

Introduction

Sometime in 1243–44, residents of Lakhnauti, a city in northwestern Bengal, told a visiting historian of the dramatic events that had taken place there forty years earlier. At that time, the visitor was informed, a band of several hundred Turkish cavalry had ridden swiftly down the Gangetic Plain in the direction of the Bengal delta. Led by a daring officer named Muhammad Bakhtiyar, the men overran venerable Buddhist monasteries in neighboring Bihar before turning their attention to the northwestern portion of the delta, then ruled by a mild and generous Hindu monarch. Disguising themselves as horse dealers, Bakhtiyar and his men slipped into the royal city of Nudiya. Once inside, they rode straight to the king's palace, where they confronted the guards with brandished weapons. Utterly overwhelmed, for he had just sat down to dine, the Hindu monarch hastily departed through a back door and fled with many of his retainers to the forest hinterland of eastern Bengal, abandoning his capital altogether.¹

This coup d'état inaugurated an era, lasting over five centuries, during which most of Bengal was dominated by rulers professing the Islamic faith.

1. Maulana Minhaj-ud-Din Abu'l-'Umar-i-'Usman, *Ṭabaḳāt-i-Nāsiri: A General History of the Muhammadan Dynasties of Asia, Including Hindustan (810–1260)*, trans. H. G. Raverty (Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1881; reprint, New Delhi: Oriental Books Reprint, 1970), 1: 557–58. This account by Minhaj is the earliest narrative we have of this important event. It is likely that some of the historian's informants had been eyewitnesses to the events they described; some may well have participated in them.

Nudiya is probably identifiable with Naudah, a village several miles northeast of Rohanpur railway station in western Rajshahi District. See Abul Kalam Muhammad Zakariah, "Muhammad Bakhtiyar's Conquest of Nudiah," *Journal of the Varendra Research Museum* 6 (1980–81): 57–72.

In itself this was not exceptional, since from about this time until the eighteenth century, Muslim sovereigns ruled over most of the Indian subcontinent. What was exceptional, however, was that among India's interior provinces only in Bengal—a region approximately the size of England and Scotland combined—did a majority of the indigenous population adopt the religion of the ruling class, Islam. This outcome proved to be as fateful as it is striking, for in 1947 British India was divided into two independent states, India and Pakistan, on the basis of the distribution of Muslims. In Bengal, those areas with a Muslim majority would form the eastern wing of Pakistan—since 1971, Bangladesh—whereas those parts of the province with a Muslim minority became the state of West Bengal within the Republic of India. In 1984 about 93 million of the 152 million Bengalis in Bangladesh and West Bengal were Muslims, and of the estimated 96.5 million people inhabiting Bangladesh, 81 million, or 83 percent, were Muslims; in fact, Bengalis today comprise the second largest Muslim ethnic population in the world, after the Arabs.²

How can one explain this development? More particularly, why did such a large Muslim population emerge in Bengal—so distant from the Middle East, from which Islam historically expanded—and not in other regions of India? And within Bengal, why did Islamization occur at so much greater a rate in the east than in the west? Who converted and why? At what time? What, if anything, did “conversion” mean to contemporary Bengalis? And finally, between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, in what ways did different generations and different social classes of Muslims in Bengal understand, construe, or even construct, Islamic civilization? In seeking answers to these questions, this study explores processes embedded in the delta's premodern history that may cast light on the evolution of Bengal's extraordinary cultural geography.

Bengal's historical experience was extraordinary not only in its widespread reception of Islam but also in its frontier character. In part, the thirteenth-century Turkish drive eastward—both to Bengal and within Bengal—was the end product of a process triggered by political convulsions in thirteenth-century Inner Asia. For several centuries before and after the Mongol irruption into West Asia, newly Islamicized Turks from Central Asia and the Iranian Plateau provided a ready supply of soldiers, both as slaves and as free men, for commanders such as Muhammad Bakhtiyar. Once within Bengal's fertile delta, these men pushed on until stopped only by geographical barriers. Surrounded on the north and east by moun-

2. Richard V. Weekes, ed., *Muslim Peoples: A World Ethnographic Survey*, 2d ed. (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984), 1: 137.

tains, and to the south by the sea, Bengal was the terminus of a continentwide process of Turko-Mongol conquest and migration. It was, in short, a frontier zone.

