

Revisiting the Formation and Development of Islamic Society in Medieval Bengal: An Analysis of the Thirteenth to Sixteenth Centuries

Inder Mukherjee,

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Government General Degree College, Keshiary

Abstract: The formation and development of Islamic society in medieval Bengal was a complex and gradual process shaped by political, socio-economic, demographic, religious, and cultural transformations. This paper revisits the construction of Islamic society in Bengal from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, with particular attention to how Islam became rooted in different sections of Bengali society. It critically examines the major historiographical explanations of Islamization, including the theories of forced conversion, political patronage, immigration, social liberation, Buddhist resistance, and the missionary activities of Sufis and pirs. Rather than attributing Islamization to a single factor, the study argues that multiple processes operated simultaneously and developed over an extended period. The study demonstrates that Islamic society had acquired a visible and differentiated social structure in several parts of Bengal by the sixteenth century. The development of vernacular Muslim literature, the incorporation of indigenous cultural practices, the establishment of khanqahs, mosques, *madrasas*, and the expansion of Sufi networks facilitated the accommodation of Islamic traditions within the regional social environment.

Keywords: Medieval Bengal; Islamization; Islamic Society; Sultanate Bengal; Sufis; Pirs; Conversion; Social Formation; Vernacular Islam; Agrarian Expansion

The Sultanate period marks a significant phase in Bengal's political, religious, and socio-economic history. From the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, Bengal witnessed considerable social transformation and the emergence of new socio-political relationships. During the pre-Muslim period, Brahmins exercised considerable socio-religious and political influence in the public sphere. However, this social configuration changed significantly with the establishment of Turkish rule in Bengal. Islam's principles of equality, social inclusiveness, and spiritual appeal attracted socially and economically marginalised groups, many of whom had previously occupied subordinate positions within the Brahmanical social order, helping form a fortified Islamic society in Bengal. A revisit is needed to understand and analyze the contours of development and transitions in Islamic society in Bengal during that period.

Theories regarding Islamization in Bengal

There are certain theories about Islamization in India. The religion of the sword thesis, the religion of patronage, and the religion of Social liberation theory: for nearly one and a half centuries, historians have debated the reasons behind Islam's success in Bengal. For analytical convenience, these interpretations may be divided into two broad phases: the theories of the first-generation historians and those of the later generations.

Historians have proposed five major explanations for the spread of Islam in Bengal. The first attributes conversion to the coercive policies or political patronage of Muslim rulers, although the absence of substantial evidence for systematic forced conversion and the limited advancement of local Muslims weakens this interpretation. The second explains the Muslim population primarily through the migration of *Ashraf* groups from West Asia rather than mass

conversion of the indigenous population. The third emphasises caste oppression and argues that the egalitarian principles of Islam attracted socially marginalised groups. However, caste-based oppression alone cannot adequately explain Bengal's distinctive pattern of Islamization. The fourth theory attributes conversion to Buddhist resistance, which allegedly faced Brahmanical persecution. Still, the limited demographic strength of Buddhism and the delayed expansion of Islam challenge this explanation. Finally, the fifth theory stresses the role of Sufis, pirs, and dervishes in attracting converts through their spiritual influence and inclusive teachings. However, this explanation alone does not fully account for Bengal's distinctive experience. Together, these theories suggest that Bengal's Islamization resulted from complex, interacting social, political, demographic, and religious processes.¹

A major limitation of these first-generation theories is that they rely heavily on internal developments within Bengal and do not adequately compare the region with other parts of India, where similar conditions existed but did not produce the same outcome. The second-generation historians moved beyond these earlier explanations and offered more nuanced interpretations. They raised critical questions about the chronology of Islamization—specifically, when the process began and how long it took to establish a Muslim majority. Some scholars argue that Islamic influence began even before the Turkish conquest of the thirteenth century, while others suggest that Islam spread gradually over a period of four to seven centuries. Determining this timeline is essential for understanding the nature of Islam's success in Bengal. While acknowledging the role of Sufis and pirs, second-generation historians sought to explain their particular success in Bengal. Asim Roy argued that pirs functioned as a unifying force in a socially fluid and unstable environment. Their success lay in their ability to address the specific social and cultural needs of Bengali society. Another influential historian, Richard M. Eaton, proposed a more materialist explanation. He argued that the pirs in Bengal were distinct in that they combined religious leadership with economic initiatives. During the Mughal period, ecological changes—particularly the shifting courses of the Ganges—created new agrarian frontiers in eastern Bengal. Pirs facilitated the migration of populations into these newly formed regions and organized agricultural expansion. Conversion to Islam, in this context, was closely linked to processes of settlement, economic opportunity, and social mobility. Thus, the emergence of a Muslim majority in eastern Bengal was tied to the transformation of the deltaic landscape and the expansion of cultivation. The third generation of historians further refined this analysis by focusing on the structure of rural society. They argue that, unlike other regions of South Asia, Bengal lacked strong, rigid village institutions that could resist religious change. The relatively fluid and weakly organized rural society allowed for greater receptivity to new religious ideas. Consequently, the gradual spread of Islam, supported by pirs and their networks, found fertile ground in Bengal.²

