Ancient And Medieval History of Bangladesh

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|  | **Ancient and Medieval history** |

***By Mizanur Rahman Akhand***

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***Chapter Outline***

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| [A picture containing text, wheel, gear  Description automatically generated](https://wikieducator.org/File:SLMinto.png) | **Introduction** |

Human beings are social creatures. Their habit is to live in society. In order to live like this, it is necessary to help one another. That is why it is necessary to develop social and political establishments. Three things are first necessary to save life. They are food, clothing and shelter. Then people turn their attention to law, science, fine arts, religion, etc. to mould life in a disciplined and decent manner. These activities of human beings in their social life collectively express their culture. In this Unit we will discussed ancient and Medieval period of Bangladesh four on third, multihued and economic conditioning. We further discuses about ongoing Bengali language and literature.

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| [A picture containing red, orange, keyboard, plastic  Description automatically generated](https://wikieducator.org/File:SLMobj.png) | **Learning Objectives** |
| *After reading this chapter, you are expected to learn about:*   * Describe social and cultural aspects of ancient Bengal, * Analyze the Bengali language and literature, * Mention the Fine Arts, Architecture, Sculpture and Painting of Ancient Bengal, * Describe the Economic Condition of Ancient Bengal, and * Explain the cultural aspects of Medieval Bengal. | |

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| **[A close-up of a book  Description automatically generated with low confidence](https://wikieducator.org/File:SLMsections.png)** | **Social and Cultural Life of Ancient Bengal** |

Before the coming of the Aryans the people of the ancient settlements in Bengal had developed a social and cultural life. It is the oldest socio-cultural picture of Bengal. According to the scholars, their language was called 'Nishad'. Thereafter the ancient people of Bengal mixed with another race called 'Alpine'. They together developed the culture of Bengal before the advent of the Aryans.

As far as it is known, the political consciousness of the people in the regions did not grow in the broader Sense. Society was at that time divided into many sects. It was called 'Koumo' society. It is difficult to ascertain when the different societies merged and resulted into one big society.

Some religious thoughts of the pre-Aryan and Aryan ages have later spread in the Hindu religion. Of them mention may be made of 'Karmafal' (consequences of one's deeds), Janmantar (rebirth) 'Yoga' (meditation), etc. Many social rituals, manners and behaviors are observed at a later stage among the followers of Hinduism. They are such as offering betel leaves and nuts to guests, songs sung in praise of Lord Shiva, different folk tales, boat making, anointing the body with turmeric in marriages, wearing 'dhuti-saree' (long cloths worn by men and women) and using vermillion on the forehead by the women.

The first step in the cultural change of ancient Bengal was the culture of the Age of Aryans. The Aryans came from outside India. They had different thoughts and customs in the case of religion and social behaviour. The Aryan influence brought about an extensive change in the fields of language, religion and culture of Bengal. Of course, many traits of the former culture existed side by side. The Aryan culture, however, could not have a deep influence on the lives of the people of this country.

On the whole, the Hindu, the Buddhist and the low caste people formed the society in ancient Bengal. The Maurya and the Gupta Kings ruled this country from the third century to the fifth century B.C. At that time, the people of the Hindu and the Buddhist religions respectviley used to live in this society though small in number; there were also the followers of Jain religion. In this country, the ruling race greatly influenced the religions beliefs and social lives of the people.The religious attitudes of the Buddhist Palas were liberal, while those of the Brahmin Senas were conservative and narrow.

Thus after the Aryan culture, the third change in culture was brought about by the Buddhist culture. In the ancient time, like any other places of the world, the people of Bengal also had some rights. People spontaneously accepted the Buddhist religion. During the reign of the Gupta kings, the Brahmanic culture was established by spreading its influence over the Buddhist culture. The Pala kings patronized the Buddhist culture during their four hundred years of rule. As a result of the generous rule of the Palas, different religions and cultures came together. A new culture was, thus, evolved.

