

## **Urbanization Social Change and Cultural Space: a study on the Cities and Towns of Bengal in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

Dr. Subrata Roy  
Assistant Professor  
Department of History  
Santipur College, Nadia  
and  
Part time faculty  
Kanyashri University, Nadia  
West Bengal, India.  
e-mail: subratasntc@gmail.com

**Abstract:** This article seeks to analyse the birth, growth and development of the cities and towns of Bengal during the eighteenth century and its consequences on the society, economy and culture of Bengal. The main objectives of this article are (a) to identify and evaluate the economic as well as professional activity of the urbanites; (b) to examine the religion, caste, and class based settlement pattern in the towns and cities; (c) to assess and explore the socio-cultural interactions between the urban and rural dwellers. Some of the important findings are the following: (1) almost all the towns and cities of eighteenth century Bengal had a growing economic activity amidst political instability; (2) the demographic settlement of the city and towns appeared in the form of inter-religious and to some extent inter-caste based; (3) The emerging nature of urban culture and the common religious practices has been substantiated. And finally how the emerging urbanites formed a cosmopolitan culture is a key finding of the present study.

**Keywords:** *Bengal; eighteenth-century; demographic settlement; inter-religious; inter-caste.*

### **Introduction**

This paper is an attempt to focus on religious and cultural syncretism between the Hindus, the Muslims, the Jains, the Christians, the Armenians, the Sikhs and others who resided in and around the emerging cities and towns of Bengal during the eighteenth century. Generally, in pre-modern times, the size and number of cities and towns offered a reliable index of the extent of trade and commerce within a country. The three major cities in Bengal during the eighteenth century were Dhaka, Murshidabad and Calcutta (Karim, 1964; Ballhatechet & Harrison, 1980; Nair, 1984; Ray, 1986; Ahmed, 2009; Das & Llewellyn-Jones, 2013; Chaudhury, 2018). Moreover there were so many small towns which grew up during the period under review due to center of administration, patronage by the ruling elites, as a center of trade and commerce, religious centre or as a cantonment. In the early part of the eighteenth century, we see under the rule of the Nawabs (c.1704 - 1757), many new urban centers grew up around the administrative points across Bengal. But what is more important is that many

towns developed centering round the residences of the *zamindars* or the principal revenue collectors who were practically the local potentates with wide revenue, police and judicial powers. The first half of the eighteenth century saw the growing power of many of these *zamindars* whose seats of authority and gradually turned into the most important provincial towns of the time (Ahmed, 1992). Such *zamindari* towns were Burdwan, Bishnupur, Birbhum, Dinajpur, Krishnagar, Midnapur, Rajshahi, etcetera (Roy, 2017). In addition a number of small towns namely, Chandernagore, Chinsura, Hooghly, Qashimbazar, Malda, Baranagar, Serampore, Santipur, Chittagong, Lakshmipur, Rangpur, Kumarkhali, Sylhet, Buckergunj, Jiaganj, Azimganj, Kalna, Katwa, etcetera began to develop as a result of European settlement, fortification of military stations or as a centre of religious, commercial and economic activities (Dasgupta, 2001; Roy 2017).

The complex process of urbanization involves basic changes, primarily in economic and demographic structure. However, beyond these basic changes, others of no less importance can be observed. The nature of their significance differs in that they involve the spiritual life of human community. They make up its affective, intellectual, esthetic-artistic and educational sides. The ethnologists' goal is to understand these secondary changes which, either partially or totally, may redefine the composite profile of new social factor. To shaping up the paper, I have studied both the primary and secondary sources with special reference to contemporary Bengali Vernacular literature. Hence the study tries to highlight how with the growth of the cities and small towns social changes came to fore in the socio-cultural life of the people of Bengal during the period under review.

The great transformation which has taken place in Bengal during the eighteenth century can be seen especially clearly in the analysis of two main components of social life: urbanization and the British domination. Of course, significance is also to be found in analyzing all the implications of the diachronic dimension as each town has had its own particular history determined, over the course of time, by the development of its own social surroundings. As we know culture is learnt and depends on being brought up within a framework; a *cultural space*. India is land of many cultures and when we refer to culture it includes arts and architecture, language, poetry, music, paintings, dances, draperies, food habits, customs, traditions and some religious, especially spiritual practices. Hence the study tries to substantiate: how with the birth and growth of the cities and towns, a social change perceived in and around the vicinity? And find out how these emerging cosmopolitan urbanities formed a composite culture within the society.

### **Continuities or Change - Town Life in Bengal**

We have already noted that the towns and cities during the period under review embodied the usual all round character of administrative, commercial, industrial, educational, religious centre to a varying degree; some of them had gradually acquired greater significance in one respect or another. Considering the different

views of eighteenth century India (Ali, 1986; Alavi 2002), Hameeda Khatun Naqvi states,

“The progress of urbanization was as seriously shaken by the 18<sup>th</sup> century chaos as was the general economy of the region. Trade came to a standstill; artisans had to flee from the affected towns, civilian service personnel sought service in vain and imperial urban administration gradually disappeared. Under these circumstances the urban citizen was left with three alternatives, migration to the towns lying east of the Ganges, enlistment in the armed forces of any of the chieftains enrolling levies or else to turn towards the villages. Perhaps the number of those migrating to villages was considerable as while the urban output of manufactured goods in the western region had apparently declined and the period is marked with no scarcity of agricultural commodities. It is also likely that not all the urban artisans after reaching the villages gave up their crafts, though now much less profitable; they might have preferred continuing it even after the change of place. This feature would, to a certain extent, explain why since about the later part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century Hindustani crafts have generally been regarded more as a rural rather than urban phenomenon.”

