
**EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT AND CHRISTIANITY: A STUDY OF EMERGING
SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSION IN THE MID-SEVENTEENTH CENTURY
MUGHAL BENGAL (1650-1700 AD)**

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ABSTRACT:

This work brought a new dimension of cultural diffusion in the mid-seventeenth-century Mughal Bengal, highlighting the growth of European settlement and the spread of Christianity. There has been an established notion in the history of medieval Bengal that focused mostly on the relationship between Hindus and Muslims as a part of syncretism or composite culture. However, hardly any study has been conducted on the role of European settlement in the process of social and cultural diffusion. The discussion of this work is based on four fundamental aspects: firstly, the European settlement and spread of Christianity; secondly, a theological discourse between Hinduism and Christianity as reflected in a vernacular text; thirdly, the creation of new linguistic and cultural identity among the native converted Christians of Bengal; fourthly, Job Charnock and his relation with native Bengali society. This work used contemporary accounts of foreign travellers, vernacular texts, and secondary missionary and colonial records.

KEYWORDS: European, Christianity, Seventeenth, Syncretism

INTRODUCTION:

Mughal Bengal has created a significant position in the history of medieval India as a centre of cultural diversity and religious discourse. The mid-seventeenth century brought a significant transformation in the socio-religious sphere of Bengal through the emergence of Goddess faith, folk beliefs and the beginning of European settlement. The period has also been identified as the phase of “foreign-Bengali discourse”.¹ since it witnessed the interaction between the Indigenous population of Bengal and the Europeans that influenced religious and cultural traditions. The earlier identity of syncretistic culture which was centred around between the Hindus and Muslims had now incorporated a different essence in the socio-cultural dimension of Bengal. The contemporary sources provide ample evidence about the European settlement in different parts of Bengal which had two objectives- one was commercial another was missionary activity. The gradual spread of the Christian population ultimately led to the emergence of a distinctive process of cultural diffusion than that of the preceding centuries of medieval Bengal.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

Several works have been done on the political and social aspects of Mughal Bengal. In most cases, the authors tried to focus on the dynastic and administrative history with considerable references to regional power rivalry and imperial policy-making. Some recent works shifted the approaches by focusing on the larger socio-cultural dynamics of Mughals up to the last decade of the sixteenth century. There is a specific work on the Hindu-Muslim relation of Mughal Bengal which studies the religious and cultural interaction of these two great communities in the formation of composite heritage in medieval Bengal. A recent work also focused on the Mughal culture and its diffusion

to rural Bengal through the process of Islamization. Even regarding the period of Aurangzeb a work has been done focusing on the political, cultural and religious aspects. However, none of these works have emphasised the perspective of European settlement and Christianity as a form of cultural and religious discourse in the mid-seventeenth century Bengal.

Works dealing with the historiography of Mughal Bengal during the mid-seventeenth century are few. The *Tarikh-i-Bangala* of Salim Allah and the *Riyaz-us-Salatin* of Ghulam Hussain Salim in particular, were written to fulfil the objectives of British colonial rule, which was to obtain a detailed account of the geography, society, and culture of Bengal. While Salim Allah's *Tarikh-i-Bangala* was based on the narratives of Mughal viceroys under Aurangzeb, the *Riyaz-us-Salatin* of Ghulam Hussain Salim described the history of Muslim Bengal from the time of the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khalji to the later Mughal period. Regarding the history of medieval Bengal, we have a few major secondary works. Among them, the most prominent is Tapan Raychaudhuri's *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History*, in which he has dealt with the different aspects of society, religion, and modes of life. A related book on this subject written by Atul Chandra Roy, entitled *History of Bengal: Mughal period (1526-1765 A.D.)*. It has mostly described the administrative structure, power rivalry, and imperial policy-making of the Mughal empire, with considerable references to regional politics. Only in the second last chapter of this book, that he gives an overview of the social scenario of Mughal Bengal.² Richard M. Eaton, in his *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, expounded on several new aspects, such as: Mughal culture and its diffusion; mosques and shrines in the rural landscape, and the rooting of Islam in Bengal. In context of the society, Eaton provides a detailed insight into the

Bengali Ashraf and Non-Ashraf Muslims.³ Dr Anjali Chatterjee's book *Bengal in the Reign of Aurangzib 1658-1707* discusses the political affairs since the days of Shah Shuja. The most valuable part of this book is chapter six, which deals with the characteristics of the society, religion, culture, and education of Bengal during the reign of Aurangzeb. The work of Md. Shah Noorur Rahman entitled *Hindu-Muslim Relations in Mughal Bengal* fundamentally focused on the dynamic perspectives of syncretistic culture in Bengal which started from the time of the Bengal Sultanate.

