

Islam in Bangladeshi Society



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Introduction

South Asian region has a long history of Islamic tradition. Development of Islam in the region was accompanied by a number of important historical events that stipulated the contemporary state of affairs in religious field. The Bengali region, which is now a territory of Bangladesh, presents a huge interest for research. Thus, the paper below will research the roots of Islamic influence on Bangladeshi society.

Present state of Islam in Bangladesh

On the Indian subcontinent Islam is the second largest religion after Hinduism. Though in India only 12% of the population is Muslims, whereas in Bangladesh and Pakistan, the neighboring countries, Islamic religion is a dominant one. The Constitution of Bangladesh establishes Islam as a state religion, but any citizen is free to choose what religion to practice. Government tries to respect this provision; however some religious minorities as Hindu, Christians, or Buddhist, may still be subject of religious discrimination. Translation of the word Bangladesh is “the country of Bengal.”

Republic of Bangladesh - overview

The People’s Republic of Bangladesh is located in the South Asian region. Geographically it is almost totally surrounded by India, except for a border with Myanmar on southeast and southern coastline on the Bay of Bengal. The country covers an area of 147,570 square kilometers and has a tropical climate (Ahmed, 1964: 290). The population of Bangladesh as of 2008 is about 150 million citizens, which makes it the most densely populated country in the world. During the first half of the 20th century the population of Bangladesh increased by more than 45 percent, whereas during the second half it tripled. It is an interesting fact that the Bangladeshi population is ranked third among all the Muslim-majority countries, but it is a little smaller than the Muslim minority in India.

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Appearance of Islam in the Bengali region

According to archaeological discoveries the greater Bengali region was inhabited about three thousand years ago. At that time the region was settled by Tibeto-

Burman and Dravidian peoples. The region was basically divided into a number of territorial units that were ruled by various kingdoms and empires from the region and from abroad. Between 4th and 6th centuries CE the region fell under influence of Hindu Guta Empire when the Indo-Aryans arrived there. Afterwards there was a flourishing kingdom Bengali Shashanka established, not living long though. In the 8th century the Buddhist Pala dynasty was instituted and it was the most ascendant period of the region. However, in the 12th century the Buddhist Pala dynasty had to give up in favor of the Sena Dynasty. It was the point of Bengali history when Islam came into the life of the region.

Islam first appeared in Bengal in the 12th century AD, when Sufi missionaries arrived into the region. Consequently, due to periodical Muslim invasions the conversion of the people to Islam was reinforced. The invaders practiced the erection of mosques, madrassas, and Sufi Khanqahs. Starting from 1202 a military chief Ikhtiar Uddin Muhammad bin Bakhtiar Khilji from the Delhi Sultanate conquered a large territory of Bengal from Rangpur to Brahmaputra River. After the death of Bakhtiar Khili in 1206 internal opposition between the Khili dynasty representatives began which resulted in a series of intra-empire struggle. During these events Ghiyasuddin Iwaz Khalji succeeded and expanded the Sultan's area of influence from southern regions to Jessore and made the eastern Bang province a branch. He established the capital at Lakhnauti on the Ganges near the previous Bengal capital of Gaur. After this there were two attempts by the Turks to push east, but both were repulsed. However, the third attempt led by Mughisuddin Tughral was successful which officially brought the Sena Dynasty to an end in 1277, conquering the region of Sonargaon south from Dhaka to Faridpur.

Because Bengal was relatively remote from Delhi, by occasion the rulers declared independence and styled themselves as Sultans of Bengal. Iliyas Shah was the last ruler of this dynasty that existed from 1342 to 1487 and rejected all Delhi's attempts to get back the reign over them. Without any influence of Delhi the sultans made a lot of advancements in developing the civil institutions and fulfilling numerous architectural projects. The still existing massive Adina Mosque and the 1479 Darasbari Mosque were erected by those sultans. They also took Bengali literature under their patronage which helped to unite the Bengali culture and identity. After the Iliyas Shahi dynasty the similar dynasty of Husain Shahi came in power, which ruled from 1494 to 1538. Their ruling witnessed numerous events, such as the first arrival of Portuguese merchants, and rising activity of Afghanistan which eventually resulted in conquer of the capital by them.

