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BENGAL I. PERSIAN MUSLIM ELEMENTS IN THE HISTORY OF BENGAL

Bengal, the deltaic region of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna rivers, is the easternmost haven of Indo-Iranian culture on the Indian subcontinent. Iranian culture was introduced in Bengal from a.d. 1204, when the cavalry of Baḵtīār Ḵalajī, a Turkish officer of the newly implanted Mamluk dynasty in north India, swept into the city of Nādīa and dislodged from power the reigning Sena dynasty of Hindu kings (Raverty, I, pp. 548-60). Bengal was thereupon established as a province of the Delhi sultanate, through which it inherited the broad institutional features of the medieval Iranian world that had evolved under the ʿAbbasids. These included, most importantly, an appropriation of the pre-Muslim Persian tradition of monarchy and statecraft, an extensive reliance on imported slaves for domestic, military, and political service, and a highly commercialized and monetized economy. These three institutions continued to flourish even after provincial officers in Bengal threw off their allegiance to their overlords in Delhi and established an independent Bengal sultanate in 1342.

One sees the first of these institutions, the pre-Muslim Persian tradition of monarchy and statecraft, from the early 7th/13th century to about 818/1415, when a nativist Bengali revolution challenged Islamic dominion in the delta. The courts of the capital cities of Pānduā and Gaur sanctified the sultan, used

Persianized royal paraphernalia, adopted an elaborate court ceremony modeled on the Sasanian imperial paradigm, employed a hierarchical bureaucracy, and promoted Islam as a state-sponsored religious orthodoxy. The coinage of the Bengal sultanate vividly reflects the last point, and the other points are seen in the observations of foreign visitors, especially Chinese ambassadors to the Bengal court (Abdul Karim, 1960, p. 18). According to one of the latter, the court exhibited such characteristically medieval Iranian imperial paraphernalia as peacock feathers, umbrellas, files of mounted and foot soldiers, a throne inlaid with precious stones, and lavish displays of gold (Rockhill, pp. 441-42).

A second Iranian institution, slave armies and aristocracies, existed in medieval Bengal, just as was typical in other parts of the Iranian cultural world. Domestic slaves were generally castrated Bengalis who were either sold to wealthy Muslim merchants of the capital or given to the ruling house as a form of tribute in lieu of land revenue (Hambly, pp. 125-29). For their armies, on the other hand, the Bengal sultans relied on foreign Muslims; for, in Bengal as elsewhere in the medieval Iranian world, the ruling house failed to develop an imperial aristocracy, requiring the creation of an artificial aristocracy composed of uprooted, foreign elements. Initially these were Turks imported from upper India, many of whom were recruited ultimately from Central Asia; but by the mid-9th/15th century, black Abyssinians, known as Ḥabašīs, were imported from east Africa by sea through the Bengali port of Chittagong (Hambly, pp. 125-29). However, these same palace guards and military slaves, again on the ʿAbbasid and medieval Iranian pattern, grew in influence as they grew in numbers, until in 891/1486 they managed to overthrow their masters and rule in their own names for a period of seven years (Ferešta, II, p. 301). Although a powerful new dynasty was installed by ʿAlī-al-Dīn Ḥosayn Shah in 898/1493, the influence of foreign military slaves persisted in the kingdom until the Mughal conquest of Bengal by Akbar in 994/1576.

A monetized economy and bureaucracy were likewise imported into Bengal in the early 8th/13th century. This third feature of the medieval Iranian world completely transformed the delta region. Prior to the coming of Persianized Turks in 1204, the major part of Bengal did not use metal coinage at all, although there was plenty of uncoined silver in the possession of Hindu kings in the region. Indeed, desire to plunder these stocks of silver seems to have been a major factor drawing Muslim armies into Bengal in the 7th/13th and 8th/14th centuries, since each new conquest in eastern, northern, and

southern Bengal was followed by a bulge in the circulation of silver coins, apparently minted immediately after plunder (Deyell, p. 227). This coinage served not only to legitimate the ruling house according to the traditional Islamic emphasis placed on coinage as a manifestation of legitimate rule, but also transformed the way in which political relationships were expressed. Governors and commanders were now defined in terms of the amount of land revenue they were allowed to retain for purposes of maintaining armed forces. And the land revenue, in turn, was expressed in terms of the silver *tanka*, the standard currency introduced by the Muslim rulers of Bengal. A salaried bureaucracy in which relationships were expressed in monetary terms thus remained a lasting legacy of the medieval Iranian political economy.

