



Cultural Continuity In The Sultanate Period: With Reference To Heritage Mosque Of Bengal

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Abstract

The ancient region of Bengal was the combination of various present time states i.e. West Bengal, Tripura, Jharkhand and even Bihar. Aryans, Buddhism, Jainism, Mughals have centuries of 'Effect Period' on the base culture and value system of the region. The same effect can be observed from the infrastructure build in various time periods of the region, major effect were observed from the structure of Mosques. Major construction were done between 1342 CE to 1576 CE. This present study will throw some light on the cultural continuity, value system, architecture, and bondage of the sultanate period, also some facts and figures will be present to support and investigate the role of local artisans, use of local elements in the constructions and even presentation of Bengali tradition in the structure.

Keywords: Cultural Continuity, Bengal, Heritage, Sultanate Infrastructure.

Introduction

In the present times we are looking forward to a number of changes at the level of society and the same are being accelerated by every passing day. Research scholars, interested stakeholders, and other related academicians, etc. are willing to explore such changes, on the other hand evolution at the level of culture and social development are also becoming the point of interest for above such areas. The outcome of various studies stated that the society and culture always go hand in hand i.e. the development and evolution of the same also goes hand in hand, it can also be stated that culture and society are the two sides of same coin. In the process a number of enhancements and culture related theories came up; such theories are still the benchmark for upcoming theorists, researchers and scholars. It is also evident from the records that every society had undergone numerous changes and these changes were the part and parcel of self-development and references taken from other societies. Apparently who is the beneficiary or most impacted entity of such changes the answer is people, here it is important to mention that some people of the society easily accept the change and some other people take time to accept and continue with the same; such delays are because of environmental concerns and issues; also such changes affect the normal life of a given person to great extent. Some parameters to evaluate such changes can be considered as technology, economy, modernization, urbanization, competition, ideologies and other related components. The above said changes are recognized at an early stage because the indicators are very clear i.e. growth in GDP, comparative growth

of population, shrinking villages, etc. but the value system takes time to recognize and inculcate because the adoption process is generally slow i.e. the values adopted by one generation are reflected in the behavior of next generation, likewise cultural adoptions are visible in the same manner. Talking about the cultural changes, they are generally smooth and continuous in nature they keep on getting processed unless and until anything unexpected comes in the way, like acceptance to monarchy after the advent of Aryans, acceptance of Islam and Christianity after Mughal and British, and many other such instances. Now someone can ask a question that what is the time frame of such changes in the society, the answer to such question can be the attainment of equilibrium in terms of social and cultural elements, now this equilibrium can be identified in a number of ways, for example people started to accept the conditions laid down by the British. Such shifts are sometimes positive in nature and some are negative i.e. they can exert negative impact on the same.

Many of the previous studies explained the process of development for culture and value system and progress of the same till the present times state of the same, all such explanations had referred to the historical facts and figures; the researchers had regarded human greed, extended division of society, etc. as major reasons for the same. However such changes are very slow but having far reaching effects. In the ancient India or any of the human society world-wide the level of social stability was high and more normative than present times. The period of medieval history became the benchmark for historians as because in this period there was maximum social stability and also the interactions between the cultures was also high, but beyond this period cultural stability started to diminish, in case of India and nearby places the situation was far away from the societies in Europe and other countries.

Here the main concern is that how the periodic benchmarks of the historical periods should be defined in terms of 'period markings', in this concern most of the historians, scholars and researchers had given and agreed upon the segregation of ancient, medieval, and modern historical periods also these periods were contextual in case of global history as well. As far as cultural calamity is concerned major changes were experienced since 1900 BC when Aryans invaded or entered the Indian subcontinent, this was followed by other invaders like Chinese, East Asians, Persians, Arabs, Africans, Europeans, etc. and all of them exerted major effect on the culture and value system of the country, also most of the societal norms were laid down at that time and still they are being followed with great integrity. All such visits and invasions left their long lasting effect on the social and cultural norms of the country and various religions spread all over geographical areas like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Christian, and Islam.