In Bengal immigration theory has been applied by certain historians. Richard M Eaton mentioned three theories about rooting of Islam in Bengal; these are inclusion, identification and displacement. Inclusion means acceptance of Islamic superhuman agencies in folk rituals of Bengal. Identification means co existence of Islamic religious tradition with local religious tradition, displacement signifies uprooting the superhuman agencies from local cosmology and replacing them with Arabic or pure Islamic traditions. Inclusion and identification took place more or less at the same period. Emergence of the deity Dakshin Roy and Bare Gazi Khan and their juxtaposition which was depicted in *Raymangal* in the seventeenth century indicates the process of inclusion. Prior to this in 16th century Said Sultan in his literary work *Nabivansa* made Eve a Bengali by decorating the character who used vermilion ³ which also indicates the process of inclusion.

Eaton's hypothesis on the process of Islamization has been criticized later. The process of conversion to Islam in Bengal is intrinsically linked to the region's historical and socio-political transformations following the Muslim conquest in the early 13th century. However, the historical record remains largely silent regarding the precise mechanisms and chronology of this religious shift. Only sporadic references to conversion exist, making it difficult to determine the exact point at which Islam began to spread or when certain regions achieved a Muslim majority.

Notwithstanding these limitations, it is widely acknowledged that the Pirs played an instrumental role in the Islamization of Bengal.

Historical data regarding the activities of Pirs provide some insights into this process. According to Akbar Ali Khan, approximately 62.8% of these figures arrived between the 13th and 14th centuries, with 19.9% arriving in the 15th century and only 13.4% in the 16th century. However, Khan argues that the influence of Pirs on conversion was not immediate, as most conversions were carried out by their disciples rather than by the Pirs themselves. This suggests that a considerable time lag—spanning fifty to one hundred years—was required for their impact to manifest. If one assumes a century-long delay, then an analysis of major Muslim shrines implies that large-scale conversions began in the 14th century and continued until at least the 17th century. By this estimate, the complete process of Islamization in Bengal unfolded over a span of approximately four hundred years.⁴

Richard Eaton presents an alternative framework, postulating that the bulk of conversions took place between 1574 and 1734—a much shorter span of 160 years.⁵ However, this assertion remains largely speculative due to the lack of robust historical evidence. Eaton's assumption rests on the premise that mass conversions, rather than individual or gradual processes, were the principal drivers of Islamization in Bengal. Nevertheless, this hypothesis encounters two fundamental weaknesses. First, there is an absence of direct historical evidence to support the claim that conversion in Bengal occurred primarily through mass movements. Eaton cites only five instances in which entrepreneurial Pirs were engaged in proselytization at the frontier over a period of 160 years. However, he fails to provide any concrete documentation indicating whether these Pirs attracted individual converts or entire communities. No historical records explicitly name any groups that converted collectively. Second, this hypothesis stands in contrast to the broader patterns of Islamic conversion observed in other regions, such as the Middle East and Punjab. In these areas, Islamization required four to five centuries to reach a demographic majority. Given these precedents, the proposition that Bengal underwent a complete transformation in fewer than two centuries appears improbable. Available evidence suggests that conversion in Bengal occurred incrementally over a period spanning four to five centuries, with individuals embracing Islam over successive generations rather than through abrupt mass movements.⁶

The complex nature of religious conversion in Bengal is further underscored by the inherent difficulties associated with Hindu-to-Islamic conversion. Will Durant attribute this challenge to the centrality of the doctrine of transmigration in Hindu belief systems. He posits that while Hindus historically tolerated foreign rulers, they remained steadfast in their religious traditions, as their primary concerns revolved around spiritual continuity rather than temporal governance.⁷ Consequently, mass conversion from Hinduism to an alien faith would have been an extraordinary phenomenon, requiring exceptional circumstances.

However, the question arises: why did Pirs succeed in Bengal more than in other regions of India? Ashim Roy argues that Pirs in Bengal effectively fulfilled both material and spiritual needs, becoming stabilizing forces in an otherwise turbulent society. He suggests that Islamization was facilitated by the integration of local animistic beliefs into the cult of Pirs. Yet, this theory is not without its weaknesses.⁸ Akbar Ali Khan critiques Roy for overemphasizing the role of mass conversion when available evidence suggests a gradual, individual-based transition. Additionally, Roy's claim that Bengal's 'pirism' was uniquely effective overlooks the fact that similar Sufi traditions existed throughout India without yielding comparable demographic shifts.⁹

Richard Eaton offers an alternative explanation, proposing that Pirs in Bengal succeeded due to their dual role as religious guides and economic pioneers. Many Pirs settled in the agrarian frontiers of East Bengal, aiding in the

transformation of wilderness into cultivable land. This economic integration, combined with their spiritual influence, encouraged local populations to embrace Islam.¹⁰

However, there are significant gaps in Eaton's thesis from both theoretical and historical perspectives. His argument overstates the frontier nature of Mughal Bengal and oversimplifies the process of conversion to Islam, overlooking key demographic, ecological, and sociopolitical factors.