OBJECTIVE:

The objectives of this work are as follows-

1. To focus on the growth of European settlement and the spread of Christianity in the mid-seventeenth-century Bengal.
2. To identify the emerging mode of cultural diffusion.

METHODOLOGY:

This work makes use of published primary sources as well as secondary literature, journals, and articles to reach valid conclusions. The information contained in the available primary sources has been analysed and compared with the secondary sources. Most of the primary sources, the present study has made use of, like the accounts of foreign travellers, vernacular Bengali texts, and other Persian sources, etc. are published. For consulting the secondary sources, personal visits were made to the Central Library of Visva-Bharati, and the Kolkata National Library.

DISCUSSION:

The objective of any cross-cultural study is not to promulgate the superiority of one above the other but to explore their inner development, and nature of interaction with other similar and dissimilar cultures.⁴ The problem in the case of Bengal as well as India was that such kinds of studies are only limited to the Hindus and the Muslims or to some extent among the locally varied cultures. In Bengal too, the face of composite identity parallelly continued between Hindus and Muslims because most of the contemporary indigenous sources provide the elaborate details of these two communities. Therefore, a full-fledged syncretic picture remains untouched. In the mid-seventeenth century Bengal significant role of Christianity can be seen in the making of contemporary society, culture and religious beliefs. In that context, the modern scholars have also demonstrated the same socio-cultural profiles. But less emphasis has been given to the assimilative virtues of Christianity due to lack of evidences. The necessity of studying this aspect is to explore the new composite shape that occurred after the advent of the Europeans. Simultaneously, how Christianity helped in the process of understanding the prevalent culture and society can also be closely examined.

Before initiating the main discussion, it is necessary to have an overview of the spread of Christianity in Bengal. Bengal, during the rule of the Mughals, housed diverse group of foreigners who were actively involved in trade and commercial activities as Bengal was one of the most important economic pockets of India. Among them, some had settled during the sixteenth century, while many had come during the seventeenth century. The Portuguese, Dutch, English and Armenians, etc. were active in the economic as well as cultural life of Bengal. Unfortunately, little

is known about the life of these varied people, even though they had become very much the natives of the province, and almost lived in the similar manner as the common inhabitants of Bengal. Bengal's contact with Christianity began with the Portuguese who were the earliest European to settle in Bengal in the first half of the sixteenth century. Emperor Akbar permitted few of them to build churches in Bengal.⁵ From Hooghly the Portuguese gradually dispersed throughout Bengal, particularly in the districts of Midnapore, Dacca, Jessore, Barisal and Noakhali which transformed into the centre of Portuguese commercial activities. By about 1630 AD, there were some 7,000 Christians at Hooghly, consisting of Portuguese, their wives, their Eurasian descendants and converts.⁶ The Portuguese sometimes used force to proselytize the common masses. The Jesuits built a school and a hospital in Hooghly in 1598–1599 AD with Emperor Akbar's approval. Jesuit Father Francisco Fernandez, with the permission of king Pratapaditya, also built a church, known as the “Holy Name of Jesus” which is now located in the old Jessore district of the present-day Bangladesh.⁷ In 1598 AD, the Augustinians constructed a church in Hooghly, after which they advanced as far as Dhaka. Further, they travelled to Arakan from 1621 AD and converted a large number of natives.⁸

The history of the arrival Armenians in India can be traced to pre-Mughal period. They were active in Agra, Kashmir, Bihar, and Bengal during the Mughal period. They erected a church at Agra during the reign of Akbar around 1562 AD. The city of Surat was the first location in India where they established a permanent settlement. During the mid-seventeenth century they settled at Syedabad, a commercial suburb of Murshidabad; and, at Chinsura, the commercial suburb of

Hooghly.⁹ Additionally, it is claimed that prior to the coming of Job Charnock, the Armenians had formed a small commercial centre in the village of Sutanuti at Calcutta.¹⁰ In the town of Chinsura, the Dutch had also built their first factory in Bengal.¹¹ Thus, by the end of Jahangir's reign, the Dutch had occupied a position of some importance in the Bengal's trade. The English constructed their first factory in Bengal in 1651 AD, and six years later they did the same in Balasore, Kashimbazar, and Patna. Very soon troubles started with the local government. However, in 1688 AD, Aurangzeb issued orders for conciliating the English and restoring their trade privileges throughout his empire. The Bengali governor at the time, Ibrahim Khan, received an order from Aurangzeb to permit the English the right to free trade.¹²