But the condition was again changed during the Sena rule. At that time, the Buddhists, disappeared due to the supremacy of the Brahminism. The Aryan system of caste distinction appeared. The people of Bengal were divided into four castes at that time. The Brahins belonged to the highest caste. Their main profession was to conduct the religious activities. The Kshatriyas belonged to the second caste and their profession was to fight during the wars. The Vaishyas constituted the third caste. They mainly carried on trade and commerce. Since they were rich, they enjoyed some status in the society. Those who were in the lowest were called the Sudras. Generally, they were engaged in agriculture, fishing and other minor jobs. They were the majority in number, but they had no right in the society.

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|  | **Social Life of Ancient Bengal** |

The people of the ancient Bengal did not differ much from the present day people in their food habits, social rites and retuals. Their main food at the time were rice, fish, meat, vegetables, fruit, milk, curd, butter oil, condensed milk etc. The Hilsa fish was a favorite dish even at that time. The people of East Bengal used to relish dried fish. Varities of good items were served on the occasssion of festivals. Different kinds of homemade cakes and sweet rolls were also prepared. Water was made fragrant by mixing camphor in it. It was customary to have spiced betel leaves after meals. The common dress for men at that time was the 'Dhuti' and women generally wore the 'Sari'. The style of wearing the saree was different from the present time. The use of scarf among well-to-do women was common. They wore special dresses on ceremonial occasions. Both men and women wore ornaments. The women wore various kinds of ornaments such as necklace, bangles, bracelet, earrings, finger ring, anklets, etc. All classes of women used to put vermilion on the forehead. They also used various perfumes.

Games and entertainments of various kinds were arranged in ancient Bengal. Of all the games, dice and chess were the most popular. Dances, songs, and dramas were the favourite items of entertainment. The people used to participate in physical exercise, wrestling and fighting with bamboo sticks. The also engaged themselves in various religious rites, social festivals and ceremonies. These were the worship of Vishwakarma, Shitala, Mansha, Durga, Chandi, Shasthi, Kali, Shiva, and the festivals of Rathajatra, Ashtami Snan, worship of Dharmathakur, the Charak festival, the ceremony Sraddha and others.

The bullock carts and boats were the main transports of the people of ancient Bengal. The raft and small narrow boats were used to move in canals and marshlands. Boats of various sizes were used for transporting goods. The rich people used to travel in big boats called 'pansi' and also small sailing boats called 'dinghy'. Make-shift narrow bridges were used to cross small canals. As an agricultural country, the majority people of Bengal lived in the villages. On the whole, the life of the people was happy. But there were also poor and unhappy people in ancient Bengal. The lives of the common people, rich or poor, during the reign of the Sena Kings were not happy. The main power was in the hands of the upper class (the Brahmins). The practice of the knowledge of the scripture was limited among the Brahmins only. The persecution by the Brahmins made the lives of the common people miserable. This persecution was inflicted mostly upon the Buddhists. The Brahmins used to snatch away their wealth. They were not punished if they killed the Buddhists. Towards the end of the Sena rule, the common people became aggrieved due to the oppression of the kings. It is known that Ballava, the Queen of Lakhsman Sena and her brother, Kumara Dutta used to torture the commom people too much. The degree of torture was so great that even the courtiers of the Royal Court, resented along with the common people.

Bad days fell upon the Buddhist society and culture during the reign of the Sena Kings. Due to the influence of the Brahmins, the common Hindu community was upset. It was in such chaotic condition which prevailed during the last phase of the ancient period of Bengal that the process of establishing the foundation of the Muslim society began. The Medival Age commenced in Bengal with the Muslim conquest. The structure and the characteristics of the society and the culture of Bengal changed at that time.