Eaton's depiction of Mughal Bengal as a vast agrarian frontier available for settlement is problematic. A true frontier, in the historical sense, implies sparsely populated or uninhabited land open for colonization. However, Bengal had one of the highest population densities in India, as recorded in the 1872 census, suggesting that high population density was a longstanding feature of the region. While internal migrations occurred due to alluvial shifts and river course changes, these movements were gradual and localized, not large-scale frontier expansions.

Furthermore, the deltaic lands of South Bengal, which Eaton presents as newly accreted and attractive for settlement, constituted only a fraction of the total landmass. Although fertile and relatively free from malaria, these lands were highly vulnerable to cyclones and tidal bores, which posed serious threats to human habitation. Historical records, such as Abul Fazl's account of a devastating tidal bore in 1584 that killed nearly two hundred thousand people, illustrate the dangers of settling in such regions. These risks likely discouraged large-scale migrations, contradicting Eaton's portrayal of continuous agrarian expansion driven by religious pioneers.¹¹

Eaton's argument regarding the role of entrepreneurial Pirs in forest clearing and agricultural expansion is also flawed. He assumes that all forests in Bengal were identical, requiring leadership for reclamation. In reality, Bengal had three distinct types of forests: inland deciduous (sal) forests, hill forests, and mangrove forests. Sal forests, which were widespread, could be cleared by individual efforts through cutting or burning. Similarly, hill forests, though dense, were cleared by individual settlers, as seen in Assam's experience with migrant cultivators from Mymensingh.

In contrast, the mangrove forests of South Bengal, which covered less than five percent of Bengal's total land area, required more organized efforts for clearance. While some entrepreneurial leadership may have played a role in these specific regions, Eaton mistakenly generalizes this process to the entire Bengal region. Moreover, forest clearing was not unique to the 16th and 17th centuries—Bengal's landscape had been shaped by agricultural expansion long before the Mughals arrived. Eaton does not adequately address why the need for entrepreneurial Pirs supposedly emerged during the Mughal period, nor does he provide sufficient evidence to support his claim that these figures played a decisive role in expanding the agrarian frontier.¹²

Eaton's thesis heavily relies on the notion that entrepreneurial Pirs led large-scale conversions and settlements in Bengal. However, his historical evidence for such figures is weak. He names only five entrepreneurial Pirs, among whom Khan Jahan Ali died in 1459—over a century before Mughal rule—and Pir Umar Shah was active in the mid-18th century, long after the period Eaton focuses on. The other three figures (Meher Ali, Shah Saiyid Nasiruddin, and Khandkar Shah Ala) remain relatively obscure. In contrast, there are at least 51 historically significant Sufi saints whose shrines have been venerated for centuries. It is difficult to accept that the Muslim majority in Bengal resulted from the influence of a handful of relatively unknown Pirs rather than the widespread activities of more prominent Sufi figures. Additionally, Eaton does not specify how people responded to these Pirs or the sequence of conversion. Did migrants accept Islam before resettling in the active delta, or did they move as Hindus and convert later under the influence of Pirs? Eaton does not address these critical questions, leaving space for alternative explanations.¹³

Eaton's thesis assumes that conversions to Islam in Bengal occurred rapidly and on a mass scale, implying that the majority of conversions took place within 150 to 200 years. However, historical evidence suggests a much longer process, spanning four to five centuries. This suggests that most conversions were gradual and individual, rather than the result of mass movements led by religious leaders.

Akbar Ali Khan highlights this distinction, noting that mass conversions typically occur when a king, tribal chief, or village leader adopts a new religion, leading to the rapid conversion of an entire group. In contrast, individual conversions are slower, often spanning several generations. The historical record indicates that conversions in Bengal followed the latter pattern, contradicting Eaton's assumption of large-scale, rapid Islamization.¹⁴

An alternative explanation for the spread of Islam in Bengal emphasizes the nature of local social organization. Scholars like Jafar Sharif and A. L. Basham have argued that Hinduism remained dominant in regions with strong village institutions, such as North India and South India, where tightly organized caste-based communities resisted proselytization. In contrast, Bengal's rural settlements lacked such rigid social structures, making individual conversions more feasible.

Bengal's villages, especially in the east and south, were characterized by what anthropologists call an "open village" system—marked by weak communal organization, flexible land ownership, and a lack of strong caste leadership. Historical census data from 1872 support this view, with British administrators observing the scattered nature of settlements and the absence of cohesive village institutions. This structural weakness in village life may have facilitated the gradual spread of Islam, as ostracism—a key social mechanism enforcing caste boundaries—was less severe in Bengal than in other parts of India. Unlike in North India, where village leadership could enforce strict social sanctions against converts, Bengal's fragmented rural society allowed individuals to convert without facing overwhelming social consequences.