(Naqvi, 1969, 237-238)

But Bengal was a happy exception to the general picture of political decay and economic decadence. Throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, political and economic affairs in Bengal were conducted with vigour and efficiency. Thus even during the period of administrative and political disintegration in general, the provincial administrative system in Bengal appears to have grown stronger (Chaudhury, 1995). As a result of politico-administrative stability, the socio-cultural and economic life in Bengal moved on gradually. Institutional, cultural, religious, political and economic ties had existed between the peasant villages and urban cultures since the beginning of historical times. Eventually we see the urban centers had to depend necessarily on villages for agricultural products and other rural surpluses. Even for the continuance of these primary supplies a stable pattern of rural-urban relationship was a pre-requisite. The bases of this relationship, however, were much wider. The bonds were not only economic but also institutional, political, and cultural (Deva, 1969). Hence the social formation of the towns and cities of Bengal during the period under study take a multi-cultural shape where people from various caste, class, religion, and profession took shelter across the towns and cities, eventually a major section of the town-dwellers formed their profession based settlement which have been reflected in the name of their settled wards or *mohallas*.

Just at the beginning of the eighteenth century the social life of the people of Bengal grew complex and full of ups and downs. This is because of more than five hundred years of continuous Muslim rule in Bengal that created a large Muslim population in the land. Whether this was due mainly to immigration and settlement of foreign Muslims in the country or to conversion of the local population to Islam is a question. Besides, the entry of the European companies in

Bengal was also a turning point in the process of transformation of the social life of the people of Bengal. And finally the existence of a large Muslim population in Bengal was generally lost sight of following their loss of political power and the establishment of British rule in the country in the mid-eighteenth century. Naturally, the political transition had great impact on the society, economy and culture of Bengal. As a result, during the eighteenth century, Bengal became the seat- of various religion, caste and creed. Finally, with the emergence of new cities and towns a cosmopolitan urban society was being formed within the cities or towns (Roy, 2017). Besides, most of the mediaeval town is a direct ancestor of the present day city or town. But for the better understanding of the urban society of Bengal, we have to look into the shaping of different religions, their customs, values, tradition, modes of life and above all the contemporary literature, folk tales, ballads, miniature paintings, etcetera which are in turn, associated with the administration, administrator and the masses.

As the primary purpose of the city and town is to provide adequate living and working accommodations for its population, so the city/town's 'form-order' and 'social order' cannot be separated; they must be developed hand-in-hand, reciprocally inspiring one another, irrespective of caste, creed and religion. And the practice is also encouraged by the ruling elites of the towns, instead of the caste system, which was the pivot of the social organization of Bengali society. Momtazur Rahman Tarafdar (Tarafdar, 1993) shows how technological innovations were responsible for social evolution in medieval Bengal. Moreover during Medieval India Islamic influence was reflected in the dress, food and social manners of upper class Hindu society (not the masses and priestly class). But at the same time the Muslims were also influenced by Indian dress, food and toilet habits. Various political, social and religious causes accounted for the progress of Islam in Bengal. Here the social and religious life of the Muslims, - came to be profoundly influenced by Hinduism and marked by inter-penetration of many local manners and customs of the Hindus, and incorporation of certain beliefs, rites and ceremonies which were inconsistent with the Quran and bearing palpable signs of Hindu influence. If there was no absorption, there was undoubtedly assimilation between the two communities (Sarkar, 1972; Sarkar, 1984). The present study will try to emphasize and re-emphasize how the syncretic tradition of our heritage draws people together.

### **Human Settlements and Professional Activities of the Towns**

The settlement pattern and professional activities of the cities of Dhaka, Murshidabad and Kolkata were inter-mixed in every way of life. Dhaka was made the capital, as an administrative and military headquarter, Dhaka expanded rapidly and its commercial activities increased, foreign and Indian merchants, traders and bankers - Europeans, Mughals, Pathans, Armenians, Turanis, Marwaris and other up country Hindus were attracted to the place. They needed accommodation both for themselves and their goods (Karim, 2009). In the early part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Dhaka's period of glory came to an end with the shifting of provincial capital

from Dhaka to Murshidabad (Karim, 2009; Chowdhury & Faruqui, 1980; Ballhatechet & Harrison, 1980), a Naib Nazim used to administer the city of Dhaka. Although the old pomp and splendor were gone yet the commerce of Dhaka continued, only the expansion stopped. Since 1763 the English officials began to reside at the Lalbagh fort while the Naib Nazim was then residing at the Bara Katra. The English also started constructing some buildings (Ray, 2015; Ahmed, 1986). In this regard the nature of human settlement and the demography of Dhaka take a turn under the Europeans.

The history of Murshidabad city becomes clear from the early years of the eighteenth century when Murshid Quli Khan moved from Dacca to Murshidabad [then Makhsudabad]; but its origin is uncertain (Mohsin, 1980). After his arrival at Makhsudabad he improved the town, raised public offices and other government establishments and changed its name to Murshidabad (Mohsin, 1980). An idea of the extent of the city may be obtained from the accounts of the traveller who visited the city in the eighteenth century and from the records of the East India Company. Most contemporary accounts suggest that the city extended five miles in length and two and a half miles in breadth on both sides of the river (Mohsin, 1980). The numerous *ganjes*, *bazaars* and *ghats* not only suggest that all parts of the city were well furnished with daily requirements but also that they had a regular flow of supplies from their extensive hinterland (Mohsin, 1980). Trade with Europeans and Indians made Murshidabad a lucrative destination for migrants and the hub of economic and administrative activities. A mint was set up in 1705, including the beginning of a banking system which was traditionally handled by mahajans and sarrafs (shroffs) from Rajputana, who travelled with Mughal army. Families like Jagat Seths carried on business on the strength of their own capital with both the Nawabs and the Europeans. The Seths brought Jainism with them and built several temples of this faith in Murshidabad.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century, especially under the rule of Murshid Quli Khan, was the golden period of Murshidabad. Many grand mosques, tombs, and other buildings were constructed by the Nawabs and their families during this era (Das & Llewellyn-Jones, 2013). Rani Bhabani, Maharaja Rajballav and Kirty Chandra also constructed several temples at Murshidabad. Besides, the Armenian, the Dutch, the English and others also erected their dwelling here (Das & Llewellyn-Jones, 2013). The upheaval in the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century not only made Bengal a colony of the English East India Company but also destroyed a rich urban heritage. The fall of the Nawabi rule signaled the growth of three tiny villages' viz. Calcutta, Sutanuti and Gobindopur in a mighty city. But one should not forget that the growth of Calcutta had its origin in its trade. To flourish their trade and to protect their tiny settlement, Clive and his men destroyed the French settlement at Chandernagore in March 1757 (Sreemani, 2009). By the middle of the eighteenth century Calcutta had advanced quite a distant from a haphazard collection of hamlets towards a traditional type of Indian city. In the transitional stage of the growth of Calcutta the pattern of the Indian village came to be