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|  | **Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs) - 1** |
| Put a tick mark (√) against the correct answer.  1. In which race were the inhabitants of original Jacarandas of Bengal included?  a. Bengal  b. Nishad  c. Alpine  d. Aryan  2. Which religion did the Pala Kings follow?  a. Hindu  b. Aryan  c. Brahmanya  d. Buddhist | |

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| **[A close-up of a book  Description automatically generated with low confidence](https://wikieducator.org/File:SLMsections.png)** | **Origin of Bengali Language and literature** |

The language of the original inhabitants of Bengal was Austric. This language gradually died away after the coming of the Aryans. The name of the language of the Aryans was Ancient Vedic Language. This was later reformed. The scholars turned the Vedic language into a language of literature. As the old language was reformed, this new language was named as the 'Sanskrit' language. Many are of opinion that the Bengali language originated from the Sanskrit language.

The modern scholars, however, have not accepted this view. In the ancient time, the common people did not use this language. Only the Brahmins used it. The name of the language of the common people was called 'Prakrita Bhasa'. As time passed, changes began to come over the language. It gained excellence and quality through the writing of books. Two languages were born of the 'Prakrita' language. One was 'Pali' and the other was 'Apabhransha'. The language of the common people, howerve, remained as 'Prakrita' language. Many new languages were bom in many states of Eastern India at that time. These originated from the 'Apabhrangsha' language. Our Bengali language was also born in this manner.

Sanskrit language has been used most in Bengal during the reigns of the Pala and the Sena dynasties. As a result Bengali language did not develop much during that time. The cultivation of the Bengali language increased later, in the Medieval Age. The language, too, developed a lot. During the period 1350 A. D-1800 A.D, Bengali poetry was compossed extensively by Hindu and Muslim poets. In the Age of the Muslims, Bengali language gradually secured a seat of its own under the generous patronization of the Sultans.

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|  | **Rise and Development of Bengali literature** |

With the rise of the Bengali language, Bengali literature, too, developed. It was in the Medieval Age, that Bengali language truly found its expression. It was cultivated to some extent in the ancient times also. A collection of lyrical poems composed by the Buddhist Monks known as 'Charjapada' is supposed to be the earliest specimen of Bengali literature. The Buddhist Monks composed those poems during the reigns the Pala and the Sena kings. The period upto the twelfth century was known as the ancient period of Bengali literature. The Buddhist kings of the Pala dynasty patronized language, literature, art and culture. The 'Charjapada' began to be composed from that period. A Bengali book by the name 'Sadukti Karnamrita' was written in the ancient Bengal. There were names of one hundred and thirteen poets in the book. Most of them were Buddhists and the inhabitants of Bengal. Shridhar Das compiled the book. We can learn from the 'Charjapada' that chess was the most popular game in ancient Bengal. Mention of the 'Vina' (Indian lute) among the musical instruments is found in it. Marriage ceremonies were performed with great pomp. Women dreesed their hair into a knot at the back of the head men kept long curly hair hanging down to the neck. They used to wear coronet on the occasion of marriage.

The Sena kings, Vallala Sena and Lakshman Sena were themselves great scholars. Lakshman Sena revered the poets and scholars. However, most of the literary works at the time were written in Sanskrit.

Before the Muslim rule, Ramai Pundit composed a book of verses called 'Shunnya Purana'. The stories and hymns of Hindu Gods and Goddesses like Mansha, Shitala, Chandi, etc. were at the mouth of all and sundry. Although the journey of Bengali literature started in ancient Bengal, it found its true expression in the Medieval Age.

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|  | **Fine Arts, Architecture, Sculpture and Painting of Ancient Bengal** |

The people of ancient Bengal have left their marks in architecture, fine arts, sculpture and painting. Many palaces, stupas, temples, monasteries etc., were built in the Hindu period. Most of them have now perished. It is possible to get some ideas about these constructions from the accounts of the foreign travellers, inscriptions on stones and copper plates. The oldest specimens of Bengali architecture are the Buddist monuments. These were built on the bones of Lord Buddha or any objects used by him. Later, the Jains, too, made such monuments. The Buddhists regarded the stupas as sacred as the temples. Viharas were built on the dwelling houses for the buddhisr monks and for their pursuit of knowledge. It is learnt from the account of Chinese travellers that the Viharas were of big in size and adorned with artistic works. The Shompura Mohavihara in Paharpur of Noagaon district was built in the Age of the Pala. Besides, some relics of a few monasteries have been found in Mainamati in Comilla district.

The art of sculpture of Bengal lies in the creation of statues of different Gods and Goddesses. Specimens of such sculptures have been found in Paharpur and Mainamati. They were mostly made of terracotta. Besides, statues of different shapes and forms were found after the ninth century. Scholars, however, are of the opinion that the people of this country were skilled in sculpture even before the birth of the Christ.

It is supposed that the art of painting developed from the time of the Palas. The culture of painting started for religious purposes. Thus, it has been observed that in the beginning, there were paintings on the walls of the temples and the Buddhist Viharas. Pictures of Buddha and various Gods and Goddesses were found in ancient Buddhist manuscripts. Various colours were used in the pictures.

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|  | **Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs) - 2** |
| Put a tick mark (√) against the correct answer.  1. Rumi Pundit Composed a book ovrses  a. Shaanama  b. Gita  c. Bibel  d. Gitagalli  2. What is the name of the language of the Aryans?  a. Austrik  b. Ancient Vedic  c. Bangla  d. Pali  3. From which language was the Bengali Language directly evolved?  a. Pali  b. Prakrit  c. Sanskrit  d. Apabhrangsha | |

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| **[A close-up of a book  Description automatically generated with low confidence](https://wikieducator.org/File:SLMsections.png)** | **Economic Condition of Ancient Bengal** |

Bangladesh is mainly an agricultural country. Hence, the economy of the country developed depending on agriculture. Paddy was the main crop. Besides, there was sugarcane. Molasses and sugar made from the juice of sugarcane were exported and a lot of money was earned. Bengal was famous for the cultivation of cotton, mustard and betel leaf. Among the fruit bearing trees, mention of coconut, betelnut, mango, jackfruit, pomegranate, banana, lemon, etc., are worth mentioning.

One important source of Bengal's economy was cloth. Many industrial goods were prepared in Bengal. Bengal was famous for textile industry since the ancient time. Fine cotton and silk cloths were produced in great quantity in this country. In the first century, huge quantity of high quality cloths were exported to foreign countries. The world famous Muslin cloth has been manufactured in Bengal since the ancient time.

Many small industries grew in the ancient time. Earthen pots, gold and silver ornaments, boats, the bullock carts, decorated wooden materials, etc. were made at that time. Business flourished with the development of industry. Transportation of goods was convenient as there were many rivers in Bengal. A lot of markets, trade-centres and cities grew up on the banks of the rivers due to this. It has been mentioned before that Bengal had trade links with foreign countries. Hence, the Muslin cloth, pearls and different kinds of trees and plants were exported to foreign countries through the waterways.

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|  | **Social and Cultural Life in Medieval Bengal** |

The Medieval Age in Bengal began with the assumption of power by the Muslims. Before the advent of the Muslims, people belonging to the Hindu and the Buddhist religions lived in Bengal. The Muslims under the leadership of Bakhtiar Khalji entered Bengal as a royal power in the beginning of the thirteenth century. Even five to six hundred years before that the Arab Muslims who had come to do business were living on the coastal belt in Southeast Bengal. The Sufis and the Saints began to come to Bengal to preach Islam from the eleventh century. Many of the common Hindus and Buddhists embraced Islam at the time. Thus, gradually a Muslim social structure developed in Bengal. The Hindus and the Muslims lived side by side all over Bengal at the time. As a result, a sort of mixture began to take place between one another's thoughts and rituals. The culture which evolved in this way is called the Bengali culture.

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|  | **Language and Literature** |

The Sufis and the Saints had an important role in the expansion of the Muslim society in Bengal. The abodes of the Sufis and the Saints were called 'Khankahs'. Along with the establishment of the 'Khankah' the Sufis also established almshouses, Maktabs, Madrashas. In fact, they created the proper atmosphere for the establishment of a Muslim society in Bengal. The deprived Hindus during the Sena period got the equal privilege of learning during the Muslim period. Hence, some Hindu writers emerged in the society during the Muslim period. For example 'Karcha', 'Naladamyanti Kavya', 'and 'Devayan Upakhyana' were written by goldsmith Govinda Das, barber Madhusudan and milkman Ram Narayan Gope respectively. The Hindus and the Muslims had good relations with each other in the Age of the Sultans. Many Hindus were appointed in high offices of the State. When Sree Chaitnya preached the new 'Vaishnaba' religion, he received no opposition from the Muslim Sultans.

The Sultans patronized the growth and expansion of the Bengali language and literature. In this respect the first name that can be mentioned is Giasuddin Azam Shah (1393 A.D-1411 A.D) of the Ilias Shah Dynasty. It was during his regin Shah Mohammad Sagir wrote his famous poem 'Yusuf-Zulekha'. Barbak Shah of the later Ilias Shahi Dynasty patronized Jashoraj Khan, composer of 'Sree Krishna Vijoy'. Alauddin Hussain Shah had a reputation for inspiring the cultivation of Bengali literature. He patronaged Maladhar Basu, Bipradasa, Vijayagupta and other poets. Sultan Nasiruddin Nusrat Shah also has reputation for such patronage. During his time Kavindra Parameswar translated Mahabharata in Bengali. The cultivation of not only Bengali, but also of Arabic and Persian works were widely preactised during the Sultanate period.

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|  | **Dress and Ornaments** |

During the period of the Sultans, the aristocratic and rich men and women wore expensive, decent and attractive dresses. The men wore 'ijar' (pyajama) and long attire with round neck. A broad ribbon made of cloth was tied round the waist. They wore the turban on their heads. They wore decorated leather shoes and socks. Men with delicate taste used shoes with designs on them. The dress for the middle class Muslims was pyajama, long shirt and turban. They wore shoes too. The common Muslims wore 'lungi' (cloth worn from the waist to the ankles), 'nima' (short shirt) and the cap on their heads. The aristocratic Muslim women wore short 'kamiz' and 'shalwar'. They used to wear the scarfs made of cotton or silk. They wore costly sarees too. Common women wore sarees.

After the Muslim rule was established in Bengal a radical change took place in the dresses of the Hindus in general, and the aristocratic Hindus in particular. The influence of the Muslims on the dress of the aristocratic Hindus was so great that if an aristocratic Hindu at that time did not wear 'tilak' (mark of sandal paste on the forehead) and ear rings, it was difficult to differentiate him from an aristocratic Muslim. The common Hindus used the 'dhoti' (long cloth from waist to the ankles) and 'chadar' (wrapper). They also wore garment called 'angarakhi' which covered the body down to the knee. They wore 'Kharam' (wooden sandal) on their feet. The lower class Hindus wore only the 'dhoti'. This 'dhoti' was from the waist to the knees. The common dress for the Hindu women was the 'saree'. They ware 'saree' and scarf according to their social amd economic status. The poor wore the 'saree' only. It is worth mentioning that the style of wearing the 'saree' changed after the Muslims came to Bengal. The old system fused with the foreign custom and a new manner of wearing the 'saree' was evolved.

Men and women, either Hindu or Muslim, both wore ornaments. However, the women were more fond of ornaments. They wore the tiara and, 'sinthipathi' on the head; earring, tops, jhumka, kushul, kanbala, balies in the ears; nose-ring in the nose; necklace and hansuli in the neck; kankan' bangles' string' churi' khar' penchi' angada in the hands; rings in the fingers; mekhala and kinkini in the waist; anklet' bangle of bells for the ankle and pansuli in the toes. Both men and women used various cosmetics. But women were more inclined and attentive to it. Women were more careful about their hairdo. They used to make bun. They made their hair twisted into braid and sometimes allowed to fall eh hair on the back. They also used various kinds of perfumes. Noteworthy among them were musk, kumkum, incense, camphor etc. Flower was invariably used for adoring oneself. They used 'surma' and 'kajal' in their eyes.To colour their hands they used a substance called 'hena'. To redden their lips they ate betels. The Hindu ladies also used Sandal paste on their foreheads.

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|  | **Architecture and Painting** |

Muslim architecture became quite developed in the Age of the Sultans. Noteworthy examples are the 'Dakhil Darwaza' of Gaur, the 'Kotwali Darwaza', the Chata Sona Masjid, the 'Adina Masjid', the 'Baro Sona Masjid', the 'Qadam Rasul', the 'Shat Gambuj Masjid' etc. The craftspeople of Bengal were skilled in making, pottery, plates, knives, scissors etc. High quality paper was made from the barks of trees. Sea faring vessels were also built in the shipbuilding factories. Silver coins were used as currency for buying and selling goods. The 'kari' a local medium of exchange, was in use at the same time.

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|  | **Self-Assessment Questions (SAQs) - 3** |
| Put a tick mark (√) against the correct answer.  1. In which period did painting develop in Bengal?  a. Aryan  b. Gupta  c. Pala  d. Sena  2. What was the main source of the economy of ancient Bengal?  a. Agriculture  b. Tombs of the Sufis  c. Commerce  d. Guest houses of the Sultans | |

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*The key points of this chapter are as follows:*

1. Ancient
2. Literature
3. Bangali Literature
4. Bangal
5. Culture
6. Buddhist
7. Medieval
8. Aryans

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1. **Charzapada** : Its a oldest specimen of bagel literature
2. **Koumo society** : As far as it is known, the political consciousness of the people in the regions did not grow in the broader Sense. Society was at that time divided into many sects.
3. **Yousuf Zulekha** : Famous Poem, wrote Shah Mohammad Sagir
4. **Nima** : Nima mens short shirt

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1. Describe the social and cultural life in Ancient Bengal?
2. Write a short essay on the origin, evolution and development of Bengali language and literature?
3. Describe the society and culture of Bengal in the Sultanate Period?

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| **SAQ - 1** | | | |
|  | 1. d | 2. b |  |
| **SAQ - 2** | | | |
|  | 1. b | 2. b | 3. c |
| **SAQ - 3** | | | |
|  | 1. c | 2. a |  |

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|  | **References and Further Readings** |

1. History of Muslim Bengal – By Siyod Amir Ali
2. Class 9-10 (General history Book by BOU)

Hinduism in medieval Bengal

 Helal Uddin Ahmed | Published:  October 07, 2019 21:07:38

The Virupaksha Temple in the city of Hampi in India

A clear distinction can be drawn between religion and society in ancient and medieval Bengal on the basis of historical developments. Although there were separate religious communities of Hindus, Buddhists and Jains in the ancient era, they had their origin from the same religious roots and their differences also diminished gradually. Besides, the Buddhist religion became almost non-existent in Bangla towards the end of the ancient era. Consequently, when the Muslims came to settle in this land at medieval times as conquerors, they termed the religion and society of the local people 'Hindu'.

MUSLIM CONQUEST OF BANGLA: The structure of a Brahmanical religion that was erected throughout Bangla through the efforts of the Sena dynasty was shattered after the defeat of Lakshman Sena in 1204 AD and the conquest of Bangla by Bakhtiar Khalji. Khalji and his soldiers destroyed and plundered many Hindu temples (Murshid, 2006). The rulers who succeeded Khalji followed the same path. From Zafar Khan Gazi of the 13th century to Murshid Quli Khan of the 18th century, they continued to demolish Hindu temples. The manner in which the Muslim soldiers led by 'Kalapahar', the military commander of Suleiman Karrani, looted and destroyed Jazpur temple during the second half of the 16th century (1568) was narrated in detail by the poem 'Niranjaner Rusma' in the book of religious worship 'Sunyapuran' by Ramai Pundit.