Furthermore, in other regions of India, strong village organizations were necessary for irrigation, security, and protection against wild animals. In Bengal, where natural irrigation was abundant, foreign invasions were infrequent, and threats from wildlife were minimal, these communal structures were weaker. As a result, individuals who converted to Islam were not as dependent on their village communities for survival, making conversion a more viable choice.

Thus, the majority-Muslim population in Bengal likely emerged from centuries of individual conversions rather than mass proselytization by entrepreneurial Pirs. While religious figures played a role in Islam's spread, Eaton's thesis overemphasizes their influence while underestimating broader social and structural factors. Even Akbar Ali Khan, a proponent of the open village hypothesis, acknowledges the lack of direct historical evidence for any singular explanation of Bengal's Islamization.¹⁵

So it can be stated from the above mentioned debate that Eaton laid emphasis on the time period within 1574-1734CE. when mass conversion occurred. Akbar Ali Khan defying Eaton's View stressed individual conversion a process that takes 400-500 years. It should be noted that before 16th century a strong Islamic settlement was established in Bengal. In a letter Muzzaffar Shams Balkhi requested Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah to take the Dervishes in the pilgrimage on first ship boarded from chhatagram;¹⁶ which denotes the increasing number of Muslims in the then period. So from the above discussion it can be inferred mass conversion at the hand of Pirs and individual conversion took place simultaneously. Actually People in the delta region historically lacked strong, structured religious beliefs. In contrast, Islam developed as a more concrete and adaptable faith, allowing it to penetrate new cultural spaces. Akbar Ali Khan stated that 73% shrine were established within 14th -16th century. Popularity of

deceased Pir Nurkutub Alam was increased among the growing Islamic community in pandua which can be stood by the data that Hussain Shah gave 42 villages to the Mazar of Nur Kutub Alam. It may be a part of political maneuver of Hussain Shah to draw the allegiance of the Islamic community which itself acknowledged the flourishing situation in the other parts of Bengal also, not confining to the delta region of Bengal. Ceaser fredrici in 1567 noted the eastern peninsula especially Sandwip was full of Muslim population. in 1599 Francis Fernandez observed that the majority of the people of Narayangunge was Muslim.¹⁷ In literary evidence from 16th century we see in Munkundaram Chakrabarty's *Chandimangal* where the poet describes¹⁸ different professions of the Islamic community living in Gujrat Nagar where Dervish, *Mulla* and other Muslims belong to lower income groups were mentioned and while describing the community Mukunda praises dervish for their knowledge and trivializes the social importance of the converted Muslims which suggests that Mukunda had a clear concept about Islamic community and their stratification and without the strong presence of Islamic society such detailed description cannot be given by a poet. Earlier in the last phase of Fifteenth century, Vipradas (1495AD.) also mention about the Islamic community in describing the settlement in satgao where he juxtaposed Saiyid, *Mulla* and Kaji¹⁹ but after a long period, mostly after hundred years in the last phase 16th century Mukundaram made distinction between Dervish, *Mulla* and other converted people which actually denotes the incresing number of Muslims in Bengal at that period. Thus it can be inferred mass conversion at the hand of Pirs and individual conversion took place simultaneously which continued in Mughal period and later but within 16th century strong Islamic society was flourished in different parts of Bengal.

Role of Muslim Saints in organizing socio religious pattern and relation

Though the above mentioned debates makes the historiography of medieval Bengal more palatable which tends to decline the earlier views, the role of Pirs and Sufis can't be given less importance in building Islamic society in The then Bengal. The most widely accepted explanation attributes the spread of Islam to the efforts of Muslim saints, whose influence endured across generations. Sufis such as Mir Saiyid Ashraf Jahangir Simnani praised Bengal for its receptivity to Sufi missionaries, who not only preached Islam but also established shrines that became focal points for spiritual and social life.

Muslim society in Bengal had been created due to conversion of non-Muslims on a large scale. Muslim saints played crucial role in converting non-Muslims to the Islamic religion. It is said that most of the people converted into Islam where hailed from lower strata and did not have any strong structured religious belief prior converting to Islam thus the new religion easily felt an impact on them, few people from higher strata of the society attracted to the particular religion for getting patronage but there were instances that some non-Muslims were attracted by the charisma of the spiritual leaders of Islam in this subcontinent. It is said that once few yogis (Hindu saint) entered the assembly of Sufi Saikh Sarafuddin Maneri (1290- 1381) and overwhelmed by the charisma of the saint they desired to take the path of Islam.²⁰ Sufis played crucial part in making the Islamic society in Bengal. Some of them even took initiative to clear the forest and cultivate the land to make a space for human settlement. Tradition of Sufi came in Bengal along with sea trade. In 8th -9th century Arab merchants established commercial relation with Chattagram. Chattagram bears the tradition of 8th century Sufi Bayazid Bostami who never came to Chattagram but it is assumed that through these merchants his legacy has been established there. According to oral tradition some sufis came Bengal before the Muslim conquest. Baba Adam Shahid, Shah Sultan RumiShah Sultan Mahiswar, Makhdum Shah Daula Shaid, Makhdum Shah Mahmud Ghaznavi were noted among them. After the conquest of Turkish forces path of preaching Islam was more easier for sufis who came Bengal in 13th century. Shaikh Shah Jalal ud din Tabriji seems to be the first sufi who came in Bengal in this phase He was contemporary to Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar kaki and Bahauddin Zakaria. He came to Bengal after 1210 AD. Other noted Sufis who came to Bengal during that period

were Shaikh Sharaf-ud-din Maneri who came to Bengal with his teacher Shaikh Abu twama, Shsaikh abu twama was based in Sonargaon made the place as one of the leading learning centers of Islamic studies. In Sylhet Islam was preached by Shah Jalal who is one of the most influential spiritual figures in the whole subcontinent. In western part of Bengal the sufi who lit the light of spiritual and Islamic knowledge was Shaikh Akhi Siraj. He made Gaur and pandua as his base. He established a school of Islamic knowledge, Famous saint Shaikh alaol Haq was part of that school as he was disciple of Shaikh akhi Siraj. Akhi Siraj died in Gaur in AD 1357.²¹ The most intellectual Sufi of Sultanate period was Nur kutub Alam who was placed in high position for his political and intellectual activities at that period. He requested Sultan Ibrahim Sharki of neighboring state Jaunpur to invade Bengal as Usurped King Ganesh was oppressive towards those saints who were reluctant to accept Ganesh rule. Ganesh Compromised with Nur kutubAlam and converted his son Jadu to Islam to avoid the invasion of Sultan Ibrahim Sharki.²²

Here it is seen that some of the above mentioned preacher were not involved in settlement of Islamic society but their inculcation of knowledge and academic activities situated those places in esteemed position in broader spectrum which helped entire process of building Islamic society in Bengal.

Tahmid Zami argues that Sufis in Bengal can be typologically divided into three broad ideal types.²³ As Enamul Haq's descriptive account demonstrates, a particular class of Sufis began settling in Bengal from North India and Central Asia from the 13th century onward. Although immigrant Sufis had already begun arriving in the regions that now constitute Bengal even before Bakhtiyar Khalji's invasion, the establishment of political authority significantly increased the flow of migration.

In Sufi theory, travel to distant lands such as Bengal was conceived as a sacred mission. Umar Suhrawardy, the influential founder of the Suhrawardi Tariqah, conceptualized *safar* (journey) as a mode of Sufi practice, wherein the seeker, estranged from his kin, ventures out—like Jesus—in search of spiritual fulfillment. These immigrant Sufis and their successors occupied an elite social status, reinforced by political patronage, transregional familial and pedagogical networks, and their participation in Islamic literary culture through writing in widely recognized Islamic languages.

Many first- or second-generation immigrant Sufis received state patronage in the form of *madad-i-ma'ash* grants for their hospices. They traced their spiritual lineage through cosmopolitan networks structured around various *tariqahs*. Their instruction often derived from masters or institutions based in the Arab heartlands or North Indian centers. These Sufis maintained trans regional connections through *tariqah* affiliations, correspondence, and intellectual exchange. Some even claimed descent from prominent Islamic figures. Their migration was often justified as divinely ordained—either through the command of a spiritual preceptor or visionary dreams.

Crucially, they wrote in Arabic and Persian, languages associated with power, prestige, and orthodoxy. This enabled their works to circulate within a broader Islamic intellectual world, enhancing their acceptance within orthodox frameworks. Their writings often had a dual transmission: while accessible locally, they were primarily circulated within spiritual networks, typically through letters rather than texts intended for a mass audience.²⁴

The second category of Sufis consisted of Bengali-speaking Sufi writers, whom Asim Roy describes as mediators of religious and cultural exchange. These Sufis largely belonged to a middle social stratum and were rooted in Bengal through their familial ties, systems of instruction, and networks of patronage. Their orientation was distinctly local, and their engagement with Islamic learning often followed a predominantly one-directional flow of textual transmission, where ideas were adapted from established traditions into the regional context. It was this group of

Sufis who played a crucial role in shaping what may be termed as vernacular Islam in Bengal, expressing Islamic concepts through the Bengali language and embedding them within the cultural framework of the region.²⁵

The third category comprised subaltern Sufis, drawn from the lower strata of society—peasants, artisans, and mendicants. A related precursor to these figures can be found among the itinerant Qalandars, who operated on the margins of both urban authority and rural society. While vagrancy and mendicancy were acknowledged within mainstream Sufism—Umar Suhrawardy himself noted that some Sufis abandoned *kasb* (earning) in favor of a life of *tawakkul* (trust in God)—the Qalandars had, by this period, acquired a reputation that was often viewed with suspicion by orthodox circles. These near-naked ascetics, often with shaved heads and beards, became highly visible in Bengal and were frequently referenced in Persian and Bengali literature of the medieval and early modern periods. However, not all Qalandars were marginal figures; some belonged to elite circles, and certain Qalandari groups maintained cordial relations with established orders such as the Chishtiyya. A few even received patronage from the Bengal Sultanate. For instance, in 1279, Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban, after suppressing the rebellion of Tughril Khan in Lakhnauti, publicly executed a Qalandar who had been associated with the rebel governor.²⁶

Beyond these identifiable groups, there existed two additional, distinctive categories. First, certain elite immigrants were posthumously transformed into *pirs* through popular tradition. Figures such as Khan Jahan or Ismail Ghazi Shahid, who were originally administrators or military leaders, came to be venerated as saints over time. Second, what Richard Eaton terms “entrepreneurial pirs” were instrumental in clearing forests, establishing settlements, and facilitating agrarian expansion in eastern Bengal, particularly in response to ecological changes such as shifting river courses. These figures included both genuine Sufis and opportunistic adventurers. Asim Roy interprets this process of *pirification* as a response to the need for stable authority in regions marked by weak state presence, environmental uncertainty, and social conflict. Over time, this phenomenon extended further into the realm of myth, giving rise to a wide array of legendary pirs across Bengal. These ranged from transregional Islamic figures such as Khidr or Elias, to subcontinental saints like Badar Pir, Madar Pir, and Ghazi Pir, as well as entirely local mythical figures such as Ghora Pir, Thanka Pir, Nora Pir, and Manai Pir. Indigenous religious practices were reinterpreted through the idiom of *pir* veneration. Rituals such as *vratas*, elements of shamanism, and magical practices were absorbed into this evolving framework. Folk narratives further embellished the lives of both historical and mythical pirs, rendering them more accessible and meaningful within popular religious consciousness.²⁷

Stratification and transition in the society:

On the way of the construction process Muslim society in Bengal got stratified into few subgroups. There were religious classes who were called Mashaikh and Alem. Alems or Ulama were associated with State given posts. Like modern day’s intellectuals they also used to explain and justify ruler’s decision, Rulers also wanted to seek their support from them. Beside that there were Sufis who were not associated with the state function in a direct manner but they were not remain indifferent in state affairs. Muzzaffar Shams Balkhi clearly stated their discontent over the recruitment of Hindus in official post under Bengal Sultanate.²⁸ Nur Kutub Alam expressed his anxiety over the situations of Muslims when Raja Ganesh came to power.²⁹

Apart from high class Muslims, there were Mollas who were not so educated like alem, played pivotal role in maintaining the day to day rituals in rural Muslim settlement. Though the name of the term *Mulla* was juxtaposed with Saiyid and Saikhs thus mentioned in the same group name Ahl –I- Sadat but there was difference between them. Saiyid were the descendants of Nabi and very small difference can be drawn between Saiyid and Shaikh as a separate class. From *Insa I Mahru* we came to know that in Firuz shah Tughlaq’s pamphlet; declared prior to the war against Iliash shah, *Mulla* was not mentioned, but from Manasamangal of Bipradas pipilai (written in 1495) it

came to be known that the term *Mulla* was juxtaposed with Saiyid and Kajis while describing the Muslim establishment in Saptagram.³⁰ So it can be said that within those years *Mullas* became the integral part of Muslim society who can't be ignored. In the early phase of Islam the term *Mulla* denoted a teacher/cleric/wise person that placed them along with saiyyid and kajis but in Bengal "*Mulla*" denotes a half educated person who works as rural cleric. Bipradas may describe those *Mullas* who acted as rural cleric but could not be able to differentiate them with Saiyyid and kajis who were elite by birth. After 100 years, poet Mukundaram Chakrabarty in his *Chandimangal* clearly described a picture of *Mulla* who performed rituals associated with marriage. The Bengali Muslim society got expanded during medieval period. Many newly converted Muslims did not have ideas about ritual, *Mullas* who were able enough to perform these kind of rituals situated themselves in an important position in rural society. Highly educated Alems and Sufis were not interested in performing those ceremonial rituals for half educated lower strata Muslims and *Mullas* were there to perform for these people. *Mullas*, Kazis could be included into same group that is Ashraf but kazi held higher position than *Mullas*. In an inscription in a mosque at Satgao it is inscribed that *Mullas* would be cursed by God if they defraud public endowment, it would be the duty of kaji to prevent this kind of fraud.³¹ So it can be seen that kazis secured higher position than *Mullas* by supervising their works.

Divisions in Muslim society also visible in the then Bengal as lower class Muslims were not mentioned in the pamphlets of Firuz shah Tughlaq neither they got any place in Bipradas's poem but in the end of the 16th century in Mukundaram poem lower class Muslim like *rangrez*, *jola*, *kabari*, *mukeri* etc got mentioned³² from that it can be said that within these years converted Muslims raised into large numbers in Bengali society so that they drew the attention of the poet.

Though division in Muslim society was seen due large number of converted Muslims from lower strata of the society, Muslim rulers were very much keen in building up Muslim societies in Bengal. They built mosques; madrasas to encourage Muslim settlement as well as creating impression among non-Muslims about a new society where all belong to same religion could be part of a society in an equal manner.