reflected in it. The English town was a 'fenced city' sharply distinguished from the 'native town', where a large number of castes and professionals had settled. Holwell, the Zamindar (Magistrate Collector) of Calcutta, divided the town into a number of quarters, allotting each quarter to one professional group or caste (Sinha, 1991). Finally we see, the transfer of the Diwani office to Calcutta in 1772 was a blow to the position of Murshidabad as chief city of the province, by then Calcutta had become a city composed of heterogeneous element.

While the frequent transfer of the capital of the province changed the settlement pattern and professional activity of the cities, what happened in the major towns of Bengal in this context? In his description on town and market of Burdwan the poet Ramprasad says that the market of Burdwan abounded in many foreign traders and the shops were filled with jewellery to cheap materials (Gupta, 1954). But the customers were few and sale was scarce. But when Bharat Chandra gave the description of the town of Burdwan in 1752 he said that the town was thickly populated with all kinds of professional people living in different wards (Bandopadhyay & Das, 1350). The poet's description of the town shows that it had a well-guarded gateway. The principal guard was an Abyssinian who was not happy with the administration since the pay was very low. He opened the gate after receiving substantial bribe.

The poet described different wards of the town as *garh* or fort although there was no mention of a separate gate for each ward. Inside the town, the first ward after the gateway was occupied by the foreigners including the English, Dutch, French, Danes and the Armenians. It may be pointed out that the Danes had to leave Bengal in 1717 due to a quarrel over taxes but they came back during the rule of Alivardi Khan, possibly after 1750. These foreigners brought their goods here by ship for sale. This seemed to be a special area for the sale of foreign goods since there is no reference to Indian merchants. Some of them were artillerymen. The second ward had been occupied by all kinds of Muslims including Syeds, Mullicks, Shaikhs, Mughals, Afghans and Turks. They spoke Arabic mixed with Persian and did their prayers in their language. Here the races and professions were mixed. The third ward was occupied by the Khatriyas who were fighters and experts in weapons. The fourth ward was occupied by the Rajputs who were good warriors and they guarded the bedroom of the king. The elephant drivers and couriers sat together in the fifth ward. The sixth ward held the treasury and was heavily guarded. Various kinds of people and sarafs were there in this ward (Ray, 2015; Roy, 2020).

The town Krishnagar was also very famous during the period of our study. Various communities based on their profession surrounded the royal palace and set up multiple wards, for instance, at the eastern side of the royal palace were Sudra para (wards of the lower caste), Sapuriya para (wards of the snake-charmer) and Kalu para (wards of the oil-man). At the northern side of the palace were Sankra para (wards of the goldsmith), Kumartoli (wards of the potters), Kadamgachi, Bagdi para (wards of the tribal) and Moulavi para, at the western

side of Moulavi para were Nolo para and at the northern side of Moulavi para were wards like Peyada para and Beshya para, wards of the prostitutes (Roy, 2020; Sen, 2009). The urban settlement of the town Krishnagar indicates that the demography of the town was very much composite in nature and such a kind of human settlement was also a sign of a progressive society.

The central point of town Dinajpur was Ghoraghata. It was built and flourished around the Ghoraghat fort (Westmacott, 1872; Zakaria, 1948; Karim, 1996). The residential area, guest houses, market place, bathing place, road and bridge, *madrasha*, *maktab*, *saraikhana*, *toran*, *majar dargaha* etcetera all were the symbols of Mughal architecture. In Buchanan's words, at the zenith of its prosperity, the town of Ghoraghat was 10 miles long in its width and 2 miles long in breadth. The town was densely populated and full of stay-houses. The town contained as many as 51 *pattis* (small ward) and 52 *gallies* (narrow lanes).

While walking on the town of Midnapur we see the demographic structure of the town as follows: South-west of the criminal courts is a large open space, enclosed between several roads. The centre is occupied by a large walled building enclosing a quadrangle in the middle. This building is the remains of a Musalman fort, called *Abashgarh*. During the early days of British administration a military force was posted in it. Subsequently it was used as a jail, but it was abandoned on the construction of the Central Jail.

In marked contrast with this western half, which is sometimes called *Kerani-tola*, or clerk's quarters was the town proper spreading to the south and the south-east. It is traversed by numerous small streets and lanes, and thickly crowded with houses and huts, mostly poorly built and badly ventilated. This area was divided into small wards of different professional class. The market namely *Bara bazar* and *Choto bazar* was also there. Both the Hindu and Muslim area there were temples and mosques for religious gathering but the date of its settlement is difficult to trace (Chakraborty, 1962; O'Malley, 1995). Moreover, the towns of religious, commercial and business entrepot like, Hooghly-Chinsurah, Chandernagore, Qasimbazar, Baranagar, Santipur, Nabadwip, Jiaganj, Ajimganj, Kalna, Katwa, Buckergunge, Chittagong, Lakshmipur, Rangpur, Kumarkhali, Sylhet, and the like were also inhabited by Hindu, Muslim and European as well. Hence we may argue that in and around the emerging small towns of Bengal there existed people of various religion, caste and creed. Of course, such a profession based human settlement developed the demographic structure of the town as well as identified the townsmen by their profession.

