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Between the Mosque's Call and the Temple's Bell: The Making of Bengal's Syncretic Literature across a Thousand Years

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that Bengali literature emerged from a continuous process of religious and cultural interweaving, shaped by Bengal's multi-ethnic origins and centuries-long Hindu–Muslim coexistence. It traces how political patronage, Sufi–Vaishnava mysticism, folk practices, and shared linguistic spaces produced a syncretic aesthetic visible across genres—from court poetry and Mangal-kāvya to Maimansingha ballads and the works of Muslim poets in Arakan. By highlighting patterns of mutual influence, hybrid language use, and cross-religious participation in literary production, the essay shows that Bengali cultural identity was not inherited from a single tradition but created through sustained encounters that blurred boundaries of faith.

The Fundamental Premise: Religion and the Bengalis

Anthropologists describe the Bengali people as an ethnically composite population and one of the earliest human groups to inhabit this region. Numerous people from different parts of the world entered Bengal, some settled, while others departed—yet each left behind unmistakable traces of their presence. The bloodline of the larger Bengali population thus carries within it the imprint of many diverse racial groups. For centuries, these early inhabitants lived in different parts of Bengal, divided into various communities and clans, gradually intermingling over long stretches of time. According to ethnographic anthropology, the branches of all four major human racial groups of the world arrived in Bengal at different points. It is believed that among Bengal's ancient peoples, the Austroasiatic speakers were the most dominant. Elements of Mongoloid lineage are also discernible here. Later, the arrival of the Shaka people from Persia–Turkistan introduced another significant layer of admixture into the Bengali gene pool.

The historical phase of Bengali ethnic identity begins with the Gupta era (320 CE–550 CE). Subsequently, Shashanka (c. 600 CE–636 CE), through his capable rule, elevated Bengal and the Bengalis to a position of distinction. From this period onward, the journey of Bengali

ethnonational identity takes shape, which further matured during the Pala and Sena dynasties, establishing the robust foundations of the Bengali nation. It is upon this foundation that the Sultanate state of Bengal emerged. The region was primarily known by three names: Gauda, Rarha, and Banga. Sultan Shamsuddin Iliyas Shah conquered these territories and unified them under his authority; it is from this political unification that the term *Bangalah* originated. He adopted the titles *Shah-i-Bangalah* and *Sultan-i-Bangalah*.

At the time of the Muslim conquest, Bengal was predominantly a Hindu-Buddhist land. During Bakhtiyar Khalji's invasion, although Brahmanical Hindu Sena rulers were in power, the Buddhists had constituted the majority population of Bengal for several centuries. Following the Buddhist era came the Brahmanical rule of the Sena kings. In the words of Acharya Dinesh Chandra Sen, this period may be understood as the Hindu–Buddhist age. Thereafter began the advent of Islam. However, to speak of Islam's arrival solely in terms of the Turkish conquest would be a partial truth. In reality, Islam entered Bengal by both land and sea. The Turkish conquerors arrived by land, carrying with them their religion, culture, and modes of governance. Conversely, Arab traders came by sea for commercial purposes. They too brought their faith and cultural practices, but their objectives differed significantly from those of the Turks: the Turks sought political domination, whereas the Arabs visited seasonally for trade and returned home after each trading period. Nevertheless, both groups played undeniable roles in the cultural exchanges that shaped Bengali culture.

When examining who the Muslims of Bengal were, two primary categories emerge: the ruling elite and the common populace. While the aristocratic Muslims were largely foreigners, the majority of ordinary Muslims were converts. These converts, marginalised within the Hindu caste system and having long turned toward Buddhism, eventually embraced Islam in hopes of royal patronage. Naturally, among these newly converted Muslim masses, traditions and folk practices inherited from their ancestral past continued to persist. Many retained long-standing customs, social behaviours, and even literary affinities such as the appreciation of Hindu epics. These forms of cultural continuity shaped sustained interactions between Hindus and Muslims. Such reciprocal influence left a deep imprint on the social and religious life of both communities. As a result, certain Muslim practices affected Hindu social and religious life, while some Hindu customs were absorbed into Muslim everyday culture. Evidence of such exchanges is abundantly present in our medieval literature and literary history.

Islamic influence is visible across Bengali culture—in rituals, festivals, cuisine, clothing, and more. Though Bengal was a *subah* or province under the Mughal imperial structure, its governors remained attentive to preserving the region's cultural distinctiveness. It is during this time that many of Bengal's major festivals took shape. The Bengali calendar, the names of the Bengali months, and the celebration of *Pohela Boishakh* (Bengali New Year's Day) were Mughal contributions. Various festivals, foods, and attire, which further enriched the texture of Bengali identity, also developed during this period. Betel (paan), tobacco, beverages, musical soirees, and convivial gatherings or addas were among the cultural practices popularised under Mughal rule. Meanwhile, local rulers actively supported the flourishing of non-Muslim (mainly Hindu) cultural traditions. These interactions profoundly influenced Bengali literature. Sufism and Vaishnavism—as well as the literary and folkloric traditions

associated with them—gave Bengali thought a distinctive character that strengthened communal harmony, tolerance, and cooperation.

Thus, it becomes evident that the Bengalis are an ethnically mixed people, and their culture too is syncretic. The culture of a nation is shaped by the trajectory of history and by its continuous exchanges with its surrounding environments. To say that the syncretic religious and ethnic identity of the Bengalis nurtured their culture would not be an exaggeration. This culture was formed through the coexistence of Hindus and Muslims. The extent to which this coexistence shaped our literature is the central concern of this essay. From the vast corpus of ancient and medieval literature, only a few selected texts will serve as the focal point of our discussion. Before that, however, we shall examine the political landscape of literary patronage.

Patronage of Muslim Rulers

A review of Bengal's political history in relation to the evolution of Bengali literature reveals that the period identified as the "ancient age" of Bengali literary history is essentially the Buddhist era—the age of the Pala kings, spanning roughly the eighth to the twelfth centuries CE. Thereafter came the reign of the Sena rulers, who migrated from Karnataka and established Brahmanical orthodoxy in Bengal. Yet the Sena dynasty's rule did not last long. Within a short time occurred the Turkish invasion occurred, and with it the establishment of Islamic authority in Bengal.

Thus, in the background of the Bengali literary tradition, we first encounter Buddhist influences, followed by Hindu norms, and finally, the beliefs introduced by Islam. Medieval Bengali literature is extensive and multifaceted, encompassing diverse currents and orientations. Throughout this vast period, numerous religious ideas and systems of faith were at work.[1]

Chronologically, most of premodern Bengali literature was composed under Muslim rule. Readers of literary history are well aware that the bulk of the religious literature produced during this period centred on non-Muslim themes. Poets frequently received royal favour. Across the strata of early literary history, royal and aristocratic patronage is clearly discernible. Emperors, sultans, feudal lords, zamindars, jagirdars, nobles, and ministers—all acted as patrons of poets. Regarding the generous literary encouragement offered by Muslim rulers, Kshitimohan Sen writes: "The Muslim rulers who came to India not only destroyed temples; they also cultivated an appreciation for vernacular languages, and even for Sanskrit. … From the earliest phases of Bengali, we see the encouragement of Muslim rulers and the sincere dedication of Muslim writers."[2]

Debnath Bandopadhyay, discussing the translation of Hindu Puranic texts under Muslim royal patronage, notes:[3]

> In the pre-Chaitanya era, Bengali poets translated the *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mahābhārata*, and *Bhāgavata* under the patronage of local Muslim rulers. By reciting verses before the king of

> Gauda, Krittibas received floral garlands and a silk upper garment as gifts. Maladhar Basu was awarded the honorific title Gunraj Khan for his translation of the *Bhāgavata*, most likely by Ruknuddin Barbak Shah. Under the patronage of the military commander of Husain Shah, Paragal Khan of Chittagong, and his son Chhuti Khan, Kabindra Parameshvar and Shrikar Nandi produced Bengali translations of the *Mahābhārata*…

It may thus be inferred that these Muslim rulers rose above religious identity in their appreciation of literary aestheticism.