Bengal's connections with Iran during the 7th/13th and early 8th/14th centuries are clearly reflected in its architecture. Built near the end of the 7th/13th century, the tower of Chhota Pānduā near Calcutta is the earliest surviving Islamic monument in Bengal. Its height and form suggest that, in addition to serving as a minaret for a nearby mosque, it also announced victory over the conquered Bengali population, and in this capacity would have found precedents in the minaret of ʿAlāʾ-al-Dīn in Jām (before 600/1203), the tower of Ḡaznī, both in Afghanistan, and most immediately and significantly, the Qoṭb Menār of Delhi (597-612/1200-15; Asher, p. 53; Nath, p. 22). This wholesale transfer of Iranian architectural and ideological motifs into Bengal is further seen in the mosque of Ẓafar Khan Ḡāzī, built in 697/1298 in Tribeni, a formerly important center of Hindu civilization in the southwestern delta (Asher, pp. 135-36). Departing from the indigenous architectural tradition of Bengal, the arches and domes of this mosque reflect the contemporary style of north India, which in turn found its models in contemporary Persianized Central Asia. Thus the period 1204 to 1342 may be said to have been colonial in nature, as Persianized Turks of north India sought to extend their values and ideals into this farthest area of Indo-Muslim power in south Asia, a process that can be traced in contemporary literature and coinage, as well as in monuments (Jūzjānī, tr. pp. 559-60; Lowick, pp. 196-208).

In the 730s/1330s, however, Delhi's grip over this eastern province began to slip, and in 1342 an independent sultanate was established by Šams-al-Dīn Elyās Shah. This successful revolution inaugurated a new era in the Bengal sultanate's articulation of its cultural identity, and ushered in a new phase in

its relations with Iran. Both the coins and the architecture of the dynasty suggest how its sultans sought to distance themselves from their parent sultanate in Delhi and, conversely, to find greater identification both with the institution of the caliphate and with the Iranian cultural world generally (Karim, 1960, p. 18). The Elyāssāhī kings identified most readily with Iran's imperial tradition, which is clearly seen in the great Ādīna Mosque in Pānduā, constructed by Šams-al-Dīn's son and successor, Sultan Sekandar in 1375. Built of stone stripped from demolished temples, the Ādīna (Friday) Mosque measures 172 by 97 m and is the largest mosque in the Indian subcontinent (Crowe, pp. 155-64). Seen from either the exterior or the interior, the mosque's western side projects a distinctly imperial aspect reminiscent of the grand imperial style of Sasanian Iran. The entire western wall is a huge multistoried screen on the exterior surfaces of which alternating recesses and projections, both horizontally and vertically, produce a shadowed effect. Though this kind of screen has no clear antecedent in Indo-Islamic architecture, it immediately recalls the external facade of the Ayvān-e Kesrā of Ctesiphon (q.v.), which is the most imposing architectural expression of Sasanian royal power to be found anywhere. The Ādīna Mosque's most prominent feature is its monumental, ribbed barrel vault over the central nave, the first such vault used on a monumental scale anywhere in India, and yet another feature shared in common with the Ayvān-e Kesrā. Generations of Iranian architects and rulers came to consider the famous Sasanian palace with its enormous barrel vault to be the acme of visual grandiosity and regal splendor, and as such, a model to be consciously imitated. Hence a number of Iranian monuments intervened during the thousand years separating the Ayvān-e Kesrā and the Ādīna Mosque, perhaps the most important of which was the Masjed-e Jomʿa of Tabrīz, built in about 720/1320 (Wilber, pp. 146-47; Crowe, p. 158; see arg-e ʿaljšāh).

Cut off from both north India and the Middle East in the late 8th/14th and early 9th/15th centuries, Muslim Bengali monarchs enthusiastically looked far to the west for cultural inspiration. Thus, for example, the inscription on the Ādīna Mosque describes Sultan Sekandar as "the exalted Sultan, the wisest, the most just, the most liberal and most perfect of the Sultans of Arabia and Persia (*ʿArab o ʿAjam*)" (S. Ahmed, p. 38). The Bengali sultan evidently sought his inspiration not from local Bengali models of authority or from north Indian models, but rather from conceptions and models thoroughly rooted in the Iranian political and architectural tradition. Moreover, his son, Sultan Ḡīāṯ-al-Dīn Aʿẓamšāh (ca. 791-813/1389-1410) even tried to persuade the great poet of