### **Religious Existence across the City and Towns**

We have already mentioned that the towns of Bengal during the period of our study were the seat of various religions, these are as follows:

**Hindus:** The Hindus were the premier religious community throughout the eighteenth century. At the opening of the century Alexander Hamilton computed the numerical proportions between Hindus and Muslims in Bengal at 100:1

(Hamilton, 1930). It is difficult to rely on the estimates which he might have formed on the basis of the population of a few towns. Moreover, the foreigner could not distinguish one from the other amongst the masses. But they give us a fair idea of the overwhelming numerical superiority of the Hindus in the scale of total population. Both Edward Ives and Stavorinus, who visited Bengal within the two decades following 1750, almost, corroborate his proportion in the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; Charles Grant approximately reckoned their proportion in the company's territories as eight to one (Raghuvanshi, 1969). Needless to say that the Hindus were the majority within the towns, and in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, caste certainly promoted specialization in economic life on hereditary lines, but in the lower castes alone it is definitely recognizable. The relationship between caste and occupation, too, cannot be held as an infallible criterion of general classification of caste-groups in society (Raghuvanshi, 1969).

**Jains:** During the period, the Jains are generally mentioned as sects of the Hindus, and they were mostly of *Vaisya* caste, successful businessman, the most abstemious people of society (Raghuvanshi, 1969). Jains were prominent actors in the settlement of Murshidabad and have remained significant in the economic, political, social and cultural life of the area ever since (Das & Llewellyn-Jones, 2013). They were found in the towns of Qasimbazar, Jiaganj, Azimganj and Burdwan. The Seths brought Jainism with them and built several temples of this faith in Murshidabad (Roy, 1982). A number of Jain traders do their business all over the towns of Bengal.

**Muslims:** Next comes to the Muslims, a conspicuous social element in the life of the country. But as Robert Orme says, numerically they were "dispersed throughout the vast extent of the empire," "and if collected together would form a very populous nation." Their number was far greater in Northern India and in Bengal Islam spread mostly in the villages (Raghuvanshi, 1969; Sarkar, 1972). But from 16<sup>th</sup> century onward the *ashraf* were the Muslim urban artisans who formed part of Bengal's growing industrial proletariat (Eaton, 1994). Moreover, these groups constituted the earliest-known class of Bengali Muslim. Fully five of them- the weavers, loom makers, tailors, weavers of thick ribbon, and dyers- were linked to the growing textile industry (Eaton, 1994). Both the Hindu castes and the Muslim artisan groups together involved in producing variety of cloths in the towns and suburbs of Malda, Dinajpur, Bishnupur, Birbhum, Santipur, Chittagong, etcetera.

**Christians:** During this period the Christian community was fast growing in numbers (Taylor, 1840). It was composed of three classes: the European residents, the mixed Christians, and the Indian Christians. In most of the towns of our study, especially the towns which were situated on the bank of river Bhagirathi, large settlements were owned by the French, Dutch, Danes, and Portuguese (Raghuvanshi, 1969). There is a huge number of Christians in Bengal who were previously Hindus and Muslims. Hence, it was the result of racial intermixture between the East and the West and was multiplying rapidly at the settlements



(Datta, 1989). The missionary enterprise which commenced with the advent of the Portuguese was also being pushed up by different European missions. Conversion of Indians was, however, not a heartening and successful experiment. Progress was solely confined to an infinitesimal portion of the lowest strata, the underdogs of society (Datta, 1989). Although the Christians, along with both the mixed and Indian Christians were very few in numbers, but all of them had a great influence in the society. Moreover, we find regarding the Indian Christians in Bengal, Scrafton spoke them as “the most abandoned profligate wretches of human species.” (Raghuvanshi, 1969). For this reason the sensible Europeans were in opinion not to promote such conversion.

**Armenians, Sikhs and others:** We also find Armenians, Sikhs and others residing within the towns. The Armenians figure as permanent nationals and traders at the European settlements (Raghuvanshi, 1969). At the time of Sirajuddaula, the Armenian merchants, Khojah Petrus, took a leading part in his negotiations with the English and the French (Seth, 1928). Gorgin Khan, the Commander-in-Chief and minister of Nawab Mir Kasim was also from the Armenian community (Seth, 1928a). Besides, the Armenian community was fast growing in numbers at Chandernagore, and they had good relation with Alivardi Khan, the Nawab of Bengal. Moreover the Begum of the Nawab (Alivardi Khan), used to address Khojah Petrus as ‘brother’ (Seth, 1931). At Saidabad near Qasimbazar, there was an Armenian Church (Seth, 1925). Referring to Dhaka James Taylor mentioned that there are about 40 families of Armenians and 12 of Greeks in the city. The former people appear to have settled here about the time the Company acquired the Dewanny. Many of them carried on an extensive trade in cloth, salt and betel nut, and held Zemindaries, some of which are still possessed by their descendants. Their Church was erected in 1781 (Taylor, 1840). The above discussion makes it clear that the Armenians not only played a vital role as traders, but they had a social significance also. The Sikhs were mostly of Jat origin, and even in the period many Hindu leaders in the Punjab were entrenching themselves as Sikh chieftains (Polier, 1947). A very few number of Sikhs were found in the towns of Jiaganj, Azimganj, Qasimbazar and Burdwan as traders, the descendants of the Sikhs are still to be found there.