The gradual advent of Europeans had also resulted in the founding and expansion of various settlements associated with the Christian monasteries in Bengal. Hence, there emerged, what we call as a new affluent of foreign-Bengali discourse. It is on record that Manucci had negotiated with Mirza Gul, the governor of Bengal province, on behalf of a Jesuit father to build a church at Hooghly.¹³ Manucci even noticed many Christians, white and black Portuguese, with a church being served by a monk named Agostinho at Dhaka.¹⁴ Thevenot, while talking about Dhaka, mentioned the existence of an Augustinian monastery.¹⁵ Manucci took note of a prominent group of Christian monks as Friars.¹⁶

On religious and philosophical matters, the first interactions between the Christians and the native Hindus of Bengal have been recorded in a text titled *Brahman-Roman Catholic Sambad*. It was written by Dom Antonio who was said to have been the prince of Bhusana, in the Jassore district of present Bangladesh.¹⁷ The king of Bhusana was a Hindu, but his son had become a Christian. It happened in 1663 AD, when the Portuguese Magh pirates had enslaved the prince in Arakan. Later, an Augustinian clergy named Father Manuel Do Rozario manumitted him in exchange for money. Although initially the prince was fully devoted to his religion, after a dream of father Antonio he decided to embrace Christianity.¹⁸ Thereafter, he returned to Bengal and convinced others to widen the circle of Christianity. He wrote dialogues and compendiums to extensively preach the gospels of Jesus throughout eastern Bengal. It is estimated that, in due course, he converted between thirty and forty thousand people to Christianity. He wrote a popular Bengali book about his discussions with a Brahman through which he tried to establish the superiority of Christianity over Hinduism by way of episodes of debates on various aspects of religion. At the very beginning of this text, the discussion has been conducted on faith in which it can be observed that the Roman Catholic had a profound knowledge of the Hindu theology in terms of the concepts of heaven, hell, sin and virtue etc. In every step of this debate, he countered the Brahman and the Hindu scriptures. He ultimately pronounced Hinduism as *adharma*.

“আমিতো ধর্মো নিন্দা করিনা, ধর্মেরে ধর্মো কহি; অধর্মেরে অশ্মো কহি,..”.¹⁹

(I don't hate true religion. I consider them as pure; but I always regard the false as ungodly...).

[translation mine]

He criticised the way the Brahman claimed the humans to be dependent on the will of the God regarding his actions, rather than the discipline of religion. He points out at a conversation about *Karmafal* in which the Brahman said,

“করমাক্ষিত এই প্রব জন্মিয়াছিল, তাহাতে বিস্তি পাপ করিয়াছিলো,এ কারোন সেই পাপে এ কালে পাপ করে।”²⁰

(Everyone has been born in this world on account of his/her deeds; those who did sin in the previous life, are doing the same in this life too...). [translation mine]

But the Brahman's proclamation for *Karmafal* has been denied by the Roman Catholic as he doesn't believe that human actions are determined.²¹ Therefore, it can be observed in the next narrations that the Roman Catholic strongly disregarded the notion of predestination (Niyati or fate which are determined by Devine rule) which he argued was a wrong approach of Brahman.²² Thirdly, regarding the concept of God the Roman catholic used the term true *Parameshwar*. It has been argued that God is supreme above all who is most gracious, and can defeat everybody. Although he never emphasised upon a particular shape of the creator, the Brahman didn't believe in a shapeless God.²³ Even the Brahman demonstrated that God can bear the human form who can do every work normally. But the Roman catholic stated that based on his religious scripture God came in human form just for once. Here, he was referring to the Jesus. While answering the question of the Brahman, this Roman catholic described the story of Jesus by saying that Jesus was born at the home of Joseph and in the womb of Merry.²⁴ Fourthly, there was a long dialogue

between them about the idea of Avatar or incarnation. According to Hinduism the evolution took place through the incarnations of Kurma (tortoise), Macca (fish) and Narasimha (man-lion) Avatar.²⁵ Regarding Narasimha's Avatar, the Brahman enumerated the story of Hiranya Kashyapa, a demon, who was killed by this Avatar.²⁶ The same thing he repeated for Rama Avatar, who was sent to kill the Ravana.²⁷ The Brahman opined that all of these Avatars came for a purpose of causation according to the demands of the time. Afterwards, their discourse turned to Rama's figure of Param-Brahma, in which the Brahman explained the story of Ramayana from the beginning to the circumstances when Sita was subjected to the ordeal of fire, to defend his answer.²⁸ Fifthly, the Roman Catholic raised the issue of Krishna and the Brahman defined his story and again regarded Krishna as Param-Brahma while the Roman catholic mocked Krishna for his abominable acts with the Gopis.²⁹ Hence, the Roman Catholic was denying that God could be revered in human form where He commits sins and have multiple desires, some of which are unsuitable for holiness. Their last discussion centred around Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar where the Brahman described the story of these Hindu Gods in the sense that they were born as normal humans and did everything for their material pleasure.