The large scale conversion of Islam lasted for hundreds of years. For the most part the conversion was selective, but sometimes it was individual. Many of the ostracized or outcaste Hindus were accepting Islam as their religion. Islam attracted large number of Buddhists and low caste Hindu because of its ideals of brotherhood, equality, and social

justice, known as Islamic egalitarianism. Many conversions were encouraged by the numerous Muslim missionaries.

Because Bangladesh was a province of Pakistan until 1971, the process of Islam development in the region was heavily impacted by Pakistani order in political, social and cultural fields. Despite the long-term political hostility between the countries, the Islamic population of Bangladesh and Pakistan used every opportunity to struggle together against the Hindu imperialism that prevailed in the early region's history.

Division of Muslim population in contemporary Bangladesh

The Muslims in Bangladesh are divided into two communities: Sunni and Shia. The majority in Bangladesh are Sunnis, but there is a small Shia community however. This division between the Muslims dates back to the year of death of Prophet Muhammad. After his death all the Muslims raised a question of who was to take over the leadership of the Muslim nation. The opinions on the resolution of this question divided the Muslims into two groups. The Sunnis believed that the leadership must be taken by a person who was capable to fulfill this mission, and the elections had to be organized between such people. On the other hand, the Shias considered that the leadership should have stayed within the Prophet Muhammad's family. The majority of Muslims took the first position, and up until now there are more Sunnis than Shias in the world – about 85% of the Muslims in the world are Sunnis. In Bangladesh the Shias are also small in number but usually no serious conflicts arise between the groups as they observe the same major Muslim laws and are considered to be brethren in faith.

The role of Sufism in Islamic Bangladesh

Sufism, the Islamic mysticism tradition, appeared very early in Islamic history. Essentially Sufism became a very popular movement because it emphasized love of God while before it the fear of God was preached. Sufism emphasizes personal and direct dedication to God by means of the external ritualistic adherence of the faith. One of the central Sufi concepts is that the average true believer may pursue the truth by using the spiritual guides. These guides are usually called pirs or fakirs. In Bangladesh the word pir is used more commonly and the general meaning of the word is "the teacher" and "saint." For many years there has been a tension between the Muslim scholars ulama and the Sufis on the method of salvation path. There were many instances through the centuries when writers and poets were inspired by the Sufi concepts and applied them in their writings, though many of them were not adherents of the teaching (Ziring, 1992: 255).

In South Asian region that we all now know as Bangladesh the Sufi missionaries played a vital role in conversion of the population to Islam. Until now, the majority of Bangladesh Muslims are influenced by Sufism concepts, though not in a truly formal way but in a form of occasional consultations. The fakirs and pirs are very popular in the village areas of Bangladesh. There it is more probably to see more the shrines of saints than the mosques. In some rural areas the terms fakir and pir are used almost interchangeably. However, in overall the pir represents an itinerant holy person, while the fakir is perceived as the developed murshid, meaning a holy man who has attained a higher spiritual level and has more successors.

Religious hierarchy in Islamic order

After Sufism became a popular movement in Bangladesh, the outstanding religious people alleged to have received the miraculous gifts and they began to gather disciples around them, called murids. A disciple may be described as an associate who lives in a secular surrounding and is occupied by secular tasks: irregular consultations of pirs or murshids, religious ceremonies participation and support, gathering contributions in support of mushid. Moreover, the disciple may be engaged into a fraternity that worships the devotions to murshid and practices various pious exercises that are striving to mystical enlightenment.

During the late 1980s there were three widespread main Sufi orders formed: Qadri, Naqshbandi, and Chishti. The Qadri and Naqshbandi beliefs are close to those in an orthodox Islam. The third one, Chishti, is somewhat unusual for the subcontinent and uses a large number of unorthodox practices. The Chishti has many supporters among musicians and poets, because, for instance, it allows using music during the liturgy which is not a characteristic of other Islamic orders. The roles of pirs may be different. As a rule they may not be considered as community representatives and are not elected through consensus. However, a villager may be advised by pir on social matters and be inspired by him, but the pirs will not participate in communal prayers and weekly sermons in the local mosque. Nevertheless, many pirs are known to take an active participation in the political life. They are either running for some public office or support other candidates. For instance, Pir Hafizi Huzur claimed for a position of president in the election of 1986. Also, famous pirs of Sarsina and Atroshi, are known for their sufficient political influence. They are known to have advised numerous presidents and ministers.

