Shrines, Cultivators, and Muslim 'Conversion' in Punjab and Bengal, 1300–1700

Richard M. Eaton*

This article discusses the growth of predominantly Muslim populations in two regions of South Asia—western Punjab and eastern Bengal. No evidence supports conventional understandings that Islamisation in these areas resulted from a desire for social liberation on the part of the lower orders of the Hindu caste system. Nor should Islamisation in these regions be characterised as instances of 'conversion', a term embedded in the nineteenth century Protestant missionary movement and thus, inappropriate for reconstructing religious processes in medieval Bengal and Punjab. Rather, transformations of religious identity in these two regions appear to have been gradual and unselfconscious in nature. They also appear to have been part of larger socio-political and economic changes that were occurring in the regions, in particular the diffusion of settled peasant agriculture.

The transformation of religious identities of whole societies is one of the most consequential themes of world history. Much of the world's political geography—certainly that of South Asia—is the product of earlier diffusions of religious systems. Yet historians have faced many problems in attempting to explain these phenomena. Some of these are conceptual

This article draws on the 'Introduction' to Eaton (ed.), *India's Islamic Traditions*; Eaton's *Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*; and 'Political and Religious Authority of the Shrine of Baba Farid'.

*Department of History, University of Arizona, Tucson. E-mail: reaton@u.arizona.edu

The Medieval History Journal, 12, 2 (2009): 191–220
SAGE Publications ♦ Los Angeles/London/New Delhi/Singapore/Washington DC
DOI: 10.1177/097194580901200202

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

in nature. What is 'conversion'? What, indeed, is 'religion'? Since any society-wide religious transformation necessarily involves change, what, exactly, is changing? Can non-religious factors be linked causally to religious change, and if so, how? There is also the empirical issue of identifying reliable indices of religious change. These issues take on special significance in South Asia, a region where the past is seen not as some remote prologue to the present, of interest to none but antiquarians. Rather, India's past is a fiercely contested terrain on to which today's struggles, especially communal issues, are often projected.

Challenges of Explaining 'Conversion'

The present article considers the growth of substantial Muslim communities in two major regions of South Asia: western Punjab and eastern Bengal. As the first forms the core of present-day Pakistan and the second the nation of Bangladesh, the growth of Islam in these two regions is of great historical significance. Yet, the dominant theories of 'conversion' to Islam in South Asia are all seriously flawed. The oldest of these stresses the role of military force in the diffusion of Islam in India and elsewhere. This idea attained special prominence in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when much Orientalist scholarship identified Islam with violence and the warrior as Islam's 'ideal type'. But proponents of a 'conversion by the sword' theory seem to have confused conversion to Islam with the extension of Turko-Iranian rule in north India after c. 1200, a confusion originating in too literal a translation of Indo-Persian chronicles that narrated the 'Islamic' conquest of India. In these accounts, one often meets with ambiguous phrases like 'they submitted to Islam' or 'they came under submission to Islam', in which 'Islam' might mean the religion, the state or the army. But a contextual reading of such passages suggests that it was usually the Indo-Muslim state and more explicitly, its military arm, to which people were said to have submitted, and not the Islamic faith.[1] Moreover, if Islamisation had ever been a function of military or political force, one would expect that those areas exposed most intensively to rule by Muslim dynasties would today contain the greatest number of Muslims. However, the opposite is the case, as those

[1] See Friedmann, 'Contribution to the Early History of Islam in India': 322.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

regions where the most dramatic Islamisation occurred, such as eastern Bengal or western Punjab, lay on the fringes of Indo-Muslim rule, where the means of coercion were necessarily weakest.

Others sought to explain Islamisation in India in terms of political patronage, arguing that conversions followed the granting of non-religious favours from the ruling class, such as relief from taxes or promotion in the bureaucracy. It is true that in the early fourteenth century, some Indians presented themselves as new converts to the Khalaji sultans, who in turn rewarded them with robes of honour according to their rank.[2] According to nineteenth century census reports, many landholding families of north India were remembered as having declared themselves Muslims in order to escape imprisonment for non-payment of revenue, or to keep ancestral lands in the family.[3] However, although this kind of explanation might help account for the relatively low incidence of Islamisation in the heartland of Indo-Muslim rule, the upper Gangetic Plain and Delhi Doab, it cannot explain the massive growth that took place along the political fringe—as in Punjab or Bengal. Like military pressure, political patronage would have decreased rather than increased as one moved away from the centres of Indo-Muslim power.