Muslim rule in Bengal began around the thirteenth century. Rakhaldas Bandopadhyay has shown that around 1200 CE, Bakhtiyar Khalji defeated Lakshman Sen and captured Lakshmanavati (Nabadwip). Subsequently, the political control of Bengal witnessed significant contestation and upheaval. Yet, for the next two hundred years, there is little evidence of literary production under direct royal patronage.

The earliest examples of distinguished scholarly patronage under the Bengal Sultanate appear during the reign of Ruknuddin Barbak Shah. Later, during the reigns of Alauddin Husain Shah, Nasrat Shah, Firoz Shah, and other sultans, similar forms of patronage can be traced.

Ruknuddin Barbak Shah ascended the throne of Gauda in the mid-fifteenth century. In keeping with the traditions of the Mahmud Shahi dynasty, he was not only a capable military ruler but also a connoisseur of beauty and an ardent patron of learning. Numerous Hindu names appear among the courtiers and officials mentioned in inscriptions and panegyrics from his reign. His two physicians (Ananta Sen and Narayan Das), the Prime Minister (Bishwas Ray), and the fort superintendent (Bhandsi Ray) were all Hindus.[4] In addition, Krittibas, the translator of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, mentions several Hindu courtiers of Barbak Shah in his autobiographical verses. Just as the Sultan was nonsectarian in matters of administration, similar examples of impartiality are found in his treatment of learned figures and alongside Muslim scholars such as Ibrahim Faruqi, author of the *Sharafnāma*, many Sanskrit scholars and Bengali poets also received titles and patronage at his court.

Narhari Visharad was a compiler of *smṛti* literature, while Raymukut Brihaspati Mishra was a distinguished commentator on Sanskrit texts. He produced commentaries on the *Amarakośa* (the *Pādacandrikā*), *Gītagovinda*, and the works of Kalidasa. Dinesh Chandra Bhattacharyya, analysing the concluding verse of the *Pādacandrikā*, demonstrated that Brihaspati Mishra received the honorific titles *Pandit Sarvabhauma* and *Raymukut* from Ruknuddin Barbak Shah upon completing the work.

Professor Debnath Bandopadhyay, drawing on extensive evidence, has shown that the royal patronage extended to Krittibas Ojha came from none other than the ruler of Gauda, Barbak Shah. In this context, he follows the research findings of Sukhamoy Mukhopadhyay in *Prachin Kabider Parichay O Samay* and *Banglar Itihaser Dushosh Bochor*.[5] To avoid burdening this essay with repetition, we shall not elaborate further on this topic. Instead, we present a

single verse from Krittibas's autobiographical narrative, which records the honour he received from the king of Gauda:

To Krittibas Pandit, known to all,
The king of Gauda bestowed diverse gems and honours.[6]

(কৃত্তিবাস পণ্ডিতের সকল গোচর।
রত্ন দিয়া যাকে পূজিল গৌড়েশ্বর।।)

Another Bengali poet who received recognition from the ruler of Gauda was Maladhar Basu, author of *Śrī Kṛṣṇa Vijaya*:

I possess no merit, nor do I hold any great knowledge.
Yet the king of Gauda bestowed upon me the name Gunraj Khan.[7]
(গুণ নাহি অধম মুঞি নাহি কোন জ্ঞান।
গৌড়েশ্বর দিলা নাম গুণরাজ খান।)

Jayananda, in his hagiographic epic *Caitanyamaṅgala*, also refers to Maladhar Basu as *Gunraj Chhatri*. Maladhar Basu's family enjoyed royal patronage across generations; his son, too, received a title—*Sattyaraj Khan*—from the Sultan.

In addition to Barbak Shah and his successors, notable patrons of Bengali literature in the sixteenth century included the Sayyid dynasty sultans, Husain Shah and Firoz Shah. Although Husain Shah was not a patron of Hindu religious practices—indeed, history (and Chaitanya-related literature) contains several instances of his politically motivated acts of religious intolerance—he is nevertheless praised for his literary patronage by Bijayagupta and Bipradas Pipilai, the authors of *Manasāmaṅgal*. During the reign of Husain Shah, Paragal Khan and Chhuti Khan served as governors of Chittagong; under their patronage, Kabindra Parameshvar and Srikar Nandi undertook Bengali translations of the *Mahābhārata*.

In Sridhar Kabiraj's *Kālikāmaṅgal–Vidyāsundara* manuscript, we also find praise of Sultan Firoz Shah, his patron:

King Śrī Firoz Saha, wise and gracious,
is witnessed by the Brahmin poet Śrīdhar Kabiraj.[8]
(রাজা শ্রীফিরোজ সাহা বিনোদ সুজান।
দ্বিজ শ্রীধর কবিরাজ পরমাণ।।)

The history of such patronage by Muslim rulers constitutes a luminous chapter in the literary culture of medieval Bengal.

Hindus and Muslims in Vaishnava Literature

For nearly six centuries of the premodern period, Bengali literature was dominated by Radha–Krishna devotional poetry and Vaishnava literature. From *Śrīkṛṣṇakīrtan* through the corpus of *padāvali* poetry to the hagiographical literature of the Mahants, this vast literary tradition—though rooted in a specific religious community—never shut its doors to external influences. When these *padāvali* and hagiographies were being composed in Bengal, the Muslim presence—both on the throne and in everyday neighbourhoods—was strong and undeniable. Scholars such as Ahmad Sharif, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, and Dr Muhammad Enamul Haq have extensively discussed the affinities between Islamic mystical Sufism and Bengali Vaishnavism. A few representative excerpts from their arguments are presented below.

Regarding the early medieval secular narrative poem *Śrīkṛṣṇakīrtan*, Muhammad Enamul Haq notes, in observations that are equally applicable to later Vaishnava literature: "Just as Krishna appears in the form of the *āshiq* (lover) of the Sufis, Radha is revealed as the *māshuq* (beloved). Brajai too is represented as the 'pīr-i-maghān'—the spiritually perfected guide—who unites the two lovers. … The final two sections of *Śrīkṛṣṇakīrtan*, the *Vamshi* and the *Biroho* cantos, vividly evoke the Sufi concepts of *gil-āzārī* and the pain of separation (*judā'ī*).

The Sufi *ghazal* tradition and Vaiṣṇava Padāvali are not merely analogous in meaning; they share similarities in spirituality, emotional intensity, and form. Just as Sufi poetry uses metaphors of wine, tavern, and cupbearer to express divine love, Vaishnava love-poetry employs the idioms of longing and sulking (*māna*), carried by the Gopis from grove to grove in Vrindavan. … What connection do these literary Radha, Krishna, Yamuna, or the flute bear to the mythological Radha–Krishna? … In the hands of Sufi poets, the human being becomes the *ashiq* or *parwāna* (lover); in the hands of Vaishnava poets, the same becomes Radha or the passionate lover. The Sufi poet's yearning (*sūz o saaz*)—manifested in the anguish of separation (*hijrān*)—brings tears to the reader's eyes; similarly, the Vaishnava poet's *biroho-bedanā* (agony of separation) or *pīriti-ārti*, labelled *Māthur*, evokes the same grief in all Bengalis."[9]

Through such analysis, Enamul Haq shows that Vaishnava poets, in composing Radha–Krishna lyrics, were far less indebted to the Purāṇas than to Islamic Sufi thought. Sufi ideas had become so deeply woven into Bengali cultural life that mystic Vaishnava poets could not ignore their influence; indeed, they absorbed these concepts wholeheartedly into their devotional practices. The essence of Jalaluddin Muhammad Rumi's thirteenth-century Persian masterpiece—named *Bāṃśaribedan* in Bengali by Enamul Haq—resembles the spirit of Bengali *padāvali* poetry. Even the manner in which Sufi disciples wrote biographies of their saints (*Tazkirah-i-Awliyā*, *Suwānih-i-ʿUmrī*, etc.) was adopted by Vaishnava writers in composing hagiographies of their mahajanas.

In medieval devotional literature, the central figure was Chaitanya. In the sixteenth century, he brought a tidal wave of Bhakti to Bengal through Gaudiya Vaishnavism. Scholars have demonstrated that underlying this devotional fervour lay elements of Islamic mystical heritage. Acharya Suniti Kumar Chatterji has shown in several places that Sufi influences are

present within Gaudiya Vaishnavism: "Through Sufism, the character of Indian civilisation—Hindu civilisation—was deeply modified. In my article 'Islamic Mysticism, Iran and India', published long ago, I mentioned that even in our Gaudiya Vaisnavism, certain Sufi influences actually strengthened it."[10] Elsewhere, he remarks: "Between Sufi Islamic thought and the fundamental tone of Bengali culture, there is no essential contradiction."[1]

Literary historian Sukumar Sen writes: "In the higher society attached to royal courts, some degree of cultural compromise between Hindus and Muslims certainly occurred. The influence of darvesh and faqir traditions played a role here, and it seems that traces of Sufi sentiment entered Gaudiya Vaishnavism through this channel."[12] Ahmad Sharif, in his essay *Islam and Gaudiya Vaishnavism*, quoting from *Suratnāma* (Haji Muhammad) and *Chaitanyacharitāmṛta* (Krishnadas Kabiraj), establishes the connections and mutual influences between these two religious systems: "Under the influence of the Sufi doctrine of *āshiq–māshuq*, Chaitanya's Bhakti path transformed into a path of divine love. … Chaitanya's *rāgātmikā* and *rāgānugā* Bhakti were both shaped by Sufi mysticism (recall Rabia's *rāgātmikā* devotion—'Lord, I desire only You'; and the declarations of Ibrahim Ahmad and Mansur Hallaj—'Ana'l-Ḥaqq', 'I am the Truth'). (Cf. Chaitanya's 'Mui sei, mui sei'—'Soham'." In the language of Bengali Sufis and Vaishnavas, this dual–non-dual realisation appears thus:
as expressed by Haji Muhammad in *Suratnāma* …

As from seed comes the tree, and from the tree the fruit,
And fruit, tree, and seed bear three different names—
Yet the three are one, and the one appears as three.
The fruit and the tree share the same embodied form;
Still, one cannot describe *the tree within the fruit*.

Just so, all human beings (*bandā*)
are created from Allah;
Yet when the human being dies, Allah does not die.

The ocean-wave is never separate from the ocean;
Allah is like the fragrance within the flower—
The flower concealed in the scent,
The Being hidden within manifestation,
The Essence veiled within its forms."

(বীজ হোন্তে বৃক্ষ যেমন বৃক্ষ হোন্তে ফল।
ফল বৃক্ষ বীজ এ তিন নাম হয়
একে হয় তিন জান তিনে এক হয়।
ফল আর বৃক্ষ যেন দুই এক কায়,
তথাপি ফলের বৃক্ষ কহনে না যায়।

তেমনি, আল্লা হোন্তে বান্দাসব
হইয়াছে পয়দা
তবু, বান্দার মরণে আল্লা না মরয়
সিন্ধু ঢেউ সিন্ধু হোন্তে কেহ ভিন্ন নয়
আল্লাহ যেন পুষ্পের মধ্যেত গন্ধ গন্ধেত স্বরূপ
বেকত গোপত বেস গোপত স্বরূপ।)

In the words of Krishnadas Kaviraj (*Chaitanyacharitāmṛta*):

Just as musk can never be separated
From its own fragrance,
And fire is never distinct
From the heat born of it—

So too are Radha and Krishna
Forever of the same essence;
Yet for the relish of divine play,
They assume two forms.

Just as in countless crystals
The one sun appears reflected,
So too does Govinda manifest
His own portions within all living beings.[13]

(মৃগমদ তার গন্ধ যৈছে অবিচ্ছেদ
অগ্নিজতে যৈছে নাহি কভু ভেদ।
রাধাকৃষ্ণ ঐছে সদা একই স্বরূপ
লীলারস আস্বাদিতে ধরে দুইরূপ।...
অনন্ত স্ফটিকে যৈছে এক সূর্য ভাসে
তৈছে জীবে গোবিন্দের অংশ
প্রকাশে।)

In truth, Sufi and Vaishnava traditions evolved in Bengal through mutual influence. Because of the ecumenical, mystical sensibility shared by both traditions, many Muslim mystical poets were drawn to composing Vaishnava lyrics centred on Radha and Krishna.

It is worth noting that in the amorous lyric poetry of Radha and Krishna, the range of characterisation is not particularly diverse. Since these poems were composed within the metaphysical and devotional framework of a particular religious community, one does not generally find explicit Islamic markers. Even the poets 'identities often remain obscure except for their brief vanita signatures. Yet these Radha–Krishna love lyrics were composed over several centuries during the pre-modern period at a time when Muslims formed a significant part of the population of Bengal. Understandably, traces of their presence entered *padāvali* literature as well—most notably in the post-Chaitanya period. The influence of

Chaitanya himself was a major factor in this development.

In 1945, Jatindramohan Bhattacharya, in his edited volume *Bāṅgālār Vaiṣṇava-bhāvāpanna Musalmān Kabi*, explained why several Muslim poets became imbued with Vaishnava devotional sentiment:

"During the Chaitanya era, when Bengal was inundated with a great flood of divine love, that flood entered the courtyards of Muslims as well. Around that same time, the ecstatic outpourings of Vaishnava hearts blossomed into *padāvali* songs, whose melodies and rhythms filled the skies and winds of Bengal. This celestial river of love did not flow only past Hindu homes; it flowed past Muslim dwellings too. As a result, while Hindus were naturally fulfilled by its pure waters, Muslims also, from time to time, drank from this stream to quench their thirst for love—there can be no doubt about that. Hindu poets, immersed in this sacred Ganga of emotion, composed countless verses depicting the eternal lovers Radha and Krishna. Among Muslims too, a few were moved by this devotional sentiment, and they sang of love, mentioning the names of Radha and Krishna."[14]

Abdul Karim Sahitya-Visharad identified nearly forty Muslim poets who composed Vaishnava lyrics. All of them were eighteenth-century poets, most residing in Chittagong. Among them, Syed Sultan is particularly noteworthy. Kshitimohan Sen, in *Bhārate Hindu-Musalmāner Jukta Sādhana*, writes:

"Among the Vaishnava lyricists of the eighteenth century, many were Muslims—such as Afzal, Aman, Kabir, Fayzullah, Ebadullah, Alimuddin, Muhammad Hamir, and others. … Vaishnava songs composed by the poet Ali Raja also survive. … In the Brajabuli literary tradition, we find many Muslim contributors, such as Nasir Mamud, Salbeg, Syed Murtaza, Shah Akbar, and others."[15]

All of them shared a worldview free from sectarian boundaries. Ali Raja, the eighteenth-century mystic poet of Chittagong—locally known as "Kanu Fakir"—occupies a special place among them. Ahmad Sharif's edited volume *Muslim Kabir Padasahitya* (1961) contains thirty-two Vaishnava poetries by this poet. Each poem begins with an indication of the rāga or rāginī. In many of these songs, Sufi symbolism appears explicitly, with the romance of Radha and Krishna interpreted through the lens of Sufi metaphysics.

Mirza Fayzullah, too, was a poet from Chittagong. In Abdul Karim Sahitya-Visharad's article *Vaiṣṇava Kabigaṇer Padāvalī*, published in *Bharatvarsha*, several Radha–Krishna devotional lyrics attributed to this poet were collected. From that collection, a portion of one of Mirza Fayzullah's poem is presented below:

Rāga: Kedar

Radha and Madhava in the forest-grove. (Dhruvapada)
Even Brahmā offers Him worship on all four sides.
Such a Hari—Nārāyaṇa—no eye can behold.

Carrying flowers and sandalpaste, all the Gopīs run toward Him;
throwing, they smear Govinda's body with blossoms.

Stricken by the shower of flowers and sandalpaste, Hari grows faint;
Murāri hides beneath the tendrils of the Mādhavī creeper.

There the son of Nanda remained concealed;
Crying "Śrī Kṛṣṇa! Śrī Kṛṣṇa!", the Gopīs began to weep.

Mir Fayzullah says: "What wondrous play!
Even stone melts at the sight of Śyāma's form.[16]

(রাগ—কেদার
রাধামাধব নিকুঞ্জ বনে। ধু।
ব্রহ্মা জারে স্তুতি করে চারি বআনে।
হেন হরি নারাঅন দেখিবা নআনে।।
পুষ্প চন্দন লৈআ গোপী সব ধাএ।
মেলি মেলি মারে পুষ্প গোবিন্দের গাএ।।
পুষ্প চন্দনের ঘায়ে জর্জ্জরিত হরি।
মাধবী লতার তলে লুকাএ মুরারী।।
মাধবী লতার তলে নন্দসুত রৈলা।
শ্রীকৃষ্ণ বুলিআ গোপী কাঁদিতে লাগিলা।।
মির ফএজোল্লা কহে অপরূপ লীলা।
শ্যামরূপ দরশনে দরবএ শিলা।।)

It goes without saying that this depiction of Radha–Krishna's amorous play is no less enchanting than that composed by non-Muslim poets. In the same essay, Abdul Karim Sahitya-Visharad offers a perceptive analysis of the phenomenon of Muslim poets composing Vaishnava *padas*:

"That Muslim poets once took to describing the love of Radha and Krishna in verse—in this age of sharp communal distinctions, such a fact may seem remarkable. However astonishing it may appear, it is entirely true, and there is nothing in it to cause surprise. Muslim poets were indeed intoxicated by the nectar of Radha–Krishna's divine love; some, through drinking of this nectar, attained a kind of immortality. In their portrayal of *līlā-rasa*, many became so absorbed that, if one were to remove the *vaṇitā* signature, it would be impossible to determine whether the poem was composed by a Hindu or a Muslim. For a poet to earn such praise while remaining outside the boundaries of his own religious community is no small distinction."[17]

The truth of this observation is strongly confirmed by the *pada* of Mir Fazullah cited above. To compose such poetry—rising above religious identity—is itself a luminous testament to the spirit of communal harmony.

The Mangal-Kāvya Tradition: *Caṇḍīmangal*

We now turn to the *Mangal-kāvya* tradition of premodern Bengali literature. For this purpose, we have selected the Kolkata University edition of poet Mukunda Chakravarti's text.

Mukunda Chakravarti, the author of *Caṇḍīmangal*, was a poet deeply attuned to the flavours of life. He possessed an acute sensitivity not only to the inner world of human character but also to the external structures of social life. And who is absent from the social universe he depicts? Kings, policemen (*koṭāls*), hunters, merchants, swindlers, travelling performers, peasants, Brahmins, Kayasthas, cowherds, fishermen, traders, and Muslims. Mukunda perceives Muslims not merely as neighbours but as integral participants in the occupationally diverse fabric of Bengali society. Although their religious practices differ, they are part of the larger Bengali social order—a natural assumption evident throughout his work.

As the editor of *Kavikankan Chandi*, Shrikumar Bandyopadhyay writes in his introduction:

"The most intriguing stratum of this social structure is that of the newly arrived Muslim community. Three centuries of coexistence had by then rendered the Muslim population an inseparable component of Bengali society, and within their religious unity diverse occupational sub-groups had emerged. *Caṇḍīmangal* offers a lively description of this process. Even more striking is the complete absence of sectarian narrowness or bitterness in references to Muslims."[18]

Mukunda Chakravarti recounts episodes from his own life in the *"Cause of the Composition of the Book"* section of *Caṇḍīmangal*. He describes the oppressive actions of "Dihidar Mamud Sharip." Yet even in this portrayal of personal hardship, no trace of communal hostility appears. The criticism remains confined to political and material grievances. Elsewhere in the poem, we find instead clear signs of harmony between the poet and the Muslim community. In the "Gujarāt Nagar-Nirmāṇ" section of *Caṇḍīmangal*, alongside references to the *nāṭ–bāṭ*, *Viṣṇu's shrine*, *Durgāmelā*, *nāṭmaṇḍir*, and *Śiva's temple*, the following lines occur:

On the western side he then
Raised the house of prayer—*namāz-gṛha*;
Many a mosque, each with distinctive design.[19]

(পশ্চিম দিকেতে সেহ তুলিলা নমাজ-গৃহ
দলিল মসজিদ নানা ছন্দে।)

This city plan is unmistakably a testament to Bengal's long tradition of communal harmony. From the very beginning of Kalketu's urban vision, Muslims are part of the settlement. Even the *beruṇiyā*s who arrive to clear the forest for city-building are Muslim. Their identity is introduced thus:

From the west arrived the *beruṇiyā*,
Dofor Miñā by name,
With Champā and twenty thousand men.
Making garlands of chickpeas
They invoke their Pīr and Prophet,
Clear the forest and prepare the marketplace.[20]

(পশ্চিমে বেরুণিয়া আইল দফর মিঞা
সঙ্গে চম্পা বইস হাজার।
ছোলেমানী মালা করে জপে পীর পেগম্বরে
বন কাট্যা পাতয়ে বাজার।।)

The forest is cleared, a city arises, and according to the poet's architectural design, all castes and occupational groups inhabit this new city—including Muslims. In the section titled "Arrival of the Muslims," we find descriptions of the Muslim residents who settled on the western side of the city. Mukunda describes them as devout, sincere, and unpretentious:

Extremely charitable all,
They know no crooked ways;
Even at death's door they will not forsake the fast.
They will not speak to anyone
Whose head is bare;
Their disciples they strike if found negligent.
Clad in Komboj garments,
They keep the head shaved,
The beard covering the chest.[21]

(বড়ই দানিসবন্দ না জানে কপট ছন্দ
প্রাণ গেলে রোজা নাহি ছাড়ি।
যার দেখে খালি মাথা তার সনে নাহি কথা
সারিয়া চেলার মারে বাড়ি।।
ধরয়ে কম্বোজ বেশ মাথাতে না রাখে কেশ
বুক আচ্ছাদিয়া রাখে দাড়ি।।)

Mukunda does not stop at such vivid characterisation; he also recognises that the Muslim community—like Hindu society—contained internal occupational divisions. In the section titled "The Classification of Muslims," he offers an elaborate list of groups such as *jolā*, *mukeri*, *piṭhāri*, *kābāri*, *garsāl*, *sānākār*, *hājām*, *tīrakar*, *kāgajī*, *beṇṭā*, *raṅgan*, and *hālan*:

One who skips fasting and prayer becomes a *golā*;
Thus he acquires the name *jolā*.
Herding cattle makes one a *mukeri*;
Selling cakes earns the name *piṭhāri*.
Selling fish brings the name *kābāri*;
Constant liars keep no beard.[22]

(রোজা নমাজ না করিয়া কেহ হৈল গোলা।
তাসন করিয়া নাম ধরাইল জোলা।।
বলদে বাহিয়া নাম ধরাল্য মুকেরি।
পিঠা বেচি কেহ নাম ধরাল্য পিঠারি।।
মৎস বেচিয়া নাম ধরাল্য কাবাড়ি।
নিরন্তর মিথ্যা কহে নাহি রাখে দাড়ি।।)

From the viewpoint of social history, these descriptions are invaluable. Mukunda gives us a rare, documentary glimpse into the professions and social organisation of the Muslim population of his time. Although such a detailed classification may not seem necessary to the central narrative design of *Caṇḍīmangal*, the poet deliberately incorporates it with notable emphasis. All communities come to inhabit the newly built city of Gujarat, but Mukunda introduces the Muslims first—only afterward the Brahmins, Kayasthas, cowherds, and fishermen. This ordering strongly suggests the poet's conscious, harmony-oriented vision. In the overall structure of the *Mangal-kāvya*, this poetic placement of the marginalised Bengali Muslim community is undoubtedly significant.

Who were these Muslims described in *Caṇḍīmangal*? Golam Murshid, in *Hājār Bochorer Bāṅgālī Sabhyatā*, has attempted an answer. Mukunda notes at one point that Muslims "sit ten or twenty brethren together and study the *ketāb*and the Qur'an." Drawing special attention to the word *berādar*, Murshid comments:

"From this, we may guess something about the language of these Muslims. At the very least, there is little doubt that they were descendants of outsiders, belonging to a higher social rank. The reference to 'adorning the Pīr's *maqām* 'is also noteworthy. This is not the Sunni Islam of Arabia."[23]
Rather, the implication is of Persian-speaking *pīrs* arriving from North India—carriers of a Sufi culture that Bengali Hindu society would soon adopt into both its religious practices and everyday life.

Folk Life and Literature: *Maimansinha Gītikā*

Another enduring, stone-like testimony to the social history of the Bengali people at the folk level is found in *Prācīn Purbabāṅga Gītikā*, collected by Chandrakumar De and edited by Acharya Dinesh Chandra Sen. In his editorial introduction, Sen notes that these ballads had been sung orally for countless generations and that these verses—belonging to a "pre-Sanskritic age"—deserve to stand alongside *Moināmotir Gān*, *Gorakṣavijay*, *Śūnyapurāṇa*,

Sūrya-ślokas, the earliest songs of Caṇḍī and Manasā Devī, *vratakathā*s, folktales, *ḍāk* and Khonar sayings—representative works from the vast domain of ancient Bengali literature. These folk ballads are therefore crucial for understanding Hindu–Muslim relations at the non-elite, everyday level of Bengali society.

From *Prācīn Purbabāṅga Gītikā*, only a few ballads from the *Maimansinha Gītikā* corpus have been selected here for discussion. Our focus will be to examine the extent to which religious identity becomes intertwined with the language and narrative structure of these songs.

Regarding the language of these ballads, Acharya Dinesh Chandra Sen writes:

"Over the past five or six centuries, the Bengali language has become equally that of Hindus and of Muslims. The religious scriptures and social ideals of Muslims are largely recorded in Arabic and Persian literature; knowledge of these literatures is essential to their daily lives. Our relationship to Sanskrit is, in some respects, similar to their relationship to Arabic and Persian.…
Muslims are our neighbours; we can't avoid them in any way. For this reason, the language of the western regions adjacent to Bengal has mingled with Bengali to some extent and has become related to our everyday speech. This hybrid language has entered not only the huts of our peasants but even the inner quarters of Hindu households."[24]

A brief example may be taken from the *Maluyā Pālā*:

Sitting in the *hāulī (Palace)*, The beautiful Maluā weeps.
Leaving her couch, she sits upon the *jamīn (floor)*.
The maidservants bring her food and drink for comfort.
Before her stands the *deywan-sāb*, placing a *kīrā (veil)* upon his head.[25]

(হাউলীতে বসিয়া কান্দে মলুয়া সুন্দরী।
পালঙ্ক ছাড়িয়া বসে জমীন উপরী।।
আরাম খানা আরাম পিনা আইন্যাছে বান্দিরা।
সামনে খাড়া দেওয়ান সাব মাথার দিছে কিরা।।)

In just these four lines, no fewer than eight words of unmistakably Persian origin appear. Instead of the familiar Bengali words for "Rājprāsād" "Māti" or "Chīruni" the poet uses *hāulī*, *jamīn*, *kīrā*, and others with complete naturalness. The effortless incorporation of these Persian-derived terms into Bengali—descended from the Eastern sub-branch of Magadhi Prakrit—is, in fact, the linguistic outcome of long and intimate neighbourly coexistence between Hindu and Muslim communities.

In Chandrāvat'īs *Dewān Bhābnā*, describing the beauty of Sunāi, we find:
Within the *pargaṇā–mahāl* lives a woman of wondrous beauty,
as fair as a *hūr-parī*, the daughter of a young Brahmin.[26]
(পরগণা মহালে আছে পরম সুন্দরী।
ভাটুক বামুনের কন্যা যেমন হুর পরী।।)

The editor's footnote explains: "Hūr = a Muslim word, a category of celestial maidens (ḥūrī)."

It is evident, then, that Islamic mythological and folkloric imagery had become so deeply woven into the fabric of Bengali folk culture that even a woman poet, in describing beauty, could invoke the figure of the *hūrī* with complete ease.

The first ballad of the *Maimansinha Gītikā* is *Mahua*, composed by Dvija Kanai. Its opening "sixteen-line hymn" (*ślokas*) was "composed by a Muslim singer." A few verses from that sixteen-line *vandana-gīti* may be cited here:

To the north I offer homage, unto Kailāsa mountain—
Where lie, it is said, the sacred stones of Ali's relics.

To the west I offer homage, unto Mecca, the holy abode;
Extending my devotion there, I become a true Muslim believer.

In the assembly sit both Hindu and Muslim brothers;
At the feet of that august gathering, I bow in reverence.[27]

(উত্তরে বন্দনা গো করলাম কৈলাস পর্‌বত।
যেখানে পড়িয়া গো আছে আলীর মালামের পাথ্‌থর।।
পশ্চিমে বন্দনা গো করলাম মক্কা এন স্থান।
উরদিশে বাড়ায় ছেলাম মমিন মুসলমান।।
সভা কইব্যা বইছ ভাইরে ইন্দু মুসলমান।
সভার চরণে আমি জানাইলাম ছেলাম।।)

One may reasonably assume that these sixteen lines were inserted by a balladeer. If this is the case, then it must also be admitted that a "Hindu" poet's composition being sung by a Muslim performer posed no religious conflict. At least, the surviving literary evidence makes that abundantly clear.

A similar intermingling appears in the hero–heroine typologies of the ballads. Sometimes the hero is Hindu and the heroine Muslim; elsewhere, the reverse. Acharya Dinesh Chandra Sen observes:

"The Muslim poet Kalidas Gajdani recounts with complete candour the love of Gajdani and Mamina Khatun; alongside this appears the story of Kedar Ray's sister, who was in love with Isa Khan. In yet another ballad, the Brahmin Jayachandra falls in love with a Muslim woman; and in another, Suratajmal loves the Brahmin princess Adhua. These ballads were heard alike by Hindu and Muslim audiences. The divine Being who smiles and plays with the tender movements of the human heart recognises no distinctions of caste or creed, however much they are cherished in human design."[28]

Two examples illustrate this further. In the *Rūpabatī* ballad, a Hindu king visits the home of a Muslim *nawāb*. The king is delighted with the *nazrānā* he receives, and in turn, is royally entertained:

Receiving ten thousand *tanka*, the *Person* rejoiced;
He gifted King Rajachandra a house of his choosing.
Contented, the king stayed on in the Nawab's quarters;
From within her chamber, the queen beheld a dream.[29]
(দশ হাজার তঙ্কা পাইয়া খুসী হইলা মিঞা।
রাজচন্দ্রে দিলা ঘর বাছাই করিয়া।।
#
নবাবের সরে রাজা আছে খুসী মন।
ঘরেতে থাকিয়া রাণী দেখিল স্বপন।।)

At the lower tiers of society as well, Hindu subjects did not hesitate to accept a Muslim ascetic as their spiritual guide. In the *Kaṅka o Līlā* ballad, after being blessed by a Muslim *pīr*, the poet writes of Kaṅka:

Kaṅka is no longer the mere cowherd;
The world now calls him Kavikaṅka—
Even Gargacharya marvels at the change.

Hindus and Muslims alike
Revere the true *pīr*;
Thus was the *pañcālī* honoured among all.[30]
(কঙ্ক আর রাখাল নহে, কবিকঙ্ক লোকে কহে,
শুনি গর্গ ভাবে চমৎকার।
হিন্দু আর মোছলমানে সত্যপীরে উভে মানে
পাঁচালীর হৈল সমাদর।।)

Across these folk narratives, examples of easy, organic neighbourly relations between people of different castes and religions abound. These relationships were not consciously cultivated; they emerged naturally, from the inner life of the people. This is the enduring tradition of Bengali social existence.

Muslim Poets in Bengali Literature

In the history of Bengali literature, the moment the subject of Muslim poets arises, the names most commonly invoked are those of **Daulat Qazi** or **Syed Alaol** of the Arakan royal court. Yet the association between Muslim poets and the literary traditions of the Bengali language goes back much earlier. After Sanskrit and Prakrit, an Apabhraṁśa language—widely used across the Indian subcontinent—served as an important medium of literary expression, and numerous Muslim poets composed works in this language. Among these, *Sandesha-Rāsaka*, composed by **Abdur Rahman** in the **twelfth century**, is particularly noteworthy.

During that era, Apabhraṁśa existed in two distinct forms:
(1) a grammatically codified variety cultivated by scholars, and
(2) a more colloquial or rural form used in everyday settings.
Sandesha-Rāsaka was written in this **vernacular Apabhraṁśa**. Its opening verse reads:

"Rayaṇāi dharagirī tarubaraṅi gayaṇaṅgaṇaṅmi rikakhāi /
Jenajja sakala siriyaṅ so buhayaṇa bo sibaṅ deu."

(রয়ণায়ধরগিরি তরুবরাঁই গয়ণংগণংমি রিকখাঁই।
জেনজ্জ সকল সিরিয়ং সো বুহয়ন বো সিবং দেউ।।)

O enlightened ones, may that Creator—He by whom the ocean, the earth, the mountains, the trees, and the stars adorning the firmament were brought into being—grant you auspiciousness (śiva, welfare).[31]

It is evident from this very verse that the poet was deeply rooted in the Sanskrit poetic tradition. **Kshitimohan Sen**, in one of his reminiscences, cited another example of a similar nature:

"A few years ago, during the summer vacation, I travelled to Patiya in Chittagong. There, in the village of Suchakrachandi, I met the elderly scholar and dedicated literary enthusiast **Pandit Abdul Karim**. During our conversation, he handed me a copy of an old manuscript. The manuscript was titled *Horan Jarip*, which is essentially a Prakritised recitation of the Holy Qur'an. The opening of the manuscript is composed in broken Sanskrit:

'Satyaṃ Parameśvaradattaṃ saṃsārasāratattvaṃ
Pāpanāśera astra Horan Jaripe jñāna umī sāre
Gaibī kalpataru yugajīva hitārthe śrīṃkhalārambhaḥ.'

…

(সত্যং পরমেশ্বরদত্তং সংসারসারতত্ত্বং
পাপনাশের অস্ত্র হোরান জরিপে জ্ঞান উমী সারে
গৈবি কল্পতরু যুগজীব হিতার্থে শ্রীংখলারম্ভঃ।।)

A survey of ancient Indian research materials reveals that numerous royal charters and coins issued by Muslim rulers were inscribed in Sanskrit. Many Muslim poets, too, composed in Sanskrit. The names of **Daraf Khan**, **Abdur Rahim**, and others are well known in this regard.[32]

Thus, long before the early and medieval periods of Bengali literature, Muslim poets had already assimilated the Sanskrit–Prakrit literary heritage, and they transmitted elements of this heritage even into religious texts such as the Qur'an."

In the seventeenth century, the Muslim poets writing in the Bengali language were, for the most part, inhabitants of the southeastern regions of eastern Bengal, namely the Chittagong–Rohang area. During the late fifteenth century, under the reign of **Husain Shah of Bengal**, and with the patronage of **Paragal Khan** and **Chhuti Khan**, Chittagong–Rohang emerged as one of the principal centres of Bengali literary patronage.

In their research, **Abdul Karim** and **Muhammad Enamul Haq** demonstrated that, in comparison with the Bengali Muslims of western Bengal, the Muslim communities of the eastern frontiers possessed a more developed literary and linguistic sensibility. Drawing upon the works of the pre-seventeenth-century poets **Mohammad Khan**, **Maktul Husain**, and the *Jangnama* of **Mohammad Eyakub**—a poet from the South 24 Parganas of present-day West Bengal—they showed that, between two texts narrating the same Karbala episode, *Eyakub's* composition was not only inferior to Mohammad Khan's in poetic scholarship and aesthetic quality, but that *"his language degenerated into a spineless khichuri (a muddled mixture)."*

Mohammad Khan's reluctance to employ an excessive number of Persian, Arabic, or Urdu terms, and his profound affection for the native Bengali tongue, encouraged later poets to compose literature devoid of overt Islamic religious markers. To support this argument, several lines may be cited from **Abdul Hakim's *Nurnama***, a text from this region dating back nearly two hundred years:

Those who are born in Bengal yet despise the Bengali language—
I know not of what lineage such people may be.
If one finds no joy in wisdom expressed in the native tongue,
Why does one not abandon his homeland and go elsewhere?
For generations our forefathers have dwelt in Bengal;
The instruction of the native language is profoundly beneficial to the mind.[33]

(জে সবে বঙ্গেত জন্মি হিংসে বঙ্গবাণি।
সে সব কাহার জন্ম নির্ণএ না জানি।।
দেসি ভাসা বিদ্যা জার মনে না জুয়াএ।
নিজ দেশ তেআগী কেন বিদেসে না জাএ।।
মাতা পিতামহ ক্রমে বঙ্গেত বসতি।
দেসি ভাসা উপদেস মন হিত অতি।।)

Although these poets inherited the Arabic literary tradition and were educated in Islamic learning and practices, it had already become clear by this time that the language of the Muslim inhabitants of Bengal was Bengali and that their deeper emotional life was embedded within the fabric of **Bengali culture**. Their closest cultural neighbours in this linguistic–cultural landscape were, naturally, the Hindu communities of Bengal.

Kṣitimohan Sen, while discussing the seventeenth-century poets of the Arakan (Rohsang) royal court in Chittagong, wrote:

"From Malik Muhammad Jāyas'īs *Padmāvat*, Alaol's *Padmāvatī*, Abdur Rahim's *Sandesh-Rasak*, and other works, it becomes evident that Muslim writers of that era studied Sanskrit and Prakrit with deep reverence, and discussed the Purāṇas and Śāstras with equal respect. Their knowledge of poetics, aesthetics, Sāṃkhya, and Yoga was so profound that it would be difficult to find, even today, many Brahmin scholars to match them."[34]

Golam Murshid, in *Hajar Bochorer Bangali Sabhyatā*, shows that the works of Daulat Kazi, Syed Alaol, and Magan Thakur—composed under the patronage of the Arakan court, outside the Mughal sphere—display far fewer Arabic or Persian influences. Their poetic diction is largely *tatsama* (Sanskritic), and "both in subject matter and language, Islamic influence is very limited."[35]

Daulat Kazi, born into a prestigious *Kazi* family in the early seventeenth century, composed the romance *Satī-Maynā* at the behest of Ashraf Khan, commander-in-chief of King Sūdharmā of Arakan. No Islamic themes or characters appear in the poem; all the figures—Maynamatī, Lor, Candrāṇī, Bāman, Rowna Mālinī, Chāṭan—are Hindu. Even in structure and style, his work is indebted to the *Mangal-kāvya* tradition: Mayn'ās *bāramāsī* (song of twelve months) and the didactic teachings of *Sadupadeśṭā* echo the conventions of earlier Hindu narrative poetry. Abdul Karim and Muhammad Enamul Haq both consider the *bāramāsī* section to be Daulat's most accomplished literary creation:

"Mayn'ās exquisite character is immortalised by the poet's brush in this *bāramāsī*. We know of no earlier poet who used Brajabuli in a *bāramāsī* before Daulat Kazi."[36]

The next major Arakan court poet, chronologically after Daulat Kazi, was Qureshi Magan Thakur. Literary scholars have shown that he was a Muslim of the Qureshi-Sheikh Siddiqui lineage; "Magan" was merely an honorific. He served as Prime Minister to King Sūdharmā. Some scholars believe that the author of *Chandravati*, Magan Thakur, was also Alaol's patron—although Sukumar Sen contests both his Muslim identity and his connection to Alaol. Regardless, Magan Thakur was a polymath:

"He knew Arabic, Persian, Burmese, and Sanskrit. His mastery of Bengali is evident from the *Chandravati*. In addition to these languages, he was well-versed in music, drama, poetry, and poetics; he was also skilled in medicine, magic, and various practical sciences."[37]

His *Chandravati*, composed by a scholar fluent in Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit, is entirely free of Islamic themes. Characters such as Chandrasen, Sanjay, Sut, Surpal, Chandravati, Birbhan, Chitravati, Rathmani, Indramani, Suradatta, and Rupavati populate this romantic epic. The text integrates Hindu ritual and Purāṇic lore with ease. When Birbhan's naval fleet reaches an island, Magan Thakur compares it to Indra's garden:

Neither high nor low—perfectly even.
Beautiful to behold, like Indra's celestial grove.[38]

(উচ্চ নীচ নাহি কিছু একই সমান।
দেখিতে সুন্দর যেন ইন্দ্রের উদ্যান।।)

When the hero fears he may not be able to marry Chandravati, the counsellor reassures him:

Listen, my son: by wisdom alone,
One may fetch even Indra's apsarā from heaven;
Or from the netherworld retrieve
The jewel from the serpent Ananta's crest.[39]

(শুন পারি বুদ্ধি বলে মর্ত্ত্যের মাঝার।
স্বর্গ হন্তে ইন্দ্র অপ্সরা আনিবার।।
পাতালেত অনন্ত নাগের শিরোমণি।
বুদ্ধিবলে আনিয়া দিতে পারি পুনি।।)

Such passages attest to the poet's deep command over Purāṇic and Śāstric traditions.

The third great poet of the Arakan court was Syed Alaol. In addition to completing Daulat Kazi's unfinished *Satī-Maynā*, Alaol composed five other works: *Hapt Paykar*, *Sikandar-nāma*, *Padmāvatī*, *Saif-ul-Muluk Badiuzzamal*, and *Tohfa*. Except *Padmāvatī*, all are adaptations of Persian originals.