The above discussion makes it clear that religion not only represents a town’s form order but it also indicates the socio-cultural nature of a town. Moreover, religion is, among others, one of the factors in giving birth to a culture. Culture, in fact, is product of several factors like customs, traditions, whether, locally available materials, geographical conditions and so on. In this way a religion may appear within the frame of pre-existent culture. And then religious teachings may deeply influenced that pre-existent culture and re-fashion it in its own way. Such process of co-existence generates the environment to develop composite culture within the towns.

### **Professional and Class Identity**

The process of urbanization with special attention to the birth and growth of cities and towns already highlighted the settlement pattern of different professional groups. Moreover, during this century peoples of India came in greater contact with various European peoples who began to come in larger numbers as traders and exporters, and as travellers and military and other adventures. Christian missionary endeavour brought in a new opening of the horizon for the Indian mind, not so much in religion as in other matters (Chatterji, 1966). From the point of material classification it is to be said that the Indian society was preponderantly feudal in character. The feudal lords constituted the dominant material group and possession of land was therefore a positive source of status in society (Raghuvanshi, 1969). But the idea was not at all accepted in respect of urban society, because the status of the urban dwellers mainly depended on non-agricultural source. And the life of society in urban area was highly specialized and developed. Hence, we shall now examine the relative strength of its different groups, though precise appreciation is not possible for lack of statistical data for the period. We may conveniently distribute the total population as follows: 1. Nobility, 2. Religious functionaries, 3. Commercial classes, 4. Agricultural classes, 5. Industrial classes, 6. Professional classes, 7. Menial classes, slaves, autochthons and so on (Raghuvanshi, 1969).

It is interesting to observe that during the eighteenth century the emergence of new towns, expanding market demand, in consequence various groups of artisan, traders, money lenders etcetera disperse with their profession. It was in course of their journey from one urban centre to the other that most of the sub-groups of different professional classes had emerged. At the end of the eighteenth century, therefore, we find that the professional class of both Hindu and Muslim communities were divided into a number of sub-groups (Sarkar, 1998). A striking fact about Bengal's social life before the mid-eighteenth century is the relative absence of the joint family. But by the later part of the eighteenth century, the joint family was very much an established fact of upper-caste Bengali society (Raychaudhuri, 1975). During Murshid Quli's reign, three fourth of the *Zamindars* (both big and small) and most of the *Talukdars* were Hindus. The high officers and *Zamindars* during Alivardi's reign – and for that matter during Sirajuddaullah's time too – were Hindus. Besides the Muslim's were also appointed in different posts at the court of the local Hindu zamindars. Moreover, when we compare the large number of works composed by Muslim writers of the age in praise of Hindu gods and goddesses and on Hindu music, we cannot but conclude that Vaishnava and orthodox Hindu notions and thought had deeply influenced the inner strata of the Muslim society in Bengal. In fact, the two communities were living side by side in harmony and mutual attachment in ordinary life (Chaudhury, 2015; Rahman, 2020). Referring to some letters of late eighteenth century Hindu caste-doctrine, Panchanan Mondal wrote that the tradition of Hindu caste system was not a barrier to live together irrespective of

caste and religion (Mondal, 1986). Moreover we see, “about seven-eighths of Brahmins, Bhaides and Khayets, and all the Kamars and Khansarees, among the Sudras, are worshippers of Kali; and the remaining eighth, all the Tantees, one-half of the shell cutters, and three-fourths of the Soundikus, are Busnubs or worshippers of Khrisno. There are three Gossaens in the city, who have numerous disciples in the surrounding country, as far as Assam and Chittagong, and from whom they levy annual contributions” (Taylor, 1840).

The study of social formation in Bengal for the period under discussion has hence to be concerned with diversity of religion, social status, and finally by the institution of caste. The author of *Muzaffar-Nama* tells us that “many kinds of people, high and low, and all classes of artisans and men of skill and letters were assembled in the city of Bengal *i.e.* Murshidabad” (Ali, 1985). According to William Bolts, “A variety of merchants of different nations and religions, such as Cashmeerians, Multanys, Patans, Sheikhs, Sunniasys, Paggayahs, Betteas and many others used to resort to Bengal” (Bolts, 1772). Needless to say, both the privileged and unprivileged section of the society along with most of the said merchant communities were settled within different towns and formed a pluralistic urban society. Hence we may argue that Bengal’s town can be viewed as a sociological laboratory, a Petri dish, where traditional ethos mixed with liberal ideas and practices imported from abroad. Through trial and error, the town households modernized and adduced social conduct that combined both religion and commerce (Basu, 2012). In consequence of the fact we can say that during the eighteenth century Bengal’s town life was more progressive in comparison to rural areas.

### **Social Mobility and Cultural Synthesis**

There is no doubt that the Indian caste system represents a confusion of all manner of distinctions which reflect occupational differences, racial and ethnic differences, cultural differences, etcetera the most striking feature of the complex Hindu society continued to be the institution of caste. Besides the principal castes, there were ramifications of sub-castes varying in number and nature in different localities. The caste rules were rigid, and inter-caste marital connections were not permissible (Datta, 1961). Caste had much influence in determining the vocational professions of men. The plurality of profession was major features of non-agrarian life in eighteenth century Burdwan ((Datta, 1961). “In general, it is remarked”, writes Edward Ives, “that whatever be the trade of the father, the same is that of the son; so that of the families of boatmen, fishermen, etc. are boatmen and fishermen to all generations” (Datta, 1961). Notwithstanding its various drawbacks, the caste system helped specialization in arts and industrials (Datta, 1961). Probably due to the rapid administrative and economic changes in the country since the middle of the eighteenth century, professional arrangements strictly on caste groups were becoming gradually loose within certain limits (Datta, 1961). While moving through Bengal in the 1720s, Robert Orme, the official historian of the English East India Company, found to his wonder that

almost every inhabitant at any village lying beside a large town was engaged in the manufacture of cloth. It should be kept in mind that these villages were not specialized weaving village, but villages which combined agriculture with manufacturing activities (Biswas, 2007). Moreover labour from other activities could be drawn to weaving if and when necessary (Chaudhury, 1995). So we may argue that the urban society became mobilized irrespective of its caste barrier. In a recent study it is being claimed that social mobility in the towns of Bengal became operative in respect of profession and education (Basu, 2012).