In the above discourse of Brahman and the Roman Catholic, several offshoots are visible. For example, one is that the Roman Catholic Dom-Antonio being of native origin, had adequate knowledge of Hinduism, therefore, he could obstruct the subjective ideas proposed by the Brahman who was merely defending his religion throughout the dialogues. But the Brahman was unable to

raise any questions against Christianity because of his lack of knowledge about it. Another thing to be observed here is that the Catholic was always trying to reflect the superiority of Christianity over Hinduism by degrading the facts of Hindu religion. He was judging every aspect of Hinduism from a Christian-centric perception. Further, a contradiction can be seen when the Roman catholic emphasised monotheism while the Brahman talked about plural Gods of Hinduism. However, this text certainly replicated the levels of mutual understanding between a Christian and a Brahman. Similarly, it gave a new shape to the process of the composite facet that had only been inter-related with the Hindus and Muslims. Perhaps the *Brahman-Roman Catholic Sambat* was the only discourse of two opposite religions after the Ibadat Khana of emperor Akbar where such debates and discussions were conducted till the last decade of the sixteenth century.

In the mid-seventeenth century Bengal, various instances of the establishments of churches by the Portuguese, Dutch and Armenians can be seen, which signifies their amalgamation in this society. Job Charnock handed an old cathedral to the Roman Catholics who followed him to Calcutta in 1690 AD.³⁰ One of the earliest Christian buildings in Dhaka was the church of Nagori, which was constructed in 1664 AD. The credit for its construction goes to Dom Antonio who was an early native convert and took a pivotal role in the mission. This church became an important medium of missionary work for eastern Bengal towards the close of 1695 AD under St. Nicholas of Tolentino, to whom it was dedicated.³¹ In Dhaka, incidentally, there is another church located at Tesgaon named the 'church of lady of Rosary'. This church was the mother church of Bengal including those of Nagori and Chandonagore.³² The mid-seventeenth century also witnessed the

disintegration of Portuguese power in the Mughal Bengal, but the Portuguese left a vast legacy in the sense that they blended well with the indigenous culture. Compared to other Europeans races, the Portuguese were much in advance in the task of influencing the newly native converts. It was largely owing to the following two factors: the instances of marriages between Bengalis and Portuguese people, who were given Portuguese names; and the desire, on the part of the natives, to acquire a Portuguese identity; many Hindus even took Portuguese names, such as Albuquerque.³³ Various communities claimed to be the descendants of the Portuguese, some characterised themselves as natives, while others convey the traditions of Portuguese. Some of them who only accepted the names and titles, can be further sub-divided into three groups- the pure Indians with Portuguese names, true Luso-Indians and Luso-Indians with English names. J. A Campos has provided two such lists- firstly, Luso-Indian surnames like -Agostinho, Baptista, Castro, and Faria, and, secondly, Luso-like-Indian Christian names- Fernando, Jacob, Roberto, and Thomas. All these words appeared during 1700-1900 AD. The pure Indian community, after being converted to Christianity, adopted Portuguese names. Religious alteration brought about a significant change in customs known as Pure Indians with Portuguese names.³⁴ Luso-Indian refers to those who had Portuguese parentage and lived for two or more generations in Bengal by the close of the seventeenth century. The Anglo-Indians who had English names but despite having Portuguese blood they are not familiar with it were known as Luso-Indians with English names.³⁵ According to Augustinian accounts, more than 30,000 Portuguese were converted around 1680 AD, and they lived in the latter half of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. They were

known as the *Kala Firinghis*.³⁶ This is because eastern Bengal was the primary Portuguese settlement. However, the notable influence of the Portuguese can be seen in the field of language also the geographical places of Bengal were renamed. But these names are no longer used in current vocabularies, such as Porto Pequeno (used to denote Satgaon and Hooghly), and Porto Grande (for Chittagong).³⁷