In *Manasavijay*, Bipradas mentioned Mongal, Pathan, Makhdam while describing the Muslim inhabitants in Satgao. Anirudhha Roy opined that these part might be incorporated later because neither Mongol nor Pathan came to Bengal in that period as Mongols came to India after the victory of Babur and pathan who were mainly afghan came also settled in Bihar after the victory of Babur in northern part of India and later part of them moved to Bengal.³³ Mukunda described different professions of Muslims who belonged to lower strata and who did not get mentioned in any Hindu poet's narrative. Mukunda emphasized that one group of them did not keep roza or did not attend Namaz, so a Hindu poet got well accustomed with the pillars of Islam and his importance in Islamic society and who did not perform those they could not be able a respectful position in that society that's why Mukunda mentioned it as it signifies their loose position in the broader spectrum of Islamic society. It can be presumed that Muslim society consisted of common people though stratified but got a structural shape within those years. They were quiet "visible" in civil society and people from other religion accepted them as the part of broader Bengali society. According to the poet Vijay Gupta and Mukundaram the functions of *Mulla* was performing marriage ceremony, killing animals in social or religious festivals, giving tabiz for protecting people from odd. The *Mulla* got certain remuneration for their duties but they were not salaried thus did not have stable income.³⁴

Another important feature of Bengali society in the period was emergence of "pirs" as the system got important position in the cultural religious phenomena of medieval Bengal. Pirs were credited to deforest the land and made the fertile area into a settled locality though proper arrangement of cultivation. In later period the achievements of the pirs were struck in the collective memory of the local people of the respective areas.

Ashim Roy shed light on syncretistic culture in Bengal and here he indicate a crucial point Islamic literati were in a mood of repentance that they had to translate the Islamic literary works in indigenous language but they had to because of the need for the newly formed Islamic society in Bengal. The repentance of the Muslim literati prevails the tension between the Ashraf and indigenous Muslim community of the newly built Islamic society in the then Bengal. Shah Muhammad Sagir, writer of *Yusuf Julekha* laid emphasis on Bengali as the mode of his writing. He stated that if religious matter would be written in Bengali there was no wrong in it, rather it would be helpful to understand the spirit of Islamic religious issues for the newly converted people. Though felt sin while writing religious books in Bengali. Another eminent literati Saiyid sultan showed concern for the people of his religion who were not able to understand Arabic but blamed himself for composing Nabibansa in Bengali. He was criticized for making the book Hinduised. Seikh Muttalib also felt sin for composing Muslim religious law fiqh into Bengali.³⁵ So there was a dilemma in the upper class Muslim society in compromising with their tradition for the sake of the inclusion of new people into that tradition. But a question can be raised that were the Bengali Muslim in a position of accepting the pure form of Islam originated in the Arab land or they were satisfied with this syncretistic form of Islam which is called popular Islam. Due the atmosphere of acceptance the syncretistic form never was challenged in the sultanate period or even in later era. Mainly it was challenged by Islamic revival movement in the 19th century and later it developed under the influence of pan Islamism

If we look back at the Islamic society at that period we saw several changes in this society also. Islam in his original form could not be implemented in the peripheral areas of Bengal. So the Islamic society flourished here had its own aspects. Sufis or pirs were one of the main architects of creating an Islamic society in Bengal especially in riverside peripheral areas. Sufis got the land from the state as intellectual part of the society who had the capability to mitigate the unrest prone mass by engrossing them in spiritual matters or to expedite the mass unrest against the crown thus rewarded by the State time to time to stay with the state and gradually became dependent on the state. Sufis irrespective of worldly affairs got the rent free land and their descendent enjoyed the same facilities granted by the then authority. The descendent encashed the popularity of the particular sufi thus he became an institution after his death which he particularly denounced in his lifetime. The family or the descendent of a land holder sufi became the part of influential class as the Madad-I –ma’ash holder class.³⁶ land grant system changed the internal structure of Sufism where pedigree took the place of individual spiritual ability to become famous as well as the chief of a dargah³⁷ which drew large revenue from the devotees by that time. These kind of grants became hereditary and the titles like Shaikhzada, Pirjada etc. emerged.³⁸ These kind of grants to the Sufis or pirs made the lands to be cultivated, later which could be turned to a village where certain cultural and fiscal transaction used to take place surrounding that particular khanka of the sufi for years. The descendent were regarded in the society as ‘Khanjada’ and ‘Pirzada’ not only carrying the legacy of the particular Sufi but shows their participation in the power structure of the then period.³⁹ From the initial phase of Turkish occupation grants were given for attaining political purpose. In the mentioned period grants were allotted for maintaining statuesque though the grant holders as they could play the role of ideological defender of the ruler. In the early period the process of giving land grant from the end of the state which was called “aymma” was not made institutionalized. From 15th century State in Bengal tried to maintain regular rapport with the notable Sufis like Shaikh muzzaffar shams Balkhi, shaikh Alaul haque. Shaikh nur kutub alam and granting tax free land to them was a part of that rapport. After hundred years of the death of the eminent sufi Shaykh Nur kutub Alam, Alauddin Husain Shah, founder of Husain Shahi dynasty granted forty seven villages for the maintenance of the *darga* and other associated institutions belonging to the Sufi. Sultan Nasiruddin Nusrat Shah granted 42 villages to the famous Sufi Shah Daula but the latter refused to accept. But his son received the same grant from the state after the death of his father.⁴⁰

Murtaza Bashir pointed out⁴¹ that during the period under discussion influence of Shias in Islamic society has been increased. He cited the example of Garh Zaripa inscription of Saifuddin Firuz Shah which is the first instance in any

inscription of the Sultans of Bengal where name of twelve Imams of Shia has been inscribed for prayer. Bengal had direct maritime connections with the Persian Gulf and Iraq. For this reason, a large number of Persians settled in Bengal. The Persians were part of the aristocracy of society and the intellectual power of the state. And as a result of regular and extensive maritime trade with Persia and Central Asia, the influence of Persian culture increased in the religious customs of the Muslim society of Bengal, the court splendor of the sultans, art and literature and architecture. Brick-built buildings, terracotta decorations, smooth tiles of various natures and colors, leafy or geometric designs on terracotta and tiles, architectural decoration with various materials, calligraphy, Naqsh and Naqsh and Talik script, a combination of Naqsh and Talik, were inspired by Persian ideas and elements in Bengali architecture of the pre-Mughal period. It is thus seen that the ideas of the Persian royal family were firmly established in the courts of the independent sultans of Bengal. This influence on their manners and conduct was increased by Persian immigration. The description of the court of the tenth person of Sikandar Shah given by the Chinese envoy Hu-Hien in 1436 AD and the description of the court of Nasrat Shah later given by an unknown Portuguese show that Persian ideas were reflected in the courts of the Bengal sultans. all these regions were predominantly Shia. Therefore, the Shia influence in society increased significantly as a result of the large-scale immigration. The connection of Delhi with Bengal continued till the middle of the fourteenth century. The language of official business in the Delhi court was Persian. When the Chinese traveler Ma Huan came to Bengal in the early 15th century, he found that despite Persian being an exotic language, it had prestige and influence at the court. Therefore, the dominance of the Persian language is seen in the inscriptions of the sultans, such as Sarardar, Jamadar, Sikdar, Sab-i-Lashkar, Wazir-Lashkar, Kar-i-Khail, Kar-i-Farman, Sar-i-Gomastha and Dabir-i-Khas etc. Jayananda's Chaitanyamangal states that the Jagai-Madhai who held the throne of Husain Shah had to learn Persian and they used to recite the verses of Masnavi. The villages and names of the two brothers who clashed with Mansa from the village of Hasanhati were consistent with the Shia Imams Hasan and Husain and the development of Shia dominance in society can be seen in the mention of Hasanbati instead of mosques as places of prayer in Muslim settlements in the poet Mukundaram Chakraborty's *Chandimangal*. Even some Brahmins used to read Persian literature. This proves that Persian was the official language during the reign of Husain Shah.⁴²

Bengali literature of this period mentions Shia religious institutions like Imambara. During the reign of Husain Shah, an inscription was carved in 913 AH on the wall of the Imambara in Malda's English Bazaar. Husain Shah's father, Ashraf-al-Husaini, was the Sharif of Mecca. As the caretaker of the holy Kaaba, he was respected by everyone in society. Because they were associated with the Husain family, the Sharifs of Mecca were followers of Shiism. Sa'dat, or Sayyids, were the most respected people in society. As descendants of Hazrat Muhammad, they were respected and honoured by common people. The Ulema, seen as wise and spiritually perfect men with miraculous powers, formed an elite class that included commoners and nobles, and they were respected by the Sultan. Husain Shah took pride in his lineage as a descendant of Husain, i.e., Husain. Sayyids like him were not deprived of patronage from the state's ruling elite because of their nobility.⁴³

Conclusion: The formation and development of Islamic society in medieval Bengal resulted neither from a single historical event nor from a uniform process of conversion. The historiographical debate demonstrates that neither the theories of forced conversion, political patronage, immigration, social liberation, Buddhist resistance, nor the missionary activities of Sufis and pirs can adequately explain the distinctive pattern of Islamization in Bengal. Rather, a prolonged and complex process shaped by political authority also produced an internal social stratification within the Islamic community in Bengal. The distinction between immigrant and local Muslims, the emergence of categories later identified as Ashraf and Atrah, and the hierarchy among religious officials such as Sayyids, Kazis, and Mollas indicate that Muslim society was far from homogeneous. Literary and epigraphic evidence suggests that social mobility existed within Muslim society, but the gradual formation of status distinctions accompanied it. These

developments show how Bengal's broader social environment shaped the evolution of Muslim social structures and helped lay the foundation of the core trajectories of Islamic Society in Bengal.

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