The institution of caste divided the entire Hindu population into three broad social groups: the privileged, the unprivileged, and the untouchables (Raghuvanshi, 1969). But the rigidity of such division was more active in rural area in comparison with urban area (Mukherjee, 2012). Because we have already mentioned that due to urbanization and with the establishment of British rule, the urban society of Bengal, during the eighteenth century loosened its caste rigidity. As a result, we find in the writings of Bharatchandra that various *Kayastha* castes like, goldsmith, iron-smith, brass workers and seller, artisan and trader of conch-shell, and various other professional class and lower caste people together settled within the town and performed their professional activities. Bijayram Sen also describes how the different professional class and business community got shelter within the towns. Besides in most of the temple architecture of Bengal during the period under review also represents the scenes of life style, dress habits, and customs of Bengali society in its terracotta panel on the walls of the temples (McCutchion, 2004).

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, while society was too conservative to accept anything like a repudiation of caste, still it is evident that the progressive trends were at work modifying its rigour. These are being found in inter-caste understanding and religious synthesis also. Just as the Hindus bowed low before the shrines and feet of the Muslim saints, so also the Muslim masses made offerings before the idols of the Hindu gods. In Bengal, the religious outlook and practices of the Hindu and Muslims were very much influenced by one another. We learn that Mir Jafar on his death bed was persuaded by Nanda Kumar to sip some drops of water “that had been poured in libation over the idol at Kiriteshwari (a famous temple at Murshidabad)” (Tabatabayi, 2014). It was customary for the Muslims to offer Puja in Hindu temples, and the Hindus *Sinni* at mosques. The Brahmans are mentioned as consulting the Quran, and Muslims seeking the benedictions of the *Sapta-Rishis*, the illustrious seven sages of the Hindus (Sen, 2007). In contemporary Bengal in the writings of Muslim poets, we find Muslims represented as praying to the god Shiva, and we come across the following hymn addressed to Saraswati, the goddess of learning, “Hail O Saraswati, thou art my mother/The helpless child invokes thee; will thou not hear” (Sen, 2007). Karam Ali, a leading poet of Chittagong, sang exquisitely on Radha and Krishna. One of his *padas* runs thus, “Radha wept and said, who amongst you, O my minds will bring Krishna to me?” (Sen, 2007).

This mutual adoption and assimilation of the religious practices led to the worship of the common deity “Satya Pir” which was very popular. Both the Hindus and Muslims sung hymns in Bengali in his praise, and Brahmans and *Sudras* made offerings of sweetmeats. In a poem of Bharatchandra, a contemporary Bengal poet, Sadananda, a Hindu merchant gets a daughter by invoking this popular object of worship. But he incurred its wrath as he forgot to make the promised offering, with the result that his son-in-law met with a premature death. The evaluation of the worship of this common deity was the high watermark of spiritual kinship between Hinduism and Islam in this country of universal toleration (Datta, 1929; Karim, 1963; Sen, 2007; Chaudhuri, 2008).

Even in Bengal, the worship of Kali was popular with the Muslims and even in villages inhabited wholly by them, there were distinct places of worship for this deity. Both the Hindus and the Muslims of Dinajpur resided mutually. Even the tribes also maintained their own culture (Martin, 1976). During Mohurram we find Hooghly became a place of harmony between the Hindus and the Muslims (Dien, 1900). So far as the festival of Holi is concerned, it was almost a national festival celebrated by all classes of people throughout India. By the middle of the eighteenth century, we find that this process of mutual assimilation had reached its culminating point. Nawab Shahamat Jung (Nowagis Mahommad) with Saulat Jung, who came from Purneah at that time, enjoyed the Holi festival for seven days, in the gardens of Motijhil. On the occasion about 200 reservoirs had been filled with coloured water and heaps of *Abir* (red-powder) and saffron had been collected; and more than five hundred charming girls dressed in costly robes and jewels used to appear in groups every morning and evening, mustering from every part of the gardens. After the treaty of Alinagar (9<sup>th</sup> February, 1757), Nawab Siraj-ud- Daula proceeded to Murshidabad and enjoyed the Holi festival in his palace at Mansurganj. Once, when at Azimabad, Nawab Mir Jafar crossed the Ganges with all the gentry of the town and engaged himself in enjoying the Holi festival (Datta, 1929). The Vaishnabas were more commonly (without any bias) celebrate the Holi festivals in Bengal. Besides, some of the new sects of the period made a bold attempt at a synthesis between Hinduism and Islam and aimed at harmonizing the two great faiths of the country (Datta, 1376; Bhattacharya, 1995). During the period under review the Karta Bhajas, the Pirism and the other. appeared in the scene and promoted joint worshiping between the Hindus and the Muslims (Panikkar, 1981; Rahman, 2001). Thus we see that the period under discussion with the growth of cities and towns in Bengal became the seat of various religion, caste and creed. This is not only the symbol of a cosmopolitan urbanites but it also symbolize socio-economic and cultural arena of a geographical boundary.