In Islam there is no formal organization of ordained priests, but a number of religious officials still perform the duties related to serve and clergy as priests. One of these groups is known as ulama, and they traditionally provide the orthodox teachings for the community. Unofficially, the ulama have a right and duty to administer and interpret the religious law. They base their authorities on the knowledge of sharia, which is the body of Islamic jurisprudence that was formed throughout the centuries after the death of Prophet Muhammad.

The organization of ulama has members that are divided into maulvis, imams, and mullas. Those who have received the special training courses in Islamic law and theology may received either a title of maulvi or imam. A maulvi gets his higher studies in a special school of religious education that is usually attached to a mosque and is named madrasa. After he completes some additional graduate level studies, the maulvi might receive a title of maulana.

The objectives of mullah often include various individual prayers, numerous advice on the religious topics, performances on ceremonies such as marriage or funeral. However, mullah often performs duties that are far from orthodox Islam. For instance, a mullah may be a source for various talismans and amulets to assure protection from sexual impotence or snakebites, etc. The objects provided by mullah are also supposed to bring good luck and to secure from evil spirits. The majority of village inhabitants believe that

such objects truly keep them safe from diseases and all the benefits they get are related to the objects. Usually the sales of such items constitutes a significant part of the mullah's income.

In Bangladesh there are no official sharia courts, as the modified Anglo-Indian criminal and civil legal system operates in the country. Despite this, the majority of Muslim marriages are arranged under the authority of the gazi. The gazi is a traditional Muslim judge who usually gives advice on issues related to personal law, including divorce, inheritance, religious donations, etc.

During the late 1980s the Bangladesh ulama executed an important function of teaching and saving the Islamic traditions and way of life as opposed to the outside challenges. The most obvious and significant menaces of that time directly for Islam were the sociopolitical ideas derived from communism or Christianity. According to the core religious values of Islam any modernization brought threats to the existing beliefs and way of life. Thus the ulama severely denied any external attempts to change the sharia orders. Numerous Islamic official members of ulama encouraged to establish an Islamic theocracy inside Bangladesh through various tools of political activism such as formation of several political parties. Moreover, the majority of ulama members were involved in carrying on the tabligh (preaching movement). This movement presented the effort of ulama that focused on true ideals of Islam from social and political point of view, while all the un-Islamic factors were indisputably eliminated. The Tabligh was popular among many graduate students who found it as an effective and emotional tool to fight everlasting Bangladesh's sociopolitical depression (Pearl, 1974: 35).

South-Asian Islamic religious practices

There is a number of Islamic religious practices that are particular to the South Asia only. Many of them were subject to serious reforms over the decades. A vivid example is how pirs worshipping was dealt in 1980s. Death of a pir was usually observed on an annual basis, and according to the popular belief, the anniversary of the pir's death is a favorable time for seeking the pir's intercession. The anniversary ceremonies are usually attended by the faithful as they are festive occasions that are highly enjoyed by both orthodox Muslims and the pir's followers. These ceremonies, by the way, are similar by many factors with the Hindu festivals. During the nineteenth and eighteenth century a number of reforms were undertaken by fundamentalist movements to rid Islam of irrelevant infringements that were trying to eliminate this and similar traditions. Due to this the practice of pir worshipping has remained unabated till our time (Bertocci, 1996: 138).

In the 1980s the religion in Bangladesh was filled with a number of non-orthodox beliefs that resulted from different interpretations of the popular beliefs. For example, Hindu influences may be observed in a ritual of lightening the house for celebration of Shabi Barat known as the Festival of the Bestowal of Fate. This practice was borrowed from the Hindu religion, from the ritual named Divali – Festival of Lights. The rituals of evil spirits exorcism jinni also was a result of Hindu influence. The rural inhabitants often do not differentiate between the temples from Hindu and Muslim religions. For instance, the shrines named satyapir, popular in rural Bangladesh, represent a Hindu-Muslim synthesis which has a name of Olabibi, the supernatural deity for the treat of cholera. The synthesis is an interesting example of the Hindu concept of divine spouse in contrast with monotheistic perception of Allah (Banerjee, 1981: 111).

In 1970s the governmental regimes at power tried to increase own role in the religious life of the people. The Ministry of Religious Affairs made big strides in supporting the religious institutions by means of provision of financial support for erection of mosques and community prayer grounds. The ministry also played an important role in establishment of the organization of annual pilgrimages to Mecca, which was prompted by limits the government of Saudi Arabia imposed on the number of foreign pilgrims, and the foreign regulations of Bangladesh that were restricting policies toward own citizens (Chakrabarti, 1992: 40). Another step of the ministry was direction of the policies and programs for the Islamic Foundation which was arranging and supporting various Islamic subject publications and research. The goal of foundation was also to maintain the National Mosque (Bayt al Mukarram) along with organization of trainings of imams. After the government completed formation of the national network of Islamic cultural centers and libraries inside the mosques, more than 18000 imams were scheduled for training. The Islamic Foundation provided support for compilation of the encyclopedia of Islam in the Bengal language, which was finished in 1980s (Akhanda, 1981: 80).

In 1984 a further step of government involvement into religious life of the country was undertaken. The president of Bangladesh initiated the establishment of half-official Zakat Fund Committee that encouraged annual zakat contributions on a basis of voluntarism. Revenue generated due to activity of the fund was intended to be directed for schools, orphanages, children's hospitals and other projects and institutions dealing with charity. Among the organizations encouraged to participate in the Fund's program were commercial banks and various financial institutions. With the help of the aforementioned measures the government tried to align closer ties with Islamic and other religious organizations within the country, as well as with other countries as Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.

Islamic political parties of Bangladesh

Bangladesh political arena included a variety of political formations and organizations that based their political platforms on the Issues of Islam. Out of them one of the oldest was the Muslim League that was established in 1906, known as the All-India Muslim League at that time. This organization favored the continued union with Pakistan, and for this reason it was mostly eliminated from the political stage after the country's struggle for independence. In 1980s the League began to return on political stage and even managed to accumulate four seats in the Parliament of 1986. the main points of support declared by the Islamic League were total denationalization and cancellation of the 51-percent share of the public industries owned by the government. Among other points of organization were the accuses of the government in a submissive foreign policy in regards to India, and continually summoned the Islamic rule in the country.

Another famous Islamic party within the 1980s was Jamaat e Islami. In 1970s the party was temporarily prohibited because it strongly opposed declaration of independence. However, in 1980s it returned, becoming the strongest political force among the opposition. Jamaat e Islami opposed any expression of Western-style democracy, while strongly defending theocracy. On the other hand the party demanded the resignation of Ershad and demanded the democracy to be restored. Among the representatives of the party were large numbers of madrasa students and graduates who were dedicated to the traditional ideals of Islam (Heitzman, 1989: 72).

Along with the two aforementioned political forces, the Bangladesh political stage was filled by a number of smaller political parties that propagated an anti-Indian foreign policy and defended the roughly distinct Islamic state, but possessed little political influence though. Among them must there be noted the Bangladesh Caliphate Movement (Bangladesh Khilafat Andolan) that wanted to establish a total Islamic rule in Bangladesh and to launch the holy war for faith "jihad". The party also defended the position that government must be based on Quran and Sunna. Another of the parties, the Islamic United Front, insisted on cancelling the Treaty of Cooperation, Friendship and Peace between Bangladesh and India, signed in 1972.

As it was mentioned before, the Bangladeshi Constitution establishes Islam as a state religion, but every citizen is free in the own religion choice. Nevertheless, there are issues that demonstrate the real status of religious freedom in the country.

According to the Bangladeshi family laws regarding marriages, divorces, or adoptions, the laws that are to be applied to a certain religious group representative differ slightly. There are no officially authorized limitations on marriages between representatives of different faiths. However, some issues apply.

Under the Muslim Family Ordinance, in case of an inheritance to be distributed between relatives, a female heir inherits less than a male relative. Also, husbands have much more divorce rights than a wife. Though the society strongly opposes polygamy, a man is allowed to have up to four wives in his life.

Conclusion

Islam plays a significant role in the culture and lifestyle of the Bangladeshi people. However, religion still does not dominate over the national politics mostly because Islam has not become the central component of the national identity. After the "Islamic way of life" was declared by the government in a form of constitutional amendment in 1988, very few intellectual class representatives paid attention to this rather significant national commitment. Many critics believed however, that if Islam was declared a state religion than the national life will be subject to significant changes. Besides from the suspicions that may arise related to the non-Islamic minorities, such declaration may cause an abundance of various religious parties both on the national and local levels of authority, which would most probably escalate conflicts and tension between religious and non-religious politicians. Therefore the issue of state involvement into the religious life of the country must be carefully analyzed before any significant step is made.

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