

UNRAVELING BANGLADESH'S CULTURAL EVOLUTION IN THE LIGHT OF ITS ISLAMIC MIDDLE AGES: BRIDGING HISTORIES

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ABSTRACT

This research delves into the legacy and cultural maturation of Bangladesh, specifically focusing on the period known as the Islamic Middle Ages (1204–1757). Despite Bangladesh's cultural resemblances to the Indian subcontinent, its unique geographical attributes and ethnographic diversity are often disregarded in mainstream narratives. This research aspires to elucidate the influence of Islam on the cultural identity of the nation during this specific historical age. It seeks to fill the gaps in current literature and highlight the significant role Muslims played in Bangladesh's cultural development. The study utilises a qualitative methodology with systematic observation, appraisal, and documentation. The descriptive technique, which draws from historical, anthropological, linguistic, and archaeological areas, serves as the foundation of the research. It involves the thorough synthesis of information from several sources. The results emphasise the diverse cultural legacy of Bangladesh,

which is the result of an intricate blending of Dravidian, Australoid, Mongolian, and Aryan bloodlines. The Islamic rulers played a paramount role in promoting a thriving civilisation, significantly contributing to developing language, literature, cuisine, costume design, and architecture. The emergence of Islam substantially freed the people from the oppression of caste-based social structure. The study enhances knowledge of Bangladesh's historical and cultural development, highlighting the importance of its rich past and the influence of religion in shaping identity. The research seeks to promote national cohesion and advancement by resolving current gaps in historical narratives.

INTRODUCTION

Although Bangladeshi culture has considerable similarities with other cultures of the Indian Sub-Continent, its geographical features and diverse ethnographic amalgamation have made it unique. Historically, the land where a new state called Bangladesh was formed in 1971 has been inhabited since ancient times when various races, religions, and cultures intermingled. Islam came to this country at the beginning of the early days of Islam, and it played a crucial role in shaping the socio-cultural and political customs of most Bangladeshis. However, in Bangladesh's political and social sphere, a continuous controversy exists about its historical period known as the Middle Ages (1204–1757). The dominant perspective of orientalist and secular scholars frequently depicts this era as obscure, with inadequate examination of its impact on preexisting orientalist-secular-focused literature, exemplified by the works of R. C. Majumdar (1973), Suniti Kumar Chatterji (1963), Henry Elliot (1853), William Hunter (1881), William Muir (1891), James Wise (1883), Murray Titus (1930) and other scholars (M. N. Islam, 2023, p. 17). It has led to a misleading understanding of the significant cultural legacy and influence of Muslims on Bangladeshi culture. This results in a need for more comprehension of Bangladesh's historical and cultural development, particularly during the Islamic Middle Ages. This study inquiry aims to ascertain the influence of Islam on the social structure of Bangladesh throughout the Middle Ages. The study investigates the historical origins of Bangladesh's foundation and examines Muslims' significant cultural heritage and contributions to the country's cultural development.

The study endeavours to offer a comprehensive and detailed analysis of Bangladesh's historical and cultural heritage, delving into Muslims' significant cultural origins and influences on the country's culture. Additionally, it seeks to illuminate the impact of Islam on shaping Bangladesh's socio-cultural and political traditions. Through this approach, the research provides significant perspectives on the country's multicultural character and the intricate blending of various influences.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative methodology to investigate Bangladesh's intricate religious dynamics and historical progressions. The study utilises non-quantitative approaches, such as systematic observation, assessment, and documentation, to comprehend the influence of religion on the nation's cultural identity. The data acquisition process relies on library research, which uses extensive resources, including books, academic theses, journals, papers, conference proceedings, newspapers, reports, and online databases. By integrating perspectives from historical, anthropological, linguistic, and archaeological fields, the methodology is interdisciplinary and provides a holistic understanding of the cultural development of Bangladesh throughout the Islamic mediaeval era. This study aims to provide insight into the substantial impacts of Islam and other influences on the nation's cultural heritage. By prioritising historical context and impact analysis, this approach offers a holistic comprehension of the cultural transformation of Bangladesh throughout the Islamic Middle Ages.

THE CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF BANGLADESH

Bangladesh is a country of ethnic diversity, with about 48 minor ethnic groups living together and the main population (Dhamai, 2014, p. 10). Although there are linguistic and social customs differences between these ethnic groups, there is unity in cultural attitudes and traditions with mainstream culture. The result of mixing the different ethnic groups in this country is that physical structure and social rituals cannot be separated. Bangladesh has six seasons: Summer, Monsoon, Autumn, Late Autumn, Winter, and Spring. Every season has unique characteristics that significantly impact society (Suchana & Shoeb-Ur-Rahman, 2020, p. 34). The climate also regulates the economy, communication, art, culture, religious and social rituals and indeed, the entire way of life of the people. Religion has a significant influence on the culture of this country. Although there is the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity, Islam is observed significantly as most Bangladesh people are Muslims. Most of the festivals rooted in this country are religiously Islamic (Azad et al., 2016, p. 137). Nevertheless, all festivals have a tradition of generosity, tolerance and bringing people together from all walks of life and this cultural circle has bound the entire society.