Shiraz Ḥāfeẓ to come and adorn his court in Bengal (Borah, p. 144). Although the poet declined the invitation, the incident perhaps represents the ultimate expression of this westward-looking orientation of the Bengal court, where the Persian language was extensively patronized. At this time a number of eminent Sufis, who formed the most Persianized element of the pre-Mughal intelligentsia, also enjoyed royal patronage. The most eminent and influential among these belonged to the Češtī order, and included such figures as Shaikh ʿAlāʾ-al-Ḥaqq (d. 1398) and his son Shaikh Nūr Qoṭb-e ʿĀlam (d. 1459?). In common with other members of the Muslim elite who traced their ancestry to the eastern rim of the Iranian plateau, Shaikh ʿAlāʾ-al-Ḥaqq's father had migrated to Bengal from Lahore. For his part, Shaikh Nūr Qoṭb-e ʿĀlam produced a considerable corpus of Persian Sufi literature, consisting both of mystical tracts and of letters (*malfūẓāt*) written to disciples, nobles, and even kings (Abdul Karim 1972, pp. 336-37; Askeri, pp. 32-35; Abdul Latif, pp. 30-35).

In the early 9th/15th century, however, this steady infusion of Iranian culture into Bengal was abruptly cut short when both the symbols and the instruments of Muslim political authority in Bengal were challenged by a nativist rebellion spearheaded by a powerful Hindu noble, Raja Ganesh. Though he did not seize the reins of power himself, Ganesh was able to place on the throne puppet sultans through whom he effectively ran the affairs of state. And finally, in 1415, he managed to install on the throne his own son, albeit as a Muslim, Sultan Jalāl-al-Dīn Moḥammad Shah (1415-33; Dani, 1952, pp. 121-70). As a consequence of this extraordinary turn of events, which amounted to nothing less than a social revolution, Persian influence and indeed all foreign influence in Bengal slackened, and the ruling class evolved a cultural style that clearly reflected the indigenous culture of the delta. Thus the mosques of this period abandoned such foreign elements as open courts, ablution ponds, and minarets, becoming instead simple and compact buildings with only single prayer chambers, fronted by open, grassy areas (Dani, 1961, p. 26). Sultan Jalāl-al-Dīn's own tomb, the Eklakhī mausoleum in Pānduā, itself betrayed all the hallmarks of a new, nativist architectural style: a square plan, a single dome, exclusive use of brick construction, massive walls, engaged octagonal corner towers, a curved cornice, and extensive terracotta ornamentation. To some extent these elements drew upon a high tradition of pre-Islamic Buddhist architecture in Bengal; and to some extent they drew upon local, folk idioms of household construction, most importantly the thatched hut. Both, in any case, were firmly rooted in Bengal's indigenous cultural traditions (Sanyal, p. 416; Hasan, pp. 120-24). Patronized by the Bengal

sultanate through the end of the 10th/16th century, this nativist architectural style paralleled other signs of the intrusion of Bengali culture into the court and the temporary eclipse of Persian. Ma Huan, a Chinese traveler who visited Bengal between 1425 and 1432, observed that, though Persian was understood by some in the court, the language in universal use was Bengali (Ma Huan, p. 161).

This nativist trend was reversed, however, when the Mughal Emperor Akbar (963-1014/1556-1605) conquered the delta in 1576, and for the first time in three centuries reunited the distant swampy province with the culture and destiny of north India. Though it took the Mughals until 1613 to subdue refractory chiefs and thus to integrate the entire province into their empire, this process was of cardinal importance for the reintroduction of Iranian culture in Bengal. For in 1540, when Mughal power in India was temporarily interrupted, Akbar's father Homāyūn was forced to flee to Iran, where he found refuge in the court of Shah Ṭahmāsb Ṣafawī. Returning to India in 1545, Homāyūn and his courtiers brought with them a substantial number of Persian artists and literati who collectively left a heavy stamp of 10th/16th-century Safavid culture on north India.

This second influx of Persian civilization is mirrored in the stucco work on imperial architecture in the Mughals' new provincial capital in Bengal, Dacca (Dhākā), and especially in the palaces and gardens of that city's lovely Lālbāḡ fort (Asher, pp. 58-59, 63). Socially speaking, the Mughal conquest led to an influx of administrators, soldiers, literati, and Sufis who identified themselves as *ašrāf* or "men of high extraction." Forming a Muslim elite whose descendants dominated Muslim politics in Bengal down to modern times, these men claimed an ancestry in north India, Afghanistan, and especially Iran. One account written in the 1040s/1630s refers specifically to the waves of up-country migrants who settled in the Mughal provincial capital of Dacca following Akbar's conquest, and states that most of the government officers and notables living in Dacca during that decade were foreigners whose ancestors or who themselves had come from Kašmīr, Mašhad, Tehran, Badaḵšān, Māzandarān, or Gīlān (Halim, pp. 355-56). Many of these migrants were Shiʿites who came either from upper India or, more frequently, directly from Iran via the Persian Gulf and the Bay of Bengal. Arising in part from the increase in India Ocean communication during the 11th/17th century, and in part from the decline of the Safavid royal house in Isfahan, this migration reached a high point after Moršedqolī Khan, governor of Bengal from 1701 to