By far the most widely-held theory of Islamisation in South Asia links the growth of Islam with social improvement, and more specifically, with liberation from a Brahmanically defined social order. The theory postulates a Hindu caste system that is unchanging through time and rigidly discriminatory against its own lower orders. For centuries, it is said, members of the lower castes suffered under the crushing burden of oppressive high-caste Hindus, especially Brahmins. Then, when Islam 'arrived' in the Indian subcontinent, carrying its liberating message of social equality as preached (in most versions of the theory) by Sufi shaikhs, these same oppressed castes, seeking to escape the yoke of Brahmanic oppression and aware of a social equality hitherto denied to them, 'converted' to Islam en masse.[4] By juxtaposing what is perceived as the inherent wickedness of Hindu society and the inherent justice of

[2] Ibn Battuta, *Rehla*: 46.

[3] Hardy, 'Modern European and Muslim Explanations of Conversion to Islam in South Asia': 80–81.

[4] For example, the historian, K.A. Nizami, writes, 'When the Muslims conquered these caste-cities they threw open their gates to everybody, with the result that the egalitarian principles of Islam attracted large number of non-caste Hindus and professional groups to

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

Islam, this theory identifies motives for conversion that are, from a Muslim (or indeed a Christian) perspective, eminently praiseworthy.

The difficulty, however, is that no contemporary evidence supports such a theory. For example, there is no reason to believe that Islam in pre-British times was associated with ideas of social equality. In comparing their tradition to other Indian religions, pre-modern Muslim intellectuals wrote of Islamic monotheism as opposed to Hindu polytheism, and not of Islam's ideal of social equality as opposed to Indian notions of inequality.[5] Moreover, this theory of 'conversion', like the two mentioned earlier, is refuted by facts of human geography. Owing to the uneven distribution of Brahmanic culture in ancient and early medieval India, the bulk of the indigenous populations of eastern Bengal, western Punjab, the northwest frontier region and Baluchistan had not yet, at the time of their contact with Muslims, been fully integrated into a Brahmin-ordered society. Yet, as is shown in the earliest reliable census returns, it was precisely in these regions that the vast majority of South Asian Muslims ultimately emerged. In short, having never been fully absorbed into a Brahmin-ordered society in the first place, there was no logical way that peoples of these areas could have sought escape from an oppressive Hindu social order.

the fold of Islam. It was this conversion of the lower caste population to Islam which swelled Muslim society in this country. The Muslim saints handled the problem of conversion with great sympathy, understanding and love'. Nizami, 'al-Hind: v.—Islam', *Enclyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 3: 429. 'To many', writes I.H. Qureshi of the early Islamisation of Sind, 'Islam appeared as a deliverer from the tyranny of Hinduism and the example of tolerance set by the Arabs seems to have inclined many a Buddhist heart towards Islam'. See Qureshi, *Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent*: 42. Nizami's explanation of mass Islamisation in India was perhaps influenced by the writings of Mohammad Habib, who, in 1952, speculated—without citing evidence—that the Islamic notion of human equality promised some hope to people occupying the lower orders of the Hindu caste system. In Habib's view, the 'turn over of public opinion' caused by the reception of that notion forestalled popular resistance to invasions by Muslim Turks. See Mohammad Habib, "Introduction to Elliot and Dowson's *History of India*, vol. 2," 1952: 72.