THE UNIQUENESS OF BANGLADESHI CULTURE

Bangladesh is one of South Asia's most unique cultural countries that has maintained its culture from ancient times. The Bengali language is the main language spoken and written by the people of Bangladesh. Apart from the Bangladeshi people, Bengali is the primary language spoken in West Bengal, Assam, Tripura and the Andaman Islands of India (Thompson, 2012, p. 1). Though linguistically similar to these regions of India, Bangladesh has maintained a distinct identity and cultural glory throughout history. Bangladesh's geographical boundary was nearly the same during the Punda, Pala and Sen kings from the beginning of the 4th century to the end of the 11th century and was called Banga. India's West Bengal has been separated from East Bengal since ancient times. The territory on the western bank of the river Ganga or Bhagirathi was known as Anga in ancient times. Present-day West Bengal was known as Rarh during the Pala and Sen Periods and the early Muslim rule. Some parts of North and West Bengal were known as Gaur, Lakshmanavati or Lakhnauti (A. M. Ahmed, 1966, p. 155). In 1352 AD, the Muslim Sultan Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah of Bengal brought the entire Bengali-speaking region under his rule and named it Shahi Bangla for the first time. Before this, no area outside present-day Bangladesh was known as Bangla or Banga (Rahman, 2018, p. 11).

Religion is a significant component of culture. Religious belief and motivation play an influential role in the development of civilization, and they create cultural diversity. Ethnographically, the people of Bangladesh were a branch of the Dravidian race. The Dravidians came to this country from the Semitic homeland Babylonian region of West Asia (Mannan, 2006, p. 23). As the ancestors of Bangladesh were Semitic monotheists, the influence of Aryan culture and religion could not spread much. On the other hand, West Bengal and North Bengal came under the rule of North Indian rulers several times, resulting in the Vedic Aryan religion and culture established among the region's peoples. The Hindus of Bangladesh, being non-Aryans have fundamental differences from the Hindus of West Bengal regarding religious deities, worship practices and rituals (Mukharji, 2017, p. 459). Apart from differences in religious rituals, there are differences in folk culture between West Bengal and Bangladeshi Bengalis. There are many contrasts between Baul artists of Bangladesh and West Bengal in terms of lyrics, tunes and even practice and performance (Openshaw, 2002). The Bauls of West Bengal's Nadia-Murshidabad or Birbhum-Bakura regions are Vaishnava-influenced and wear ochre-yellow clothes like Vaishnavas. Normally they chant 'Hari Hari' or 'Hari Bol' at the beginning or after the song. The Bauls of Bangladesh are engaged in Sadhana, a mixture of Nath, Vaishnav and Sufi doctrines. They wear white clothes like the corpse and say 'Alek Sai', 'Allah Alek', 'Jai Guru' or 'Sai Niranjan' (Bennett, 2019).

Despite West Bengalis and Bangladeshis sharing the Bengali language base, they have developed into separate entities distinguished by their different phonetic, gastronomic, and cultural attributes. The subtle phonetic

distinctions that distinguish Bangladeshi Standard Bengali from Calcutta Standard Bengali provide insight into the complexities of language development and adaptation (Khan, 2014, p. 82). The culinary traditions of West Bengal and Bangladesh, which are a dynamic testament to their rich cultural past, exhibit considerable differences in flavours, ingredients, and culinary practices (Dasgupta, 2023, p. 342). The historical significance of hospitality, highly revered throughout Hindu and Muslim cultures in Bangladesh, undergoes a subtle alteration as it crosses the border into West Bengal. The change in the expression of hospitality reflects the wider cultural differences between the two regions.

Moreover, the geographical and ethnic boundaries that have existed for millennia emphasise the complex interaction of historical, cultural, and sociological elements that differentiate West Bengal from its eastern counterpart (Ahsan, 2002, p. 67). This long-lasting divide represents the multilayered heritage of the Bengali-speaking areas and highlights the significant influence of history and cultural development on their identities.