In reality, Bengal in our period possessed not one but several frontiers, each moving generally from west to east. One of these was the political frontier, which defined the territories within which the Turks and their successors, the Bengal sultans and governors of the Mughal Empire, minted coins, garrisoned troops, and collected revenue. A second, the agrarian frontier, divided settled agricultural communities from the forest, Bengal's natural state before humans attacked it with ax and plow. A third was the Islamic frontier, which divided Muslim from non-Muslim communities. A porous phenomenon, as much mental as territorial in nature, this last was the frontier that proved so fateful in 1947. Finally, all three frontiers were superimposed on a much older one, a frontier defined by the long-term eastward march of Sanskrit civilization in the Bengal delta. Characterized either by an egalitarian agrarian society organized around Buddhist monastic institutions or by a hierarchically ordered agrarian society presided over by Brahman priests, Sanskrit civilization in both its Buddhist and its Brahmanic forms had moved down the Gangetic Plain and into the Bengal delta many centuries before Muhammad Bakhtiyar's coup of 1204.

After the establishment of Muslim power in Bengal, the political frontier was extended as the new rulers and their successors overpowered or won over centers of entrenched agrarian interests. As aliens occupying the country by force of arms, Muslim soldiers and administrators were generally concentrated in garrison settlements located in or near pre-conquest urban centers. This was natural in those parts of the delta where the conquerors encountered developed agrarian communities, for by controlling the cities they could control the agriculturally rich hinterland, linked to cities by markets and revenue-paying networks. The Turkish occupation of Bengal thus followed the settlement pattern found throughout the early Delhi sultanate, anticipating in this respect the cantonment city employed by the British in their occupation of India in the nineteenth century.

Of a very different nature was Bengal's agrarian frontier, which divided the delta's cultivated terrain from the wild forests or marshlands that were as yet unpenetrated, or only lightly penetrated, by plow agriculture and agrarian society. Whereas the political frontier was man-made and subject to rapid movement, the agrarian frontier was more stable, slower-moving, and shaped by natural as well as human forces. Prominent among these natural forces was the historic movement of Bengal's rivers, which in the

long run caused the northwestern and western delta to decay as their channels shifted increasingly eastward. As new river systems gave access to new tracts of land and deposited on them the silt necessary to fertilize their soil, areas formerly covered by dense forest were transformed into rice fields, providing the basis for new agrarian communities. Yet, although driven by natural forces, the movement of Bengal's agrarian frontier was also a human phenomenon, since it necessarily involved the arduous work of colonizing and settling new lands.

Our understanding of the third frontier, the cultural one, should not be biased by early Persian histories of the Turkish conquest, which typically speak of a stark, binary opposition between "Islam" and "infidelity" (*kufur*). Use of these terms has often given the impression that the rise of Muslim communities in Bengal was a corollary to, or simply a function of, the expansion of Turkish arms. In fact, however, the terms "Islam" and "infidelity" as used in these sources simply refer to the rulers and the ruled—that is, Persianized Turks who were assumed to be Muslim, and Bengali subjects who were assumed to be non-Muslim. Since large numbers of Bengali Muslims did not emerge until well after the conquest was completed, for the first several centuries after Muhammad Bakhtiyar's invasion, the political and cultural frontiers remained quite distinct geographically.

Each of Bengal's frontiers thus moved by its own dynamics: the Sanskrit frontier by the growth of Buddhist- or Brahman-ordered communities; the political frontier by the force of arms and the articulation and acceptance of the Muslim regime's legitimate authority; the agrarian frontier by the twin processes of riverine movement and colonization; and the Islamic frontier by the gradual incorporation of indigenous communities into a Muslim-oriented devotional life. Having their own laws of motion, these frontiers overlapped one another in various ways. For example, after having established a base in the northwestern corner of the delta, which for four hundred years remained the epicenter of its rule in Bengal, Turkish power moved swiftly to the revenue-rich southwest. There, where the rulers encountered a dense agrarian society, conquest by Turks did not involve the physical extension of the arable land, but simply the capture of the local revenue structure. On the other hand, in much of the eastern and southern delta, where field agriculture had not yet replaced thick forests, the political and agrarian frontiers collapsed into one. There, the territorial reach of Turkish domination normally stopped at the edge of forests, only penetrating further when the forest itself was cleared. Hence in the east, the expanding Turkish movement involved not only the incorporation

of indigenous peoples into a new political system but the physical transformation of the land from marsh or forest into rice fields.

The interaction between the delta's Sanskritic, political, agrarian, and Islamic frontiers thus forms one of the great themes of Bengal's history, and it constitutes a central concern of this study. The theme is pursued in both of the book's chronologically distinct divisions. Part I treats the establishment and evolution of Indo-Islamic civilization from the early thirteenth century to the late sixteenth, for most of which time the delta region was ruled by kings of the independent Bengal sultanate. Chapter 1 sketches Bengal's cultural, political, and economic profile prior to the advent of Islamic rule. Chapter 2 explores how Central Asian conquerors, informed by medieval Perso-Islamic conceptions of political legitimacy, established themselves amidst a society that had inherited very different political and cultural traditions. Chapter 3 follows the activities of the earliest Sufis—Muslim mystics and holy men—who settled in the delta and reconstructs their own various encounters with Bengali culture. Chapter 4 examines the delta's economy and the sociocultural basis of Muslim and Hindu communities that crystallized under the sultanate. Since this discussion sets the stage for analysis of the origin of mass Muslim society, the following chapter, Chapter 5, steps out of the narrative and reviews past and present debates concerning "conversion" to Islam, both in medieval India generally and in Bengal particularly.

Part II explores the sociocultural transformations that took place between the late sixteenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries, when Bengal was incorporated into the Mughal Empire. Paradoxically, a substantial majority of Bengal's Muslim population emerged under a regime that did not, as a matter of policy, promote the conversion of Bengalis to Islam. This part of the book seeks resolution of this apparent paradox. Chapter 6 describes the rise and consolidation of the Mughals' authority in Bengal, while Chapter 7 reconstructs the ideological basis of their rule, exploring the place of Bengali culture and the Islamic religion in Mughal imperial culture. As the book moves from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the eighteenth, the perspective becomes increasingly local in nature, with the result that political figures and events familiar to students of early- or mid-eighteenth-century history—Murshid Quli Khan, Aliverdi Khan, the rise of the East India Company, the battle of Plassey, the "Black Hole" of Calcutta, and so on—receive little or no mention at all. Attention is focused instead on the institutions through which provincial Mughal officials deepened the roots of their authority in the countryside at a time when power in Delhi, the Mughal capital, was steadily diminishing.

Imperial expansion on the Mughal periphery during imperial decline at the center thus constitutes the second apparent paradox with which Part II is concerned. Yet the principal emphasis of this part, as with the first, is on culture change, and in particular the growth of Islamic institutions and Muslim society. Thus Chapter 8 examines the political and cultural implications of agrarian growth in the Mughal period, and both Chapter 8 and Chapter 9 explore the role played by village mosques and shrines in the diffusion of Mughal authority and Islamic values in the region. Finally, in contrast to these two chapters, which analyze the politicoeconomic correlates of culture change, Chapter 10 examines the specifically religious dimensions of Islamization in premodern Bengal.

As to the periodization indicated in the book's title, one may legitimately ask why a cultural study ends with a political date—1760, the year the English East India Company became paramount in the Bengal region. For one thing, historians are always constrained by the chronological scope of their sources, and the intrusion of Englishmen into Bengal's revenue system abruptly ended the Persian documentation that forms the data base for the book's later chapters. A further reason for ending this study in 1760 is the demise of a patronage system that had played a decisive role in the articulation of both Mughal political culture and Islamic institutions. Although many of the social and cultural processes examined in these chapters continued into the later eighteenth century and even the nineteenth, the disappearance of imperial patronage as a principal motor behind them makes the year 1760 a convenient stopping point.

This book is written with several audiences in mind. For South Asians who understand Islamic history in the subcontinent in terms of an unasimilated "foreign" intrusion, the study explores how this religion, together with the Perso-Turkic civilization that carried it into the subcontinent, became indigenized in the cultural landscape of premodern Bengal. For Middle Easterners who understand Islam's historical and cultural center of gravity as lying between the Nile and the Oxus rivers, the book examines how and why Islamic civilization in the late medieval period became at least as vibrant and creative on the Bengali "periphery" as in the Middle Eastern "heartland." It also addresses the issue of why so many more Muslims reside outside the Middle East, especially in South Asia, than within it. Finally, this study seeks to reach Western readers for whom Islam's significant expansion was in the direction of Europe—a confrontation that, among other things, bequeathed to Europe and its cultural offshoots an image of Islam as a "militant" religion. I argue that Islam's more significant expansion lay in the direction of India, where Muslims encountered civilizations far more alien than those they met with in the European

or Judeo-Christian worlds. Their responses to that encounter, moreover, proved far more creative; and in Bengal, at least, the meeting of Islamic and indigenous cultures led to an exceptional demographic development: the emergence of the world's second-largest Muslim ethnic community. This book is concerned with the nature of that encounter and its extraordinary outcome.