Europeans, mainly of Portuguese, Dutch, British, French, and Denis tried to establish their control over Bengal and other coastal region of India, but it were the British who achieved ultimate success. It is true that during the colonial rule, iron and coal mining were expanded, development occurred in tea and cotton plantations, and a vast rail network was constructed (Bhagat, 2004: 5-6); yet, all of these colonisers always remained as foreigners as they never indented to involve in socio-cultural practice, but only making wealth and money. Albeit the colonial India became "the jewel in the British crown" (Bhagat, 2004: 5) in the eyes of some British historians, in the reality however, the lands, rights, and livelihoods of the rural population had to be sacrificed to commercial ventures of colonisers; and colonial way of industrialization led the Bengalis to socio-cultural conflicts deepening deprivation in cities and towns.

Tangibly, the indicators of Bengal Civilization represent to the prosperous cities, towns and ports, classic and terracotta architectures, cultural and art objects, sculptures, inscriptions, coins, as well as hundreds of philosophical, religious and literature books and texts. Intangibly, the indicators represent its hospitality, socio-religious liberalism, agriculture, river-based livelihood, myths and oral histories, wide variation of uncountable folk stories and songs, traditional customs, rituals, and festivals. These tangible and intangible components are indisputable signifiers of Bengali culture and in some or more extant they are different from culture and civilization in other parts of India and South Asia as a whole. Considering these tangible and intangible

cultural components, it is now evident that the Aryan, Mauryan and the Golden Medieval periods aided the most for socio-cultural assimilation and the pathway to the formation of a Civilization in Bengal Delta; at least archaeological records and historical evidences signify this idea.

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Bengal Medeniyeti'nin Oluşumu: Bengal Deltasında Siyasi İlerlemeler Yoluyla Sosyo-Kültürel Asimilasyonlara Bir Kısa Bakış

Abu Bakar Siddiq ve Ahsan Habib

Anahtar Kelimeler:

1. Bengal Delta
2. Sosyo-kültürel asimilasyon
3. Aryan
4. Maurya
5. Ortaçağ dönem

Özet

Bengal Deltası, tarih öncesi çağlardan beri birçok göç, kültürel dönüşümler, istilalar ve dini devrimlerin bulunduğu bir yer olmaktadır. Arkeolojik ve tarihsel kayıtların yardımı ile bu araştırma, büyük ve küçük ölçekli sosyo-kültürel asimilasyonların birden çok dalgası olsa da, her sosyo-politik değişim Delta'da aynı dereceli sonuçlara yol açmadığının hipotezini ortaya koymaktadır. Bu çalışma ayrıca, kültürel bileşenlerin çoğunluğunun ilk evrede yerli-Aryan-Budist asimilasyonları tarafından formüle edildiği ve Ortaçağ döneminin hoşgörülü ve zarif sosyo-politik arka planında yer alan Budist-Aryan-İslam harmanin Bengal Medeniyet oluşumunun nihai görevlerini yapmasını göstermektedir.