THE CONTRIBUTION OF MUSLIMS TO THE CULTURE OF BANGLADESH

Muslim rule had played a significant role in establishing a new dimension of Bengali's unique culture. But the spread of this unique cultural norm did not happen only due to the conquest of the land. Islam arrived in Bangladesh in the seventh century through Arab traders in the Chittagong region and Muslim rule began in Bengal in 1200 AD. Prior to the Muslims came to power, Arab traders and Sufis, Pirs as well as Islamic preachers had spread Islam in different parts of India rapidly, which later started a social revolution under state patronage (Talib, 2002, p. 139).

Before the establishment of Muslim rule, the society in this region was hierarchical under the influence of Brahminism. The state of society had become so deplorable that Brahmins were considered impure if they touched the shadow of a lower Caste. As a result, the rights of ordinary people were highly deprived, and under the influence of the Sanskrit language and Aryan culture, the native Bengali language and culture were neglected and became useless (S. D. C. Sen, 1998, p. 19). Responding to Islam's call for equality and justice, the oppressed people of this country made Islam their national spirit. Although the rulers of Bengal at that time came from outside, they accepted the country as their motherland and the Bengali language as their mother tongue. From 1200 to 1800 AD, the ruler and the system of governance changed many times during the Muslim rule in Bengal, but no ruler hindered the development of the Bengali language and culture. Instead, the genuine patronage of the Muslim royal power created a golden chapter for the Bengali language and culture (Billah, 2007, p. 48). They established a new civilisation in Bengal through its native name, language, education, literature, art and trade.

Formation of the Bengali Society

Bangladesh experienced numerous invasions, cultural exchanges, migrations and religious transformations. This happened in succession during the Vedic, Kushan, Persian, Mauryan, Gupta, Pala, Sen, Sultanate, Mughal and European colonial India in 1947 (Siddiq & Habib, 2017, p. 1). The Shahi Bangalah Sultanate was the first Muslim independent state during Medieval Bengal. Before Shahi Bangalah, the region was divided into many geopolitical sub-states, namely Banga, Rarh, Dakshin, Gaur, Suhma, Barendri, Samatat and Harikel (Oberst, 2015, p. 246). In the 1350s, Gaur Sultan Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah conquered Sonargaon in Banga, united this fragmented region and established the Shahi-e-Bangala Sultanate. He even took the title of Shah-e-Bangalian. He was the first to name the people of this land with the same language and ethnic characteristics as 'Bengali' and united them with the Bengali identity (Uddin et al., 2022, p. 43). From this time, the dwellers of all regions of Bengal identified themselves as Bengalis and to other outside countries they became known as the Bengali Nation (Rahman, 2018). The Sultanate's rule lasted more than two centuries and there was no religious schism in the community under the Sultans' patronage. The word Bengali is derived from the Persian word bangalah and there was no region ever called Bengal or Bangala before (Rahman, 2018, p. X). All other religious communities, including Muslims and Hindus, formed a new Bengali society and culture under the umbrella of the Muslim Sultanate.

Development of the Bengali Language and Literature

The Muslims contributed to the rich history of developing the Bengali language and literature. They played an incomparable role in expanding the Bengali language and literature from ancient to modern times. They help flourished the Bengali language and literature starting from the Muslim rule in 1200 AD (D. Sen, 1911, p. 10). According to Hai & Ahsan (2010) the origin and development of the Bengali language and its evolutionary characteristics is divided into three Eras, namely the Ancient Age (approximately 650 AD-1200 AD), the Middle Age (1201 AD-1800 AD) and the Modern Era (1801 AD–Present) (Hai & Ahsan, 2010, p. 3). The Bengali language emerged through "Gaudiya apabhramsa" from "Gaudiya Prakrit" (Alam, 2018, p. 27). The earliest specimen of the Bengali language, Charyapada, originated from the Varendra region. Varendra was the oldest and most historical region of Bengal. It is now part of Bangladesh's Rangpur and Rajshahi divisions and the language of this region is Varendri or Gauda (K. Islam, 1966, p. 41). The foremost author of the Charyapada, Kaahupa alias Kanhpa, was a resident of Sompur Mahavihara in Paharpur at Naogaon District in Rajshahi Division. The second king of the Pala dynasty, Sri Dharmapala Deva, built this Bihara in the 9th century (S. N. Sen, 1999, p. 279). Sompur Mahavihara is one of the most notable archaeological places in Bangladesh and it was selected as a UNESCO world heritage site in 1985 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre). The practice of Bengali language and literature began during the Pala dynasty but later during the period of the

Sen rulers, the Sanskrit language spread widely in this region. Sanskrit prevailed over the vernacular Bengali language in all spheres of state administration and religion. Unfortunately, in the absence of state patronage, the Bengali language made no progress and only became the spoken language of the Lower Caste people (R. D. D. Sen, 1940).