[5] See Friedmann, 'Medieval Muslim Views of Indian Religions': 214–21. In fact, the idea that Islam fosters social equality (as opposed to religious equality) seems to be of relatively recent origin, dating only from the period of the Enlightenment, and more particularly from the legacy of the French Revolution among nineteenth century Muslim reformers. See Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: passim.*; Lewis, 'Impact of the French Revolution on Turkey': 105–25.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

Attempts to explain the growth of Islam in South Asia suffer from other conceptual flaws, such as the implicit assumption that 'conversion' requires an underlying *motive*. According to this way of thinking, a potential convert would self-consciously and deliberately choose to change his or her religion. But the presumption of conscious intentionality on the part of such converts seems to be a backward projection of nineteenth and twentieth century notions of religious conversion, which in turn were informed by models and terminology generated by the worldwide Protestant missionary movement. In the latter context, conversion was understood as not only conscious and deliberate, but sudden and thorough: darkness was replaced by light, error by truth. The following revivalist hymn, which comes straight out of this nineteenth century movement, captures the spirit of a willed, deliberate act:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found;
Was blind, but now can see.

In this deeply Protestant revivalist vision of religious action, the individual is construed as an autonomous and conscious actor, as someone who deliberately chose to convert and who had specific reasons or motives for making that choice. Even the word 'conversion'—literally, 'to turn over'—carries distinct Protestant overtones inasmuch as it connotes a sudden and complete rejection of one's former religious identity in exchange for a new one.

Informed by this model of religious change, nineteenth and twentieth century scholars who studied the growth of Islam in South Asia, perhaps unconsciously, sought analogues for what nineteenth century Christian missions had been doing in European colonies. In his influential study, *The Preaching of Islam* (1896), T.W. Arnold explained the growth of Islam in India mainly in terms of the 'preaching' by Muslim 'missionaries'.[6] Not surprisingly, scholars writing in this tradition found motives for 'conversion' to Islam—for example, a desire to escape Brahmanical oppression or to achieve social equality—that reflected contemporary debates both within and beyond missionary circles over the dynamics of

[6] Arnold, *Preaching of Islam*: 254–93.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

conversion to Christianity in British India. But the projection of this Protestant model backward into medieval or early modern eras did considerable violence to the contemporary data, which do not indicate deliberateness or intentionality of any sort, much less specific motives for 'conversion' such as those just mentioned. Nothing in pre-British Indian sources suggests that there ever occurred among whole communities a conscious or dramatic 'turning-over' (that is, 'conversion') of religious identity that involved a complete rejection of a former identity and an embracing of an entirely new one. What the original evidence rather points to is a slow, almost glacial process of creative adaptation that was so gradual in pace and so subtle in character as to go largely unnoticed by either inside or outside observers.

Yet another difficulty with most models of Islamic 'conversion' is that they share a vision of Islam as a monolithic and pure essence that somehow 'spread' to India. At the same time, the Indian convert is construed as a passive recipient of a foreign creed that had been carried to and within the subcontinent by some mediating agency. One of the principal metaphors used to capture this process, as Joya Chatterji has noted, is the botanical one of transplantation. 'Biological metaphors of insemination, implantation, and germination', Chatterji writes,

> ...abound in scholarly writing on conversion to Islam. Inevitably, the role of the host society is seen as passive, merely receiving the living seed which takes root, grows and struggles to survive. And where the cultural distance between the host society and Middle Eastern cultures is great, the 'soil' is deemed to be too poor to sustain a healthy tree: the Islam that grows in such soil will inevitably be a poor debased sort of faith.[7]

Reliance on transplantation metaphors also served to explain what many considered an 'incomplete' Islamisation among South Asian communities. For, if the young shoots arising from the transplanted seed of Islam had to struggle through India's thick religious foliage, the result

[7] Chatterji, 'Bengali Muslim': 17. For example, Aziz Ahmad opens his article on 'Islamic Culture' in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* with the words, 'The transplantation of Islamic culture on the Indian sub-continent...'. Ahmad, 'Hind: vi—Islamic Culture', vol. 3: 438.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

would be either stunted growth or hybridisation.[8] Either way, the 'pure' religion of Islam would be in some way compromised. The same metaphor also informed the notion of 'syncretism', a term that normally refers to religious mixing. But the term also carries generally negative connotations owing to the *a priori* assumption that any religion that is conceived in terms of pure essence will, if mixed with another religion, yield debased, