

Factors of Faith and Practices

Bangladesh is geographically unique, with a diverse demographic and mixed social reality. The faith practices of its people are more of a response to social realities rather than strict theological beliefs.

Eastern Bengal (E.B.) is part of yet another civilization, naturally accessible to various other civilizations. As a result, faith practices here are deeply connected to nature. On the other hand, E.B. is also connected to North India.

When the Aryan civilization sprouted and developed, its culture was prominent among the ancient ruling class rather than peasants and farmers. Therefore, Bengal is not a byproduct of Aryan culture. Instead, E.B. culture is a product of many other cultures that existed before the Aryan civilization. Our population and faith practices are also mixed.

When the Aryans arrived, other cultures had already taken root. These cultures were primarily developed from ethnicities. Thus, Aryan culture shows Vedic influence at the social level, but the dominance of pre-Aryan culture remains evident.

Faith Practices and Livelihood

There is no evidence that our faith practices were dictated to us. As an agricultural society, the response to livelihood challenges has the most significant influence on faith practices. The land, rivers, and weather are seen as powerful entities deserving of worship for our sustenance. Therefore, our faith practices are mature and centered around nature worship. This is common for all civilizations that have coexisted with sophisticated societies.

Local people had the opportunity to speak and choose their faith practices.

1. Bengal was outside the Aryan circle. The Aryans considered Bengalis impure but eventually conquered the region for trade and agricultural opportunities.
 2. The caste system is closely connected to urban structures and has little in common with the rural agricultural practices of E.B. Most importantly, local people, including farmers and fishermen, belong to the Shudra class if they ever converted.
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Rise of Buddhism

The first large-scale Aryan influence in Bengal came with Buddhism. Buddhism is a byproduct of Hinduism, and there is no conflict between the two. In fact, they are different branches of the same religion. Buddha protested against Brahmin dominance. There are three major versions of Buddhism:

1. **Hinayana:** Very strict in nature.
2. **Mahayana:** Signifies the masses who perform rituals on behalf of the people. Buddhist monasteries owned a great deal of land and were part of the land-owning class.
3. **Vajrayana or Tantric Buddhism:** This version became the most popular. It is related to pre-Aryan culture, livelihood-oriented, and involves divine intervention. It attempts to control the uncontrollable forces of nature through tantra and mantra.

Political Analysis

1. **Shashankya:** Known for being anti-Buddhist, but this is questionable. It is common to portray political rivals in a negative religious light. The primary source of information about Shashankya is from his rival's biography, "Harshacharit." There is no evidence of religious wars in Bengal, and ancient rulers did not force religious conversions.
 2. **The Palas:** After Shashankya, the Palas came to power. They were great protectors of Buddhism and funded Buddhist monasteries. As Buddhism grew in popularity, the Palas sought to control Buddhist institutions and also organized land grants to Brahmins. Their relationship with Buddhism and Hinduism was more political and practical.
 3. **The Senas:** The Senas immediately attacked Buddhist monasteries upon coming to power. This was not a religious act but a political strategy. Buddhist monks fled to Tibet and Nepal. The Senas, who were from Karnataka, revived conservative Hinduism. Despite this, there was religious tolerance between Hinduism and Buddhism.
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Emergence of Islam

Islam arrived in Bengal as an external force with the Muslim ruling class, first in North India and later in Bengal under Bakhtiyar Khilji. The Muslim rulers did not have religious objectives but ruled Bengal independently to develop a separate identity. They promoted local Aryan and non-Aryan cultures to gain local support against Delhi's influence.

During the Mughal period, Bengal became very rich due to an agricultural revolution. The Mughals viewed Bengal as a food producer rather than a subject region. The Meghna River changed its course, leading to the rise of new lands. Mughal officials, known as Pir-aulia consultants, gathered local people around mosques, providing them with new livelihood opportunities and bringing new land under cultivation. The local people developed admiration for these officials, and this admiration turned into admiration for Islamic culture. Over time, local people began to identify themselves as Muslims. This was a social conversion, as they did not know Arabic and referred to Allah as "Nirvajan," a Hindu exposition of God.

Conclusion

The faith practices in Bengal have evolved over centuries, influenced by various cultures, religions, and political changes. From the early agricultural societies to the rise of Buddhism, Hinduism, and later Islam, the region's faith practices reflect a complex interplay of social, political, and environmental factors. The people of Bengal have always adapted their faith practices to their livelihood needs, resulting in a unique blend of religious and cultural traditions.