1726, established what amounted to a Shiʿite dynasty in Bengal. Among the more notable Iranian immigrants was the historian Abu'l-Ḥasan Golestāna, who wrote *Mojmal al-tawārīḵ baʿd-e nāderīya*, and who arrived in Bengal in 1169/1756 (Sarkar, pp. 224, 419). The influx of these migrants drove members of Bengal's old political elite, who were primarily Afghans, from the cities into the more remote regions of east and south Bengal where they reestablished themselves as colonizers and local magnates (Ghosh, p. 56; Du Jarric, pp. 3-4, 32). Many a village in eastern Bengal, now Bangladesh, claims to have been founded by Afghan adventurers rusticated by the Mughal conquest in the early 11th/17th century (Qadir, pp. 43-44).

Iranian influence also entered Bengal through the Mughals' revenue system. Although the revenue system under the independent sultans of Bengal had been maintained in the Bengali language, the Mughals brought with them an administrative system thoroughly integrated with Persianized administrative usages and terms. The Mughals regularly transferred their highest officers from province to province, and since Persian was the only common language used by their senior officers throughout the empire, the extension of Mughal administration in India invariably included Persian-speaking officers who were seldom in any single province long enough to learn the local language. In the early eighteenth century, in the time of Moršedqolī Khan, high revenue posts were also given to Hindus well versed in Persian administrative practice. This system encouraged the local agents of such officers to learn Persian, for, since the Mughals greatly expanded the administrative system in Bengal, native clerks and accountants, whether Muslim or Hindu, had to learn Persian in order to gain or retain state employment. In this way, the Persian language was reinstated in Bengal and patronized by both Hindu and Muslim government servants. In the 12th/18th century, there was also a proliferation of Sufi brotherhoods in Bengal, and they too added to the stock of locally generated Persian literature, though of a mediocre quality (Sarkar, pp. 223-24; 410). Moreover, at this time Persian romances such as Jāmī's *Yūsof o Zolayḵā* and Neẓāmī's *Ḵamsa* entered Bengali folk literature, profoundly infusing it with Persian imagery and vocabulary along with a world view permeated with Sufi values (Roy, p. 90).

The Mughals' reunification of Bengal with north India, and thus indirectly with Iranian culture, also served, however, to widen social cleavages between *ašrāf* Muslims and those rural masses who had been gradually absorbed into a distinctly local variant of Muslim society since the 8th/14th century. The *ašrāf*

tended to be suspicious of the religious practices of rural Muslims, steeped as the latter were in the veneration of local saints and in devotion to a host of syncretic cults (Ahmed, pp. 5-27). While the *ašrāf* claimed foreign origins and patronized "Islamic" languages like Arabic and Persian, the non-*ašrāf* were of purely Bengali extraction and spoke only Bengali, and whereas the *ašrāf* were predominantly urban dwellers and disdained farming as a way of life, the non-*ašrāf* were rural folk who readily identified themselves as cultivators of the soil. These sociocultural differences were echoed in the poetry of Bengali writers who remarked that some Muslims rebuked them for using the Bengali language and for "Indianizing" the teachings of Islam (Haq, pp. 121-22). This suggests a tension between Bengal's minority *ašrāf* population, who held the levers of social and political power, and the majority non-*ašrāf* population, for whom many Bengali poets had consciously attempted to mediate Islamic teachings.

For the past seven centuries, Persian culture has exerted a powerful influence on the social, political, and cultural life of Bengal. In view of the extensive range of these influences that resulted from a sustained exposure to Iran, it may legitimately be said that Bengal represents the easternmost extension of the Persian cultural world. The final proof of this lies in the deep penetration of Perso-Arabic vocabulary into the Bengali language. A recent dictionary compiled a total of 5,186 words and expressions of Perso-Arabic origin found in ordinary Bengali, but noted that "some of these words and expressions were metamorphosed into Bengali forms almost beyond recognition in respect of phonology and spelling" (Hilali, p. v). Indeed, the deep penetration of Perso-Arabic words into the phonology and spelling of modern Bengali remains perhaps the ultimate testimony to Iran's long and profound influence on the delta region.

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