Out of all the above said invasions and visits, most impactful and long-lasting effect was of Islam as the same has effected and influenced the value system and cultural setup of the country. Islamic invasion in the country and effect of the same on Indian culture and value system has remained the most important and popular research topic for Indian and foreign historians, on the other hand many of the miss-interpretations were laid down in this topic only. One of the biggest miss-interpretation is that the Islamic influence was having major impact on Eastern part of the country and this part is having largest lineage as compared to rest of the country. As a matter of fact this is true in terms of cultural effect but as far as invasions are concerned, many other parts of the country present strong evidence about the same, but the cultural integration of that period presents various pictures and aspects that are far different from written history because the cultural landscape is different as stated in the history i.e. many of

the local traditions strengthen this line of thought.



Source: <https://www.mapsofindia.com/history/mughal-empire.html>

Fig.1. Chronology of Mughal Invasions in India

As can be seen from figure 1 it is clear that the initial invasions were from Kashmir, Himachal, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the second phase of Mughal invasion of 1605 started from Bengal. Rest of the time periods can be traced from other parts of the country.

Geographical Legacy

To get a proper understanding of the culture and traditions it is important to understand about the evolution of Mughal invaded regions of the country. In the present scenario it is very difficult to trace back the geographical and cultural evolution of such places i.e. the only source of evidences are the historical traces given in the records. As a matter of fact written records are less in amount and making any opinion on the basis of the same is difficult. Even the archaeological and anthropological evidences are not sufficient enough to reframe or reconstruct the period of that time. Some amount of information is available from 1600 BC onwards from the records available from Hind, Sind, Habash, Zanaj, Barbar, and Nubah, etc, Hind had four sons: Purab, Bang, Dakin, and Naharwal, and every tract that was colonized by each were called after

(Salim, 1903). If Noah is a historical figure, this story could be safely placed somewhere 4200 years from the present day (2350 BCE) based on the flood record and it says that the second son of Hind, Bang, colonized the initial places. On the contrary all such developments paved the corner stone of Bengal Province; this can also be stated as the ground work or the starting of culture sharing of the two entities from different geographical places, apparently other distinct cultures and their effects i.e. after Mughal invasion are more easy to trace as the period was not too old and even the historical evidences are more clear.

Geographically speaking about the research area i.e. Bengal, it is strategically more important and took time for the Mughal invaders to take charge. At that time the nomenclature was different and very slowly moved on to the current name of 'Bengal'. Reza et al (2018). In all of south Asia, Bengal was considered as an entry gate for taking control over the region. British, Mughals, Europeans, etc. also agreed to this point of question and tried to get control over the region. In the further time period, this zone of East India was divided in Bangladesh West Bengal and Tripura. After the dissolution Bengal became the largest delta of the world, thanks to the earliest collision of the world i.e. the tectonic coalition between the sub-continental and the Eurasian plate about 50 million years ago according to the Continental drift theory. Kious et al (2013).

Talking about the topology of the region, it is surrounded by big mountains from three sides, only the southern part of the region is open to the southern sea i.e. Bay of Bengal. Valley of three largest rivers i.e. Ganges, Meghna, and Brahmaputra are present here. Such a topology was having an integral part to play in the formation of cultural landscape, this means that many invaders, including Mughals, used this landscape to spread their culture and elongated their stay in the region, and this gave time to Mughal for cultural exchanges and spread of Islam.

Coming to the ethnicity of the people in the region, it was not same in the early Vedic period, some blend of Aryans, Persians and native Indians was found to be different in color of skin, hair color and even color of eyes. Talking about the DNA mappings of human migration, it was found that the spread was not very wide i.e. people came from out of the region but then again did not left the region too frequently. Here it is important to mention that the coalition of this migration certainly gave rise to new culture and the same evolved in the form of various branches of modern day civilization of the region. It can also be stated that the above said Indo-Aryan culture has remained the new culture of Indus valley civilization and remained same for next many centuries. In this time period many of the literary text were developed and were considered as the identity of this period i.e. the period is still known as Rig Vedic period. Coming back to Bengal, this region was having a great influence of Rig Vedic period as a matter of fact the history of the region was older than the Aryan migration. Many of the historians worked on the assumption for a long period of time and came out with different point of views, however logics were different but still there are miles to go in this regard. However people of this region were having their roots in vedic culture and the same is evident from the present day culture and value system of the region.