The Bengali language entered the Middle Ages with the establishment of Muslim rule in Bengal by Ikhtiyar Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1205 AD. Muslim rulers established Bengali language and literature under state patronage and created a new era for Bengali language and literature (S. Sen, 1992, pp. 43–36). The Bengali language and literature began to be widely practised during the reign of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah of Bengal and the Shahi Dynasty in Bengal represented the golden age for Bengali literature dynasty (Chaudhuri, 2021, p. 13). The Bengali language and literature flourished under the Muslim rulers' supervision until the mid-eighteenth century. Many works of literature such as translation, biographical literature, Mangalkavya and Vaishnava Padavali were produced during this time. Shah Muhammad Sagir (1339-1419) was the first Muslim poet of Bengal and one of the most mysterious poets of the Middle Ages. He was a high-quality patriotic poet inspired by modern thought even though he was in the Middle Ages. Muhammad Sagir composed his best poem 'Yusuf Zolekha' during the reign of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah (Bose, 2014). There is no mention of the poet's birthplace in history however, three copies of his poetry book were discovered in Chittagong, and one was collected from Tripura. Thus, it is assumed that Shah Muhammad Sagir's residence was Chittagong (Bose, 2014, p. 4). Zainuddin was another famous poet of Medieval Bengal and a resident of the Chittagong region. He was the royal court poet of Gaur Sultan Yusuf Shah (1474 - 1481) and he wrote his famous poem 'Rasul Vijay' (1474) which was inspired by Sultan Yusuf Shah himself. In his poetry, the Muslim tradition is mixed with spiritual devotion expounded into literature. Daulat Wazir Bahram Khan was another influential poet of Medieval Bengali literature and he was born in Zafarabad or Fatehabad in the Chittagong district (A. Roy, 2014, p. 73). His famous literary works are Laily-Majnun and Imam Vijay. Laily-Majnun was the first romantic love story in the Bengali language. In the 15th century, the work of the Muslim poet Muhammad Sagir began with humanist romance and in the 16th century. This romanticism began to be influenced by theology. Sufism poets like Chand Kazi and Sheikh Kabir's with their "Bangla Vaishnava Padavali", Sheikh Faizullah's Satyapir and Nath literature and the renowned saint Noor Qutb Alam composed many Bengali ghazals. Syed Sultan, Shah Barid Khan, Sheikh Paran, Afzal Ali, Sheikh Chand and Haji Muhammad were poets of theology and they contributed to the creation of the field of Bengali literature in the Middle Ages (Haque, 1998, p. 267).

Emulating the literary prowess of the Muslim Sultans many neighboring kings got attracted by the beauty of the Bengali language and literature and employed Bengali poets in their royal courts. Amongst the Bengali poets appointed to practice poetry in the Arakan royal courts

include Syed Alaol and Daulat Qazi. Syed Alaol was one of the greatest poets of Bengali literature of the Middle Ages (Forster, 2011, p. 67). He was proficient in many languages including Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit and Hindi. Padmavati, Satimayna Lorchandrani, Sapta Paykar, Saifulmuluk-Badiuzzamal, Sikandarnama, Tohfa and Ragtlnama also established a special place in Bengali literature with their poetry works (D'Hubert, 2018, p. 8). In Arakan, Daulat Qazi was another famous royal court poet of King Sri Sudharma (Thiri-thu-Dhamma, 1622-1638). He started composing the poem Satimayna and Lor Chandrani. However, he could not finish it in his lifetime. Before dying, only two-thirds of his poems were written and then poet Alaol completed the rest. Satimayna and Lor Chandrani are a romantic narrative poems about the love of a prince and a princess and he illustrated spirituality through the metaphors of poetry (D'Hubert, 2018, p. 74).

Muslim poets enjoyed an outstanding stature in Medieval Bengali literature where they depicted vividly peoples' happiness, sorrows, love and social lives. As a result, life-oriented literature started in the Bengali literature especially about society and peoples' lifestyles. Muslim poets and writers contributed to the Bengali literature by writing translations of religion, history, biographies of various stages, spiritual dispatch, fairy tales and foreign translation books. They composed more than five thousand manuscripts including those of Kasasul Ambia, Fathusham, Alif Laila, Jang Nama, Shaheed Karbala, Laili-Majnu, Yusuf Zulekha, Amir Hamza, Chahar Darvesh, Satyapir, Gazi Kalu and Sonavan (Mustafa, 2005, p. 159). The Muslim poets of the Middle Ages also had an essential contribution in enriching the traditional folk literature of Bengal by composing numerous rhymes, riddles and folk songs. Mansoor Bayati was a Bengali lyricist, writer and singer. He is the composer of the famous Mymensingh folk song Deewana Medina (Rai Bahadur, 1923, p. 285).