Sukumar Sen describes Alaol thus:
"Alaol was a scholar and a man of great attainments. He had considerable proficiency in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Bengali, and Hindi; he excelled in music and dramaturgy. … Alaol was a Sufi practitioner."[40]
Padmāvatī is unanimously regarded as his masterpiece—an independent Bengali version of the Sufi poet Jāyas'īs *Sadumāvata*. The tragic tale recounts Alauddin Khalji's siege of Chittor and the subsequent self-immolation of Queen Padmāvatī to preserve her honour. Interestingly, in selecting this work for translation, Alaol chose a story in which the antagonist is a Muslim Sultan, and the poet's sympathy clearly leans towards the Hindu king Ratan Sen and Padmāvatī.

Though both Jāyasī and Alaol were Sufi poets, their diction is remarkably non-Islamic. Jāyasī avoided foreign words when native forms were available; similarly, Alaol's poetry contains very few Arabic and Persian terms:

"Both write *Kabilās* ('Kailāsa') instead of 'Beshisht '(Paradise). Jāyasī consistently uses 'Purāṇa 'where one might expect 'Qurā'n'. Though we occasionally find the word 'Qurā'n 'in present printed editions of Alaol, it is likely an editorial alteration; Alaol himself probably wrote 'Purāṇa'. Jāyasī frequently invokes episodes from the Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, and Bhāgavata; Alaol does the same. Both poets allude to the lore of Matsyendranath, Gorakhnath, Gopichand, and Maynamati; Alaol also mentions the Vidyasundar tale."[41]

Thus, even in "independent translation," Alaol, like Jāyasī, acknowledged and incorporated Hindu mythological traditions.

Another major seventeenth-century Muslim writer of this period, though not directly patronised by the Arakan court, was Syed Sultan, author of *Nabībamśa*. Unlike the Arakan poets, he did not compose romantic narratives; his works are deeply religious—*Jñānacauṭiśā*, *Jñānapradīpa*, and *Nabībamśa*. Yet Hindu Purāṇic influence is unmistakable. Golam Murshid observes:

"Syed Sultan was probably a Hajji. Yet indigenous religious thought deeply influenced him. Not only did he include Brahmā, Viṣṇu, and Śiva among the prophets, he regarded the four Vedas as *āsmānī kitāb*—divinely revealed scriptures. His *Jñānacauṭiśā* and *Jñānapradīpa* show how thoroughly he blended yogic and Sufi doctrine. *Nabībamśa* too demonstrates his profound knowledge of Hindu myth."[42]

Syed Sultan's *Nabībamśa*, whose very title echoes the Sanskrit *Harivaṃśa*, holds a unique place in Bengali literary history. At a time when composing religious texts in the vernacular was considered improper, Sultan disregarded such prohibitions, out of devotion to his mother tongue, and drew freely on neighbouring mythological sources. One example from *Nabībamśa* illustrates this:

To distinguish merit from sin among humankind,
Four great sages brought forth the four Vedas.
Brahmā sent the Ṛgveda—
That humans might gain true knowledge.
When Viṣṇu became manifest,
He dispatched the Yajurveda.[43]

(নর সবে পাইবারে পাপপূণ্য ভেদ
চারি মহাজন স্থানে আইল চারি বেদ।
ঋকবেদ ব্রহ্মাত পাঠাইলা নৈরাকার
নর সবে সেইকালে জ্ঞান পাইবার।
তবে যদি বিষ্ণুর হইল উতপন
যজুর্বেদ তাহানে পাঠাইলা নিরঞ্জন।)

Conclusion: The Continuity of Medieval Syncretic Traditions

From the evidence presented, it is clear that medieval Bengali literature never deviated from the path of Hindu–Muslim cultural exchange. Literature mirrored society faithfully. Golam Murshid notes that whereas the Arakan court poets wrote in highly Sanskritised diction, by the late Mughal period Ramprasad Sen, composing Hindu devotional songs, freely used Arabic and Persian vocabulary:

I have learned, O Mother Śyāmā,
Your court is formidable—
Filled with the cries of fukari, faredi, bādi …
What courtly majesty, O Mother![44]

(জানিলাম বিষম বড় শ্যামা মায়েরী দরবার রে।
(সদা) ফুকারি ফরেদি বাদি না হয় সঞ্চার রে।।
আরজবেগী যার শিবে দরবারের ভাষ্য কিবে মাগো।)

Even the last major poet of the medieval era, the author of *Anandamaṅgal*, Raygunākar Bharatchandra, could not escape this syncretic linguistic inheritance. Writing a devotional poem to the Hindu goddess Annapūrṇā, he confessed:

Without a blending of Yavana (Persian-Arabic) diction,
My verses will have neither grace nor flavour.[45]
(না রবে প্রসাদগুণ, না হবে রসাল।
অতএব কহি ভাষা যাবনী মিশাল।।)

In a playful courtly scene, he writes:
The Pādshāh said: 'Listen, Man Singh Rāy—
Your strange words have caused great astonishment![46]
(পাতশা কহেন শুন মানসিংহ রায়।
গজব করিলা তুমি আজব কথায়।।)

For Bharatchandra, composing in a "Yavana-mixed" style posed no difficulty; after all, he knew Persian as well as Sanskrit.

In the modern era too, Bengali culture preserved this tradition of synthesis. Raja Rammohan Roy, described as a "zabardast maulavi," was so proficient in Arabic, Persian, and Islamic theology that the preface to his first work *Tuhfat-ul-Muwahhidīn* was written in Arabic and the text in Persian.[47] He also edited a Persian journal, *Mirat-ul-Akhbar*. Adam's survey (1836–38) of five Bengali districts found 2,096 Hindu students and 1,558 Muslim students proficient in Persian.[48] Even in British India, long after the Sultanate had ended, Islamic cultural prestige remained strong among the Bengali elite, as seen in Kaliprasanna Singha's *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*:

Palanath Babu, king of connoisseurs, dislikes the English style;
he considers English learning merely practical,
and spends days and nights with Muslims,
revelling in talk of princely etiquette and Nawabi refinement.[49]

The same legacy flourished in the Tagore household, the "golden lotus" of the Bengal Renaissance. Gauri Aiyub notes that in their clothing and daily life the Tagores exhibited more *Nawabi* elegance than *Sahibi* Englishness.[50] Devendranath Tagore's love for Hafez is famous; he knew Persian perfectly. Abanindranath gave Bengali letters an Arabic stylistic flourish in many of his book covers. Muhammad Shahidullah writes of Rabindranath:

Even his attire rose above ordinary Bengali custom—
he looked like a formidable *mawlānā*.[51]

This culture of mutual exchange survived into the twentieth century. The rise of communal separatism did create tensions—for instance, the criticism of Kazi Nazrul Islam by the journal *Islam Darshan*:

This reckless youth has had no true Islamic education;
His mind is filled with Hindu imaginings.
Whatever comes to his pen, he writes.
Had this been a strictly Islamic state,
this Pharaoh or Nimrod would surely have been impaled.[52]

Yet it was precisely those who, in the name of Islamic orthodoxy, sought to sever Bengali Muslims from their cultural roots and draw them toward a fabricated "Arab" identity (East Pakistan), who ultimately—with the Language Movement—helped establish a linguistic, democratic nation-state: independent Bangladesh.

Thus the Bengali mother tongue, shared equally by Hindu and Muslim, found its fullest expression in Bengali literature—a long and continuous tradition whose foundations were firmly laid in the medieval period.

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