The ancient Banga people of that land must have some strong culture to resist the Vedic culture; the absence of the Banga people as a Vedic race in their texts is the testimony of this hypothesis. Another hypothesis is this portion was not suitable for the Aryanised Indo-Persian people to explore due to its geological character or even was not exposed to them. Further, the Veda referred to the people of Bengal as 'asura' or demons, which also proves the Bang culture was alien to them. Animal/human oblation, black magic, etc. were the major identities of the people

belonging to Bengal region, Veda referred to the people of Bengal as 'asura' or demons. Gradually their position started to change, major changes were brought after the Persian and European invasions. In the gradual centuries, high agricultural potential of the land gave rise to a great number of occasions to celebrate and improved the cultural health of the region. The flow of Ganges and Brahmaputra raised the cultural heritage of the region and reached other parts of the country. Now here one major question arises that 'was the culture and value system of Bengal good enough to meet the lines of Vedic culture or not?' The question is having mixed answers i.e. historical evidences are minimum, archaeologically speaking most of the traces are blur in this regard, on the other hand some of the mature settlements were found in the name of Wari-Bateswar, Chandraketugarh, Paṇḍu Rajar Dhibi, and Mahasthangarh was found and that too way before the entry of Vedic culture but were stronger in their presence. Some of the main historians stated that present day culture is the mix or hybrid culture of the two time zones, this mixture was traced from the starting of Vedic culture and end of above said settlements. It can be stated that the cultural and religious outbreaks of the region were not

Stature before Islam

As it is stated above that, the region of Bengal is having mixed effect of multiple civilizations and it is difficult to find the speculation for any given religion but then again 'Hinduism' was having maximum positive impact on this region and remained there for several centuries. It was also evident that from the reports of scholars and researchers the historians of that time had always promoted the 'Hindu Nationalist' all the time and this has remained established for a long period of time. The anthropological and archeological evidences stated that the region of Bengal was influenced by a number of religious beliefs but still evolution of Vedic religion was having long lasting effect on the people.

In the light of new belief system early Vedic gods started to lose their popularity, it can also be stated that Brahmanism or the Vedic system itself gave rise to new form of religious beliefs in the form of Shaivism and Vaishnavism, the new gods were Shiva and Vishnu Michaels (2004). This popularity of Shiva and Vishnu as deities commonly gave birth to new belief system of Hinduism, evidences of the same can be traced from Ramayana and the Mahabharata as well. The spread was so fast that from 7th and 4th BC only Lankan and Dravidian lands were not versed with the same and rest of the sub-continent started to believe about the same. The archeological evidences also stated that Shaivism and Vaishnavism took longer to reach Lanka and Dravidian landscapes.

Another strong system of belief raised in 5th century BCE, which was named as 'anti-Vedic' or 'Nastika philosophy' these were Jainism and Buddhism. They spread in the region of Bengal via Jain and Buddh monks. The stronghold of these philosophies were having great impact on the rulers of Nanda and Gupta as well i.e. the impact of more stronger than that of Vedic beliefs. Another reason for the popularity of these 'Nastik Philosophies' was the slowdown in the settlement of Aryan beliefs in certain parts of subcontinent and dearth of people to follow the difficult ritual all the time, where in Jainism and Buddhism the respective ritual were easy to follow. However, Hinduism was always present during this time period i.e. even in the Gupta dynasty clear evidences were found in this regard.

The popularity of Bengal can be traced from the belief system of Jains i.e. nearly all the 24 Tirthankaras, saviour and spiritual teacher of Jainism gained their spiritual power in the hilly

region of Parasnath Pahar, which is said to be situated at the edge of Bengal (present day Jharkhand) Roy (1984). The followers of Mahavira are called Digamvara (those who don't wear clothes) were said to be having great influence on the region of Bengal, as there are some historical evidences from the life sects of Mahavira i.e. between 540 BC to 468 BC. Many archeological evidences were found from the 11th century AD, as far as spread of Jainism is. Some of the non-Aryan residents of Bengal started to follow Buddhism and many of them started to do so in the lifetime of Buddha i.e. 563 BC to 483 BC, again the reason was 'easy to follow' path of Buddhism. Chakma (2008); Great Aśoka also laid down stūpas at various places in Bengal to memorize the visits, this was evident from the scrolls of many Chinese visitors and travelers as well but after this the hostile personality of Sunga (185 BC–75 BC) declined Buddhism. Chakma (2011). But still Buddhism was never totally wiped out of the region.