British colonialism began with the end of Muslim rule in Bengal in 1757 and the beginning of the modern era of the Bengali language and literature in 1800. As a result of the British conspiracy, the Muslims of Bengal fell behind in education and culture at the initial stage. After the Sepoy Rebellion in 1857, the Muslims created new motivation and enthusiasm to protect and explore the native culture (Muhammad, 1998, p. 136). Later, Muslim poets and writers played an incomparable role in developing the Bengali language and literature. In the early period of the Bengali language and literature, the contribution of Muslims towards Bengali language and literary culture is presented frivolously, and attempts had been made even to erase the contribution of Muslim poets and writers from history. Muslim poets and writers had played an inimitable role in all areas of Bengali literature including creating novels, stories, short stories, epics, songs, dramas and essays in the modern era. Prominent figures that deserve mention include Mir Musharraf Hossain, Nawab Faizunnessa Chowdhury, Mohammad Mozammel Haque, Kazi Nazrul Islam, Abu Zafar Shamsuddin, Humayun Kabir, Mahmudul Haque, Maniruzzaman Islamabadi, Dad Ali Mia, Sheikh Abdur Rahim, Shah Mohammad Karim, Munsii Meherullah, Ismail Hossain Shirazi, Abdul Karim, Shah Sufi Abu

Bakar Siddique, Mohammad Wazed Ali, Dr Lutfar Rahman, Yakub Ali Chowdhury, Ibrahim Khan, Golam Mostafa, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Farrukh Ahmed and Jasimuddin (Hai & Ahsan, 2010).

The Establishment of the Bangla Calendar

Agriculture and culture have been closely related to people's lives since ancient times. Depending on the season, harvesting crop seeds at certain times of the year, sowing of seeds, crop care and harvesting and agriculture-based festivals, everything is done synchronising with the traditional Bangla calendar (Hossen, 2017, p. 111).

The Mughal Empire made an excellent contribution to the development of administration, architecture and culture in Indian history. Bangladesh became part of the Mughal Empire in 1576 AD. The Mughal Empire was confined to the northwestern region of Bengal due to the inadequate communication system of riverine Bengal during Emperor Akbar's reign. Bengal became Subedari rule in Bengal as a suba or province under the Mughal Empire, and the appointment of governors started in Bengal (Chatterjee, 2009, p. 35).

Before the arrival of the Muslims, the people of India used the Hindu astronomical almanac (Panjika) while the Muslim rulers used the Hijri calendar for revenue collection. Using the Hijri calendar was problematic for the peasants because of the 11/12-day gap between the lunar and solar years, with 31 lunar years equaling 30 solar years. The Mughal administration collected according to the lunar year, but the peasants harvested crops following the solar year. Emperor Akbar initiated reforming the calendar to introduce a scientific, practical and acceptable calculation system. He entrusted an eminent scientist and astronomer Amir Fathullah Shirazi with the task of preparing a central year calendar by integrating the solar and lunar features of the seasons of different regions of India. In 1584 AD, astronomer Amir Fathullah Shirazi formulated a new calendar known as Tarikh-e-Ilahi (A. Sen, 2021, p. 174).

Emperor Akbar's Elahi Son (Elahi Calendar) was the central calendar of all Mughal empires. He ordered the creation of a regional tax structure to facilitate the payment of taxes to the subjects, keeping in view the seasonality and agricultural production of different regions. Farmers did not harvest crops simultaneously in large parts, like in the Indian Sub-Continent. Different calendars were introduced in other areas depending on the harvest time by the Mughal demonstration. The Mughal governor of Bengal, Nawab Murshid Quli Khan introduced the regional Bengali calendar based on the principles of the Elahi Calendar. In 963, the Bengali year began from the beginning of the Muharram month of 963 Hijri, but the Sanskrit month names were used from earlier editions. Since the month of Muharram of 963 Hijri was compatible with the Bengali month of Baishakh, instead of the month of Chaitra, the month of Baishakh was made the first month of the Bengali year. Pahela Baisakh (Bengali New Year) is the first day of the Bengali calendar. This day is the traditional New Year's Day for all Bengali people (Samayeen & Imon, 2016, p. 162). It is celebrated with

special festivals like the New Year of Bangladesh and West Bengal of India. Emperor Akbar devised other regional calendars known as the Amla Son, Vilayeti Son and Surasani Son of Orissa. Remarkably, Akbar established a flawless and scientific solar calendar which became ideal and accepted by all, irrespective of Caste and religion (Sircar, 2017, p. 310).

Muslim Influence on Bangladeshi Cuisine

Agriculture has been the primary source of livelihood for the people of Bangladesh since ancient times. Bangladesh is the largest delta, Padma-Meghna-Jamuna, with numerous rivers and canals including the Brahmaputra. The freshwater fish of these rivers and canals is a crucial component of the daily food of the people of Bangladesh (Sharma et al., 2016, p. 133). The region's geographical climate has abundant rainfall good for producing a large amount of rice in the country. For this reason, fish and rice have become the leading food menu of the people of this region. The people of Bangladesh have gained recognition as "Machhe bhate Bangali," which translates into "fish and rice make a Bengali" (Thilsted, 2013, p. 270).

In ancient times, there was no independent state called Bangladesh. Different parts of Bangladesh were divided into Pundra, Banga, Barendra, Gaur, Samatat, Chandradwip and Harikel townships (Datta, 2002, p. 3). Although there is no complete list of the food list of these divided towns, an idea of the food routines can be found in the descriptions of Charyapadas and various religious texts of Hinduism. In the Prakritpaingal text, there is a description of serving hot rice, ghee, Maurala fish and Patshak (Jute leaf) on banana leaves in the 14th century and the oldest Bengali text Charyapada contains many descriptions of rice and Shak (green leaf) (Biswajit Panda, 2015, p. 3). The terracotta plaques discovered in Sompur Vihar and Mainamati Vihar built during the Pala period in Bangladesh, depict fish cutting and carrying fish in baskets (N. Roy, 2013, p. 446). There are extensive descriptions of paddy fields in the ancient inscriptions of the Sen period.

Although there are descriptions of fish in archaeological artefacts and literature, Hindus and Buddhists had different restrictions on eating fish. In Buddhism, killing animals is a great sin, so the followers of the Bhadra religion did not eat eggs, fish and meat. They were vegetarians (C. T. Sen, 2004, p. 10). Hindu Brahmins could not eat all types of fish due to religious restrictions and widows were prohibited from eating all kinds of fish and meat (Banerji, 2006). According to the Hindu sacred scriptures, the Medieval Hindu community adopted a strict policy regarding spices where onions and garlic were forbidden in Hindu cooking (Ray, 2015, p. 64). All types of food made from milk were the food of the gods, so they considered all food processed from milk banned. The arrival of the Muslims in the Middle Ages brought about a revolutionary change in the cuisine and eating habits of the Bengal region and Bengali food culture took on a new form overcoming religious restrictions and social barriers (C. T. Sen et al., 2023, p. 403). The Mughal influence on Bengali cuisine changed the cooking style and introduced Bengalis to many delicacies. Especially after the

establishment of the Mughal Empire and making Dhaka the capital of Suba Bengal, foreign Nawabs, Sultans and Amirs brought various cuisines and ingredients to Bengal.

For breakfast, foods include roasted khichuri, Parata, chapati, rumali roti, luchi, naan roti, shahi phirni, bakarkhani, semai, baked bread, dates, butter sauces, nuts and cream. A typical lunch is an array of Biryani Kachchi Biryani, Polao, Kebab, Korma, Kalia, Rezala, Kofta and various fish curries with onion and garlic (Antani & Mahapatra, 2022, p. 4). For dessert, Pies, Faluda, Morabba, Dudh Chana, Borhani, Lachcha Semai and a variety of sweets are common delicacies (Chakrabarti, 2017, pp. 311–312). Drinks include Sherbat, Lachcha, Matha, Labang, Coffee and Syrup. Nasta (snacks) is a Bangladeshi midafternoon/early evening tradition where common tit-bits include Nimki, Samosa, Singara, Halim and Moghlai. The Muslims imparted important influence in changing the way of cooking in Bengal. They introduced some new spices in Bengal cooking including almonds, butter, cheese, cardamom, cinnamon, garlic and onion which were not used in Bengal before (Uhl, 2000, p. 252). At that time, Brahmins of other parts of India considered the presence of fish meat and onion-garlic in the food destroy their religion but the Brahmins of Bangladesh ate fish, meat and spicy foods. Above all, Muslim influence on Bengali Cuisine rose above religious restrictions and changed everyone's diet.

Islamic Architectural Development

Besides changing the religious and political context of Bengal, Muslim rule played a fundamental role in architectural development and urbanization (S. Ahmed, 2016, p. 1). Under the patronage of the Muslim rulers, numerous structures were built including palaces, forts, shrines, monuments, mosques, temples, ditches, and roads. During the Sultanate and the Mughal periods, Architecture using modern construction style flourished and urbanization expanded. Islamic architecture developed harmoniously combining the local Hindu-Buddhist architectural styles since the beginning of the Islamic regime (Hasan, 2007, pp. 4–5).

In the Middle Ages, most people lived in couple-roof and four-square-roof houses made of thatch and bamboo. Few of the wealthy people lived in houses made of bamboo and wood (Nishant & Das, 2023, p. 4067). The Sultanate rule in Bengal lasted throughout the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries. There were numerous precedents of architectural styles from the Sultanate period. During the Sultanate period, brick was widely used in architectural styles because there was sufficient supply of brick-making clay in the country and the Muslim and local architects favoured traditional brick architectural designs. The specialty of the Muslim construction style during the Sultanate period is the use of building materials, minarets, mihrabs and arches, keeping them compatible with the country's climate (Sanyal, 1970, p. 417).

Bagerhat city is a historical city of the ancient Sultanate period located in the Bagerhat district in the southwest region of Bangladesh. Ulugh Khan Jahan (1433–1459) founded this city in the 15th century and

was an administrator of the Sultanate (Shahid, 2010, p. 59). The city was named Fatehabad and was built with a combination of Islamic and local architecture and most of the designs were entirely different and unique. The city had 360 mosques, numerous government buildings, cemeteries, bridges, roads and potable water reservoirs. Among the structures built at that time, the sixty-domed mosque is one of the traditional structures representing the golden age of Muslim Bengal. The mosque is made of small bricks; its length is 160 feet; width is 108 feet and height are 22 feet. Although it is known as the Sixty-domed Mosque, it has 77 domes on the roof and four smaller domes on the mosque's four corner minarets or towers (Dani, 1961, pp. 144–146). The mosque's facade has a large arch in the centre and five smaller arches on either side and the mosque has a total of 26 doors including a door next to the main mihrab on the west side of the mosque. Remarkably, the city was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983 (UNESCO World Heritage, 1983).

Another noteworthy district Chapainawabganj district was a part of Gaur, the capital of ancient Bengal and it has rich historical monuments and archaeological resources. In Shibganj Upazila of Chapainawabganj district, there are various historical structures and sites built by Muslim Sultans during the Sultanate period. The Chhota Sona Mosque, Khania Dighi Mosque, Darasbari Madrasa and Mosque and the Tahakhana Complex are the main historical buildings of the Upazila (Sultana, 2022, pp. 1–3). These architectures were built mainly with endemic and Delhi royal architecture. There were also other buildings that were built during the country's Sultanate period including Shankar Pasha Shahi Mosque in Sylhet, Patrail Mosque in Faridpur and Bagha Mosque in Rajshahi (Hasan, 1989, pp. 58–74).

After the end of the Sultanate rule in Bengal, i.e. in the first half of the sixteenth century, there was a significant change in the architectural design of Bengal. At the same time, the Mughal Empire also played an essential role in the urbanization of Bengal. The rulers of the Mughal Empire in Bengal built the country's architecture following the designs of Delhi and Agra's architecture (Asher, 1992, p. 1). The architecture of the Mughal period brings distinctive features of mosque arches and domes with various types of craftsmanship that are easily distinguishable from those of the Sultanate period. During the Sultanate period, terracotta was used to cover the walls but during the Mughal period instead of terracotta lime-surki plaster was introduced. They built a modern city at Sonargaon in Narayanganj and modern market facilities at Chawkbazar on the banks of the Buriganga river in Dhaka and built high walls and sixteen gates for security in Chawkbazar market (Iftikhar-ul-Awwal & Alamgir, 2003, pp. 7–9). Besides, Lalbagh Fort, Baro Katra and Chota Katra Forts, Hosseini Dalan, Paribibir Shrine, Lalbagh Shahi Mosque, the Seven Dome Mosque in Dhaka, Sonakanda Fort in Narayanganj, Indrapur Fort in Munshiganj and Tahkhana Complex, Shah Naimatullah Wali Mosque and Tomb in Shibganj Upazila of Chapainawabganj District are some outstanding architectural masterpieces (Asher, 1984, pp. 37–136).

Indeed, Muslim architecture had enriched the architectural history of Bengal. These architectural feats were representative of an eclectic architectural style, and all these architectures exhibit royal features and used native materials. This multi-dimensionality of architectural styles has placed Muslim architecture in Bengal an exemplary art of architecture.

The Development of Costume Design

Bengali clothes have also changed at different times and over time the influence of religion, politics, economics and aesthetics have been added to the choice of clothing. Although there is no written information about the clothing worn by men and women in ancient times, an idea of their clothing can be obtained from the sculptures, terracotta plaques and manuscripts found in ancient and Medieval times (Akram, 2016). At that time, there was not much difference in the clothing of men and women. Moreover, there was no variety of clothing like the people of this era. Most of their clothing was minimal clothing necessary for modesty and protection from the harshness of various weather conditions including winter and summer. Both men and women wore traditional clothes; men wore Dhوتي and women wore Saree. Ordinary men wore very short Dhوتي while some elite men wore Dhوتي below the knee. Women used to wear sarees that hung up to the ankles but then women did not wear blouses or petticoats with sarees.

Along with the political and social changes brought about by the arrival of Muslims in Bengal, there were significant changes in clothing under the influence of Muslim traditions. Stitched clothes were not worn before Muslims came to Bengal; wearing stitched clothes was considered impure and men and women wore unstitched sarees and Dhوتي (N. Roy, 2013, p. 558). The Muslims introduced various tailoring designs and a new profession called 'Dorji' (Tailor) emerged in the society (Mustafa, 2021). Sultans, Mughals and Khans wore sherwanis narrowed at the waist, long at the bottom and a white turban on the head. The white cotton turban is 40 feet in length and 6 feet in width (Rahim, 1963, p. 292).

In the late 16th century, Muslim men wore pyjamas, caps, long kurtas or Punjabis and loose clothing. Muslim women wore kameez and salwar, Ghaghra and silk or cotton clothes. Girls from wealthy families were adorned with necklaces, pearls, diamond earrings, bala rings and gold rings studded with precious stones (Shoeb, 2018). They also wore another ornament called kinkini on the waist and nupur or paizar on the feet. In the Middle Ages, Muslim rulers did not change the clothes that the rulers brought with them. Initially, the people of this region did not wear these clothes but in the fourteenth-fifteenth century, people of this region slowly started wearing these clothes; first in the king's court, then among the elite and later among the rich and poor. Henceforth, for both the Hindu and Muslim communities the practice of wearing these clothes began. A widely used men's garment in Bengal is the lungi. Lungi is synonymous with 'Tahmat' or 'Tahman' both words being Persian in origin. There was no custom of wearing a lungi in ancient Bengali society. The early Arabs who came to India later used the Tahmat or lungi. The practice of wearing the

lungi and imitating the Arabs gradually spread among the elite and the ordinary people (Sobanglay, 2020). Bangladeshi women wore sarees at various festivals but the prevalence of sarees decreased significantly with the advent of Islam. In the Middle Ages, among the elite Muslims, many women wore the salwar kameez but Bengali Muslim women did not. Later, Muslim women and Bengali Hindu women also started wearing salwar-kameez. Nowadays, Bangladesh women mostly wear salwar-kameez (Hussein, 2018, p. 105).

Dhakai muslin cloth made in the Sonargaon region during the Mughal period gained great popularity among the Europeans including the Indian Sub-Continent (Khatun, 2015, p. 190). This muslin was used to make royal clothes in the Indian Sub-Continent and the western world. Different types of muslin were known by other names such as Malbus Khas, Sarkar-i-Ala, Jhuna, Ab-i-Rawan, Khassa, Shabnam, Nayan Sukh, Badan Khas, Sar-bandh, Doria and Jamdani depending on the difference in fineness, weaving style and design (Ghosh, 2011, p. 36). Among them, the Jamdani saree is still trendy among Bangladeshi women as the successor of the muslin cloth.

Even after the decline of Bengal's Muslims, both Hindus and Muslims of the country continued to wear the elite clothes of the Mughals. Rammohan Roy, Dwarkanath Tagore, Bankimchandra Chatterjee, Swami Vivekananda and all the elites of that time still wore turbans on their heads in imitation of the Muslim nobility. In British India, Bengali Zamindars Rammohan Roy and Dwarkanath Tagore showed pictures of them wearing such clothes. Bangladesh's Zamindars, Serestadars and lawyers used to wear Jama, Nima, Kaba and Korta too (kholakagojbd, 13 December, 2019).

CONCLUSION

This research pursued to illuminate Bangladesh's historical and cultural fusion, particularly during the Islamic Middle Ages. The unique multi-heritage identity of the nation, shaped by diverse genetic influences, defies simplistic categorisation. The findings highlighted the intricate lineage of Bangladesh, including Dravidian, Australoid, Mongolian, and Aryan blood, emphasising the crucial contributions of Islamic rulers to the nation's prosperous civilisation. Religion was essential in liberating the populace from oppressive structures, fostering a unique cultural identity marked by language, literature, cuisine, and architectural advancements. To further enrich our understanding of Bangladesh's historical and cultural evolution, it is recommended that interdisciplinary research be continued, integrating perspectives from historical, anthropological, linguistic, and archaeological disciplines. This research has provided valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of Bangladesh's cultural evolution, bridging gaps in comprehending its historical Middle Ages. It emphasises the importance of acknowledging the diverse heritage and the role of religion in shaping identity for fostering unity and progress within the nation.

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