### References

Ahmed, S. U. (1980). Urban Problems and Government Policies: A Case Study of the City of Dacca, 1818-1830. In K. Ballhatechet, and John Harrison (Ed.), *City in South Asia Pre-Modern and Modern*. Curzon Press: London.

- Ahmed, S. U. (1986). *Dacca a Study in Urban History and Development*. London: Curzon Press.
- Ahmed, S. U. (1992). Urbanization and Urban Classes. In Sirajul Islam (Ed.), *History of Bangladesh 1704-1991*, Vol. 2. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh.
- Ahmed, S. U. ed. (2009), *Dhaka Past, Present Future*. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.
- Alavi, S. ed. (2002). *The Eighteenth Century in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Ali, K. (1985). *Muzaffar-Namah*, translated into English by Jadu Nath Sarkar, in *Bengal Nawabs*. Calcutta: Asiatic Society.
- Ali, M. A. (1986). Recent Theories of Eighteenth Century India. *Indian Historical Review*. 13(1 & 2).
- Ballhatechet, K. and Harrison, J. ed. (1980). *City in South Asia Pre-Modern and Modern*. Curzon Press: London.
- Bandopadhyay, B. and Das, S. ed. (1350 B. S), *Bharatchandra-Granthabali* (in Bengali). Kolkata: Bangiyo-Sahityo-Parishat.
- Basu, A. (2012). *The Rise of Civil Society in Bengal*. Kolkata: The Asiatic Society.
- Bhattacharya, J. (1995). *Hindu Castes and Sects*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1896.
- Biswas, A. (2007). *Money and Market from Pre-Colonial to colonial India*. Delhi: Aakar Books.
- Bolts, W. (1772), *Considerations of Indian Affairs*. London: J Almer.
- Bandopadhyay B. and Das, S. ed. (1350 B.S.), *Bharatchandra-Granthabali* (in Bengali). Kolkata: Bangiyo-Sahityo-Parishat.
- Chakraborty, Ghanoram (1962). *Sreedharmomangal*. Kolkata: University of Calcutta.
- Chatterji, S. K. (1966). The Eighteenth Century in India. In M. E. Haq (Ed.), *Muhammad Shahidullah Felicitation Volume*. Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan.
- Chaudhuri, S. (2008). *Nababi Amole Murshidabad*(in Bengali). Kolkata: Ananda.
- Chaudhuri, S. (1995). *From Prosperity to Decline: Eighteenth Century Bengal*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Chaudhuri, S. (2015). *Trade, Politics and Society: The Indian Milieu in the Early Modern Era*, New Delhi: Manohar.
- Chaudhuri, S. (2018). *Profile of a Forgotten Capital Murshidabad in the Eighteenth Century*. New Delhi: Manohar.

Chowdhury, A. M. and Faruqui, S. (2009). Physical Growth of Dhaka City. In S. U. Ahmed (ed.), *Dhaka Past Present and Future*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

Das, N. and Llewellyn-Jones, R. ed. (2013). *Murshidabad the Forgotten Capital of Bengal*. Mumbai: Marg Publications.

Dasgupta, B. (2001), *Urbanization in Pre-colonial Bengal*, Kolkata: Centre for Urban Economic Studies, University of Calcutta.

Datta, A. K. (1376 B.S.). *Bharat Barshiyi Upashoke-Samproday* (in Bengali), B. Ghosh (ed.), Calcutta: Pathbbaban.

Datta, K. (1929). Relations between the Hindus and the Muhammadans of Bengal in the middle of the Eighteenth Century (1740-1765). *Journal of Indian History*. VIII.

Datta, K. (1961). *Survey of India's Social Life and Economic Condition in the Eighteenth Century (1707-1813)*. Calcutta: Firma K. L. M.

Datta, K. (1989). A Portuguese Travel Account of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal. *The Quarterly Review of Historical Studies*. XXVIII (4).

Deva, Indra (1969). The Changing Pattern of Rural Society and Culture: Significance of the Rural-Urban Nexus. In M. K. Chaudhuri (Ed.), *Trends of Socio-Economic Change in India 1871- 1961*, Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

Dien, I. (1900). Religious and Charitable Endowments of Bengal Zamindars. *Calcutta Review*. III.

Eaton, R. M. (1994). *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1760*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Gangaram (1313 B.S.). *Maharashtra-Puran* (in Bengali). Kolkata: Sahityo-Parishot-Patrika.

Gupta, J. (1954). *Sadhok Kabi Ramprasad* (in Bengali). Calcutta: Bhattacharjee Sons Limited.

Hamilton, A. (1930). *A New Account of the East Indies* (in two volumes), Vol. II, edited with notes and introduction by William Foster. London: Argonaut Press, reprint.

Karim, A. (1963). *Murshid Quli Khan and His Times*. Dacca: The Asiatic Society of Pakistan.

Karim, A. (1964). *DACCA: The Mughal Capital*. Dacca: Asiatic Society of Pakistan.

Karim, A. (2009). Origin and Development of Mughal Dhaka. In S. U. Ahmed (ed.), *Dhaka Past Present and Future*, Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

- Karim, K. M. (1996), Aatharo Shatoke Dinajpur – Nababi Amole. In Sharif Uddin Ahamed (Ed.). *Dinajpur: Itihas O Oitijyo* (in Bengali). Dhaka: Bangladesh Itihas Samity.
- Chaudhuri M. K. (ed.), *Trends of Socio-Economic Change in India 1871 – 1961*, Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.
- Martin, M. (1976). *The History, Antiquities, Topography, and Statistics of Eastern India*. Vol. III. Delhi: Cosmo Publications, first pub.1838
- McCutchion, D. J. (2004). *Late Mediaeval Temples of Bengal*. Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, reprint.
- Mohsin, K. M. (1980). Murshidabad in the Eighteenth Century. In K. Ballhatechet, and John Harrison (Ed.), *City in South Asia Pre-Modern and Modern*. Curzon Press: London.
- Mondal, P. (1986). *Chithipotre Samajchitro* (in Bengali), Vol. I, Santiniketan:Visva-Bharati.
- Mukherjee, Ramkrishna (2012), *The Dynamics of a Rural Society*. Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, revised edition.
- Nair, P. T. (1984). *Calcutta in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century*. Calcutta: Firma K.L.M.
- Naqvi, H. K. (1969). `Industrial Towns of Hindustan in the Eighteenth Century. In M. K. Chaudhuri (ed.), *Trends of Socio-Economic Change in India 1871 – 1961*, Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study.
- O'Malley, L. S. S. (1995), *Bengal District Gazetteers: Midnapore*. Calcutta: Govt. of West Bengal, reprint.
- Panikkar, K. N. (1981). Social and Cultural Trends in Eighteenth Century India. In *Eighteenth Century India* (Papers in honour of Prof. A. P. Ibrahim Kunj). Calicut: Prof. A. P. Ibrahim Kunj Farewell Committee.
- Polier, A. L. H. (1947), *A Narrative of the Transactions at the Court of Delhi from the year 1771 to the Present Time*. In P. C. Gupta (Ed.), Calcutta: S. C. Sarkar & Sons.
- Rachel V. B. (ed.), *Aspects of Bengali History and Society*. Hawai: The University Press of Hawai.
- Raghuvanshi, V. P. S. (1969). *Indian Society in the Eighteenth Century*. New Delhi: Associated Publishing House.
- Rahman, S. N. (2001). *Hindu-Muslim Relations in Mughal Bengal*, Calcutta: Progressive Publishers.
- Rahman, S. N. (2018). Religious and Cultural Syncretism in Medieval Bengal. *The NEHU Journal*. XVI(I).



- Rahman, S. N. (2020). Aspects of Inter-Religious Relations. In Abdul Momin Chowdhury (ed.), *History of Bangladesh: Sultanate and Mughal Periods*, Vol. 2. Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh.
- Ray, A. (2015). *Towns and Cities of Medieval India*. New Delhi: Manohar.
- Ray, N. R. (1986). *Calcutta: the profile of a City*. Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Company.
- Raychaudhuri, T. (1975), Norms of Family Life and Personal Morality among the Bengali Hindu Elite, 1600-1850. In R. V. Baumer (ed.), *Aspects of Bengali History and Society*. Hawai: The University Press of Hawai.
- Roy, N. (1982). *Jagatseth*(in Bengali), Calcutta: Praggabharati, 1<sup>st</sup> pub. 1912.
- Roy, S. (2017). Urbanization of Bengal: Growth of Small Towns (A. D. 1704 – 1800). Unpublished Ph. D thesis. Kalyani: University of Kalyani.
- Roy, S. (2020). The Growth and Decline of a Pre-colonial Town in Bengal in the Age of Transition, *Summerhill*, XXVI (2).
- Sarkar, J. N. (1972). *Islam in Bengal (Thirteenth to Nineteenth century)*. Calcutta: Ratna Prakashan.
- Sarkar, J. N. (1972). *Islam in Bengal (Thirteenth to Nineteenth century)*. Calcutta: Ratna Prakashan.
- Sarkar, J. N. (1984). *Thoughts on Trends of Cultural Contacts in Medieval India*. Calcutta: OPS Publishers Pvt. Ltd.
- Sarkar, S. K. (1998). Indian Craft-technology: Static or Changing--- A case study of the Kansari's craft in Bengal, 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> Century. *Indian Journal of History of Science*. 33 ( 2).
- Scrafton, L. (1969). *Reflections on the Government of Indoostan*, in V. P. S, Raghuvanshi. *Indian Society in the Eighteenth Century*. New Delhi: Associated Publishing House.
- Sen, B. (2009). *Tittho-Mongol*. Ghosh, Baridboron (Ed.), Kolkata: Paroshpathor Prokashon, reprint.
- Sen, S. (2007). *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, Vol. 2. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House.
- Seth, M. J. (1925). Armenian Church at Saidabad. *Bengal Past and Present*. 30.
- Seth, M. J. (1928). Gorgin Khan: the Armenian Commander-in-chief and Minister of Nawab Mir Kashim of Bengal from 1760-1763. *Bengal Past and Present*. 35.
- Seth, M. J. (1928). Khoja Petrus: the Armenian Merchant-diplomat of Calcutta. *Bengal Past and Present*. 37.
- Seth, M. J. (1931), Armenians at Chandernagore. *Bengal Past and Present*. 42.

Sinha, P. (1991). The Genesis of a Colonial City. In Dasgupta Biplab and others (ed.), *Calcutta's Urban Future Agonies from the Past and Prospect for the Future*. Calcutta: Govt. of West Bengal.

Sreemani, S. (2009). Urbanisation and Urbanism in Medieval Bengal. In Palit, Chittabrata (ed.), *Urbanisation in India: Past and Present*. Kolkata: Institute of Historical Studies.

Tabatabayi, S. G. H. K. (2014). *Sier-Ul-Mutaqherin*. Translated from original Persian to Bengali by A. K. M. Zakariah, Dhaka: Divyapokash, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

Tarafdar, M. R. (1993). *Madhyauger Banglay Prayukti O Samaj Vivartan* (in Bengali). Dhaka: Bangla Academy.

Taylor, J. (1840). *A Sketch of the Topography and Statistics of Dacca*. Calcutta: Military Orphan Press.

Westmacott, E. V. (1872). The Territorial Aristocracy of Bengal: The Dinagepoore Raj. *Calcutta Review*. 55.

Zakaria, A. K. M. (1948). *Bangladesher Pratinosampod*. Dhaka: Bangla Akademi.