But this mentality of demolishing temples underwent some change towards the end of the Sultani era. After shelving this attitude, some Sultans built new temples instead and donated untaxed land for their maintenance. Researchers have opined that this was done for making governance easier as well as boosting security, as many Hindus were appointed to royal jobs. The rulers felt that problems might crop up in governance if there was religious harassment of the Hindus. They were probably tolerant of the religious practices of Hindus for the sake of their own wellbeing. Besides, there were many Hindu Kings and Zamindars whose taxes filled the royal coffers (Bhowmik, 2007).

ISLAMIC CHALLENGE TO HINDUISM: The destruction of temples by the Muslim rulers was an external assault against Hindu religion, but the internal blow was even more serious. The caste system, which had been in vogue since the ancient era, was weakening the Hindu society from within. In addition, there were many restrictions and regulations. This took a serious shape during the rule of the Senas. The swords of the guardians of society came down heavily even for the slightest deviations from rules; the low-caste Hindus were especially ostracised from society. The religion of Islam arrived in Bengal in such a backdrop.

Alongside the rulers, many Muslim saints also arrived in India and Bangla. They were very eager to preach Islam among the people of this land. Converting non-believers into Muslims was considered to be an act of virtue. Consequently, the Sufi saints were very enthusiastic about performing this task. Many of them were very learned and used to live honest lives by following religious dictums. The ordinary people found them possessing many good qualities as well as miraculous powers. They held the saints in very high esteem and converted to Islam when they were impressed by the behaviour and magnanimity of the saints (Bhowmik, 2007).

Unlike the then Hindu society, not too many religious or social restrictions were in vogue in the Muslim society with regard to food, marriage etc. A kind of equality existed among all in the social milieu including the rich and the poor, the small and the big. Because of these reasons also, many low-caste Hindus - who had to undergo brutal torture or persecution because of class discrimination - voluntarily converted to Islam. And there were others who were compelled to convert. Grounds for these compulsory conversions were many. One's faith was blighted if an infidel touched a Hindu woman. Her whole family used to be ostracised from the society of faithful if she was taken back. One lost his class status if anything banned by tradition was eaten. And there was no scope for a reinstatement if one had deviated from Hinduism. The Hindus were therefore converting in droves because of these multifarious rules, restrictions and reasons (Majumdar, 2005).

CHAITANYADEV'S REFORMS: Chaitanyadev (1486-1533) appeared on the scene at this terrible hour of the Bangali Hindus. He preached a single 'Harinam' in place of numerous sectarian doctrines. He started to sing 'Harinam Kirtans' on the roads of Navadwip with his group, amid the sounds of 'Khol-karatal'. According to his doctrine, there was no difference between humans. He declared class distinctions as unjustified and gave equal rights to all irrespective of their gender, wealth or caste. He stopped the repression of the lower castes by the higher ones. He urged everybody to adopt 'Vaishnava' religion based on love and devotion. Responding to his call, scores of people irrespective of caste and class started adopting 'Vaishnava' faith. A few Muslims also converted. In this way, the tide which was created in favour of Islam returned to 'Vaishnavism'. In other words, the conversion process of Hindus stopped and the Hindu religion and society were saved (Bhowmik, 2007).

SMRITIKARAS' ROLE: Many 'Smritikaras' (theoreticians) also appeared on the scene at this juncture for saving the Hindu religion. They brought about various reforms in Hindu religion in order to face the challenges posed by Islam.

A famous scholar of the time was Pundit Raghunandan Bhattacharya (16th-17th century), who was known merely by the name 'Smarta'. 'Ashtabingshatitama' was his famous book of theory. There were also many other books including 'Dayabhagatika'. He had discussed all aspects of the Hindu society in these books.

The extraordinary thing that Raghunandan did was to adopt many modern doctrines after showing due respect to the ancient scholars; that is, he did not ignore the demands of time. He pronounced the edict that a renegade person could return to his own religion. Sometimes, he attuned old theory-books to the demands of time by providing modern interpretations. As a result, the rules and regulations of Hindu religion became much more flexible and people could enjoy a degree of freedom in religious practices.

One of the theoreticians of the time was Devivar Ghatak. He judged the purity of one's Hindutva on the basis of the magnitude of his deviations rather than on the basis of his caste. His objective was to develop a mechanism so that nobody became a renegade or religious outcast for minor faults.

But the efforts of these people were mostly confined to the higher classes and castes of Hindu society. This was because these scholarly books were written in the Sanskrit language, which was outside the purview of people belonging to the lower classes and castes due to their inexperience of Sanskrit language. So, the theoreticians and guardians of society adopted other means to deter religious conversions of these people. They started classifying Aryan gods and goddesses by according due recognition to the gods and goddesses of the lower class people.

As a result, people belonging to the upper classes and castes started worshipping the snake goddess Manasa, the 'Shakta' goddess Mangalchandi, Kali, Shitala and others, whom they had ignored for so long. Various 'Mangal-Kavya' were composed in Bangla language by eulogising their greatness.

IDEAL HINDU SOCIETY IN THE LIGHT OF 'SMRITI-SHASTRA': The Shaiva, Shakta and Vaishnava were the most influential sects in Hindu society of medieval Bangla. There were many other sects like Soura, Ganpatya, Pashupat, Pancharatra, Kapalik, Koula, etc. According to the 'Smritisastrakaras', the following major religious rituals were observed in different months of the year: Boishakh: Pratasnan, Jalghatadan for Brahmans; Jaishtha: Aranyashashthi, Sabitribrata, Dashhara; Ashar: Chaturmasya Brata; Sraban: Manasa Puja; Bhadra: Janmashtamibrata and Anantabrata; Ashwin: Durgapuja, Luxmipuja; Kartik: Pratasnan, Dipanwita; Agrahayan: Nabannasraddha; Falgun: Shivratribrata; Chaitra: Shitalapuja, Barunisnan, Ramnabamibrata, Madantrayodashi and Madanchaturdashi (Majumdar, 2005).

HINDU SOCIETY IN MEDIEVAL BANGLA: There were provisions in the 'Smriti-shastra' regarding the social and domestic lifestyle of Hindus as well as their religious practices and rituals. But it is difficult to say how far these provisions for an ideal Hindu society were reflected in the social milieu of medieval Bangla. It is, however, assumed that contemporary literature depicted a reliable picture of social life during the period. For example, the dominant castes in the Hindu society were found to be Brahman, Kayastha and Vaidya. Brahmans themselves were divided into various segments. Mukundaram mentioned about 40 categories. Among the Vaidyas, there was use of titles like Sena, Gupta, Das, Datta, Kar, etc. Although medicine was the main profession of the Vaidyas, they had expertise in some other disciplines as well. The titles used by the Kayasthas included Ghosh, Basu, Mitra, Pala, Nandi, Sena, Deb, Datta, Das, Kar, Chanda etc. They were educated and were engaged in agricultural work (Majumdar, 2005).

Apart from Brahman, Kayastha and Vaidya, there were also many mixed castes engaged in various professions. These included: Banik Gope (wealthy farmers); Teli (engaged in producing oil); Kamar (produced iron untensils like axe); Tambuli (sold betel-leaf, betel-nut and camphor in a package); Napit (hair-cutting and massaging); Modak (produced sugar and molasses); Das (sold fish); Kirat and Kol (drum-beaters); Chhutar (produced fried rice); Patni (ferried people on boats). In addition, mention was also made of Ksatri and Rajputs in contemporary literature, who were trained in military disciplines and warfare.

*Dr. Helal Uddin Ahmed is a retired Additional Secretary and former Editor of The Bangladesh Quarterly.*

*hahmed1960@gmail.com*

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