The Armenians formed a permanent settlement at Syedabad and Murshidabad by the royal Farman issued by emperor Aurangzeb in 1665 AD.³⁸ They laid the foundation of a church at Chinsura which is considered to be the second-largest church in Bengal. However, it is clear from an inscription that the Armenians were thought to have lived in Calcutta before Job Charnock arrived as mentioned above. It appears that their primary concentration was on business objectives, and they only performed a small number of missionary activities. As mentioned above, the first British settlement emerged in Bengal in 1651 AD. The English were not only interested in trade and business but were also known to their involvement in local politics, including their participation in native conflicts. While identifying the mutual relation between the English and Bengalis, the example of Job Charnock can be taken as an early British who founded Calcutta. Even though controversies surround the character of Job Charnock, the fact remains that he established such a deep relation with the natives of Bengal that we get a new insight into the process of syncretism in Bengal. The company officials had little opportunity of bringing their spouses to India because they were not accustomed to a six-months sea voyage from their nation. As a result, they were married to either native women or other Europeans like the Portuguese. It is believed that Job

Charnock's wife was a native upon which different opinions have been expressed by some British officials and some other contemporary narratives.³⁹ According to the diary of William Hedge:

“Dec, 1(1682). I sent James Price to Ray Nundelall's, this morning a Gentoo sent by Bulchund, governor of Hugly and Cassumbazar, made complaint to me that Mr. Charnock did shamefully, to ye great scandal of our nation, keep a Gentoo woman of his kindred, which he has had these 19 years...”⁴⁰

Further, the narrative of Alexander Hamilton mentioned the incident of Charnock. According to Nair, he based his narration on Hedge's records also mentions that Charnock went to visit a Sati before her burning, but he was very much enthralled by her beauty. Looking at the severe situation he sent his guards to save the girl. Thereafter, she was brought to his residence, and they spent time together lovingly for many years and had children. Here one may be surprised to see the liberal approach of Charnock that he did not convert the girl, instead she continued to live as a Hindu till her death. Even, she was burnt according to Hindu rites on which Charnock constructed a tomb. He regularly performed her death anniversary every year.⁴¹ Hamilton's description is a dynamic example of mutual living through marriage relationship between a Christian and a Bengali Hindu in the history of seventeenth-century Calcutta.⁴² Whatever the case may be, this truth undoubtedly had an impact on at least two generations of educated Indians and Englishmen in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

Another approach of Charnock can be observed in his relation with paganism⁴³ which was not adopted by any other European community. Hamilton alleges that Charnock was more inclined to paganism, as he was influenced by his native wife. However, we may assess Charnock's approach in terms of the moralistic objectives in his dealing with the inhabitants of Bengal. He didn't return to his homeland, but his love for Bengal made him an eternal resident of Sutanuti. He was strongly against inhuman practices, like Sati, but didn't hesitate to become the life partner of a Hindu lady whom he had saved from the jaws of death. Even his liberal mind never wished to convert her to Christianity which was a common trend of every European of that time. In this regard, P. Thankappan Nair has argued that Vidyasagar was indebted to Charnock as his precursor of the widow remarriage campaign which launched two centuries later.⁴⁴ It is said that Charnock used to participate in the festivals of local peoples. At the same time, Charnock is also blamed for being rude with his native servants. But this allegation seems to be meaningless in the light of the noting in his diary where he did not forget to enumerate the names of his servants whom he bequeathed-

“Tenthly, I give and bequeath to Budlydasse (Badli Das) one hundred rupees and the meanest sort of my sons clothes lately deceased” “Twelfthly, I give and bequeath to my servants Gunnyshams (Ghanashyam) and Dallub (Dalab) each, twenty rupees...”⁴⁵

CONCLUSION:

The inclusion of Europeans and Christianity in the making of the composite heritage of Bengal has been analysed in the preceding pages. This subject has not been discussed in any modern work dealing with the history of medieval Bengal. In the existing scholarship so far, the discussions have mostly centred around the establishment of churches in various parts of Bengal and the route of conversion taken by the Europeans. The *Brahman-Roman Catholic Sambad* of Dom Antonio helps us to expound upon the mutual understanding between Hindus and a Christians. Also, the example of Job Charnock can be taken as a relevant perspective. Simultaneously, this period saw the evolution of new words in the Bengali language, which was a great consequence of cultural diffusion. Hence, this work has been successful in exploring the formulation of a new aspect of medieval Bengal that includes the European settlement and Christianity as a part of cultural diffusion. This study basically tried to incorporate the role of Europeans in the process of cultural diffusion or syncretism in the mid-seventeenth century Mughal Bengal as the discussion on this subject has been confined between the Hindus and Muslims till date. This work will help further to create a new scope to focus on the role of European settlement and the growth of syncretism in the medieval period.

Endnote

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