During the period of Gupta emperors i.e. from 320 CE - 550 CE, Brahmanism was at its peak but then again Buddhism also flourished at the same time, although both were not going hand in hand but still popularity of both was stable. Sen (2006). At the same time powerful cults of Saivism and Vaishnavism rises through the incorporation of local tradition with Brahmanism and Buddhism got a place closer to Brahmanism. The closeness was so real that Buddha started to be regarded as the ninth avatar of Vishnu.

Even after the end of Gupta Dynasty, various Buddhist dynasties like Khadga, Chandra, Deva, and Pala came into existence and provided boost to the popularity of Buddhism. This was the most noteworthy period of the region in terms of culture and religion. Baruah (2016). Particularly in Bengal, Shaivism gradually inclined towards Vaishnavism, and finally, when Buddhism started to decline, through hybridization of Vaishnavism and the local Shakti cult Shaktism establish as a new sect. Most of the Bengali goddesses like Durga, Kali, Saraswati, Lakshmi, and Parvati are from Shaktism. In short, the hybridization of many external ideas with the local tradition is the key phenomenon of the cultural landscape of Bengal.

Stature during Advent of Islam

It is generally believed that Ikhtiyar al-din Muḥammad Bakhtiyar Khalji also called as Bakhtiyar Khalji, was the ruler of Bengal in 1203 and known for his Muslim context in South- East Asia. Apparently this was the first step towards the spread of Islam in the political corners of Bengal. This period can also be identified as end of last independent Nawab of Bengal i.e. Siraj- ud-Daulah defeated the province to the East Indian company in 1757. The time before the conquest Babur is named as the Sultanate period whereas the time after the conquest is called as Mughal. It was also claimed that during the Islamic rule the Hindus were converted to Islam and Christianity either forcibly or through the promise of economic advantages and this was the period when more than 50,000 temples were brought to ground and many other such steps were taken. Eaton (2000).

Arab merchants were the first point of contact to Islam for the people of Bengal i.e. the earliest contact was evident from the period starting from 632 CE. In reality, long before the conquest of Bengal by the Islamic power Bengal get in touch with Islam primarily in two ways. Firstly, by the Arab merchants and settlers who settled in many ports and commercial cities of Bengal. Secondly, by the Islamic saints who followed major trade routes and settled in many inland cities by these routes. Probably when the small Muslim force conquered the capital there were enough people in Bengal who already converted or aligned with the philosophy of Islam to

celebrate the victory.

Evidences from Landscapes

In 1203 when Bakhtiyār Khaljī's started the Islamic conquest, some major part of the Bengal were attached to the Delhi Sultanate and became integral part of the same in terms of revenue, but in further years it was difficult to stronghold the position hence the governors became the individual rulers, but again in 1338 all the strategically important parts of Bengal were conquered by the Delhi Sultanate. At this time the whole areas was divided in three strategic areas i.e. Sonargaon (eastern Bengal), Gauda (northern Bengal) and Satgaon (southern Bengal). In the line of historic events it was found that in 1342 CE, Ilyas Shah again attached the three region in one declared himself as the ruler of unified Bengal. This Sultanate of Bengal remained intact for next 200 years and then became the part of Mughal rule in 1527 CE. During this period Bengal became the most attractive destination for trade i.e. the flow of wealth from Delhi was high, this vibrancy attracted European traders as well, also the taxes were decreased and small industries were promoted to meet the requirements of traders. Rabbani (2008); Bali (2016).

Evidences from Religious Architecture

As far as architecture is concerned flow of wealth from Delhi and own vibrant economy of Bengal helped a lot in development of great architectures in the region. This was the time when new era of Islamic architecture evolved and many of the mosques were built in the name of Mughal rulers and prophets, they were unique in style and have Arabian influence on the same. Most of such mosques were brought up during 1342 to 1576 CE. Hasan (2007). Some traditional elements of Bengali traditions were also present in these structures, i.e. the local features and elements were used to build these mosques but in the process many changes were brought in the infrastructure of these mosques, over time a number of changes were brought in basic infrastructure of the same.

It is also evident from the historical records that most of such structures were brought up with the help of non-Muslim artisans and other local people, most of the administration was in the hands of non-Muslims, this was done to keep the faith of local people in the deeds of Sultanate in terms of fear and faith. Till the end of 15th century many of the Bengali architectures were brought to realm in the form of shrines and temples, this period was about of 250 years. Sanyal

Then again looking at the brighter side of the structure it can be observed that there are two types of structures during the above said period (known as superstructures):

- a. Chala: These are hut shaped and were developed from the idea of old Bengali huts that use to have thatch roof.
- b. Ratna: These are pinnacled style and use to have the shape of Buddhist shrine, and is similar to the central portion of cruciform Buddhist shrines. Reza (2013).

All the above said structure styles are common to all the Bengal architectures, as used to build the temples. Such structures were complex to build but they are very common for the architectures raised during the period. Ghosh (2005). Here it is empirical to mention that the Chala and Ratna style of structures were closely reflected in various structures of Sultanate time infrastructures, even the elements of traditions were also inspired from the same i.e. the roots were almost similar.

As stated above, the land of Bengal was versed with great rivers like Ganges, Meghna, and Brahmaputra; these rivers had closely nurtured the topography of the region since the ancient

times, also the Bay of Bengal is having a great role to play in the same. With all the known water bodies, land of Bengal is having a magical elevation of 10 meters above the sea level and this makes the terrain exceptional: expansion is horizontal and flood free. The expansion of the land gave rise to a number of ponds and these ponds are having a number of application i.e. source of drinking water, fish farming, support to house drainage, etc. Tabassum (2019).

A closer Look

Structures inspired by Chala and Ratna, availability of ponds, use of local elements and artisans, traditional thought process, infrastructures of sultanate time i.e. the Mosques also use to have ponds nearby and this is a compulsory addition. Some of the ponds use to have beautiful fountains. The idea of fountains was taken from different Musand artisanslim countries Hasan (1989). The presence of ponds in the Mosques of Bengal is the proof of Islamic landscapes and present the picture of formative Islamic period. The time period mentioned above use to have the rural landscape in general and in most of the areas Mosques were built to offer the religious services, is such a scenario courtyards were very big, most of the times a number of huts were clustered to make a Mosques. Apparently at a later stage main building remained intact but the courtyards shrank to support the development of urban areas. A closer look presents that most of the time uncultivated land was used to raise such structures. After the completion of Mosques, these were also used for trade/commerce and related services for some time. Doza (2016): Reza (2018).

The size, shape, area, structure were built as per the Muslim practitioners of that locality; the overall shape of the Mosques were generally rectangular and the overall platform is left with ample space. Many of these Mosques were also having allied structures like Madarsah and Dargah, these allied structures provide the form of nuclear religious space. At a later stage these mosques became popular destinations for building houses, mostly for army and political dignitaries. Hasan (1989). In the later years many of the modification were made in these Mosques and remained the source of inspiration for upcoming engineers and artisans, centuries have passed but still these structures are source of inspirations of present day infrastructure builders, architectures, engineers, historians and even scholars. Reza (2018).

Conclusion

The cultural landscape of Bengal, specially the structure of Mosques use to have significant effect on the cultural heritage of India and is having special space in the traditional racks of Indian history. The coalition of Indian and Sultanate culture remained intact in the form of Bengal Mosques as a matter of fact these Mosques are the proof of common cultures, and the same will remain the proof of hybridizations over time. This coalition resulted in the hybrid form of Bengali culture and having its roots in the social and religious elements of this hybridization. One set of history scholars use to have a set of belief that Vedic religion was the base of Indian value system, however there is some amount of truth in it as well. As far as Bengal is concerned, the standard form of culture in Bengal is the fusion of territorial value system of Vedic Era and Muslim beliefs. The effect of Buddhism and Jainism also influenced the core values of Bengal to some extent and the same can be seen in the architectures of Sultanate period as well. 'Hybridization' will be the right word that can be used to define the core culture and value system of Bengal. The factual period was divided in centuries i.e. invasion of Aryans, spread of Buddhism and Jainism, Mughal invasion and even European invasion had their influences for around 400 to 500 years or so. During all these years, the philosophy of 'Nastiks'

also remained intact for years. Within the evolved Bangalee culture many earlier elements continue in religion, language, literature, music, architecture, settlement formation and many other aspects of culture. The presence of ponds adjacent to the sultanate mosques is one phenomenon of many carrying ancient Banga elements of settlement formation and social structure.

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