

Theological and Historical Report

Religious History of Bangladesh

Bangladesh has seen many big religious shifts throughout its history. In the 8th century AD, Buddhist rulers united the smaller kingdoms in Bengal and established the Pala dynasty. Hindus and Buddhists lived together in this dynasty for 400 years.¹ In 1214 AD, the first Islamic military expedition of Bengal was undertaken by the Ghurid Dyansty.² After the Ghurid dynasty fell, the Delhi Sultanate was established and lasted until 1526 AD.³ The arrival of Turkish and Mongolian Muslims, Sufi spiritual leaders, and Islamic scholars in this era deepened Bengal's Islamic identity, while also displacing many of the Buddhist and Hindu groups.^{4,5} The Bengal sultanate became independent from the Delhi sultanate, and the Muslim population outgrew the rest of the religious minorities in Bengal. The Mughal Empire followed the Delhi Sultanate, and the Islamic rule over Bengal ended with the British occupation in 1757 AD.⁶ Following the British's relinquishment of its Indian empire, India went through one partition (1947 AD) and one war (1971 AD), resulting in the establishment of modern-day Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.

The Bengal region was steeped in religious pluralism prior to British rule, but the post-colonial status of Bangladesh was marked with the struggle to reconcile the Muslim majority with the Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, and other religious minorities. The nation of Bangladesh started off as a secular state, but Islam was soon established as the official religion of

Bangladesh. As a result of Bangladesh's pluralistic religious history and tension with the

¹ Islam, "Historical Overview of Religious Pluralism in Bengal," 26-33.

² Ghurid Sultanate." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., n.d. Accessed February 17, 2023.

³ Delhi Sultanate." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., n.d. Accessed February 17, 2023.

⁴ Khan, *Sufism in Indian and Central Asia*, Chapter 1.

⁵ Islam, "Historical Overview of Religious Pluralism in Bengal," 26-33.

⁶ Hasan, "Religious Pluralism in Sultanate Bengal." 29-50.

religious minorities, there is often a great degree of syncretism in the expression of Christianity.

Many of the sources in the literature review highlighted some areas of syncretism present among the Muslim background Christ believers in Bangladesh.

Areas for Syncretism Among Bangladeshi MBBs (Muslim Background Believer)

1) Theological beliefs concerning Allah, Isa (Jesus), Muhammad, and the Quran – Islam and Christianity are starkly different in their teaching of these four areas, but Bengali MBBs have a range of unique teachings that synthesizes ideas from Islam and incorporates it into a perspective that veers towards the Christian stance.

2) The formation of a social identity following a conversion experience – This defines where on the spectrum between “Muslim” and “Christian” these followers of Christ identify with, and why they use these different identifiers. This area also expands upon aspects of the Insider Movement in Bangladesh.

3) MBB’s social integration with Muslims and participation in Islamic religious activities – Since so much of Bangladeshi customs are steeped in Islamic (and also Hindu) heritage, it is difficult to leave all of these cultural customs behind when people begin to follow Christ. As a result of trying to maintain social and familial relations, some MBBs continue the largely Islamic lifestyle and customs, while re-defining what these rituals signify for them.

In conclusion, the theological-historical research paper will examine the various historical/political factors that have contributed to the emergence of Christian syncretism among MBBs in Bangladesh and highlight a few key areas of syncretism. This study aims primarily to better understand the dynamic and challenges for MBB Christ followers in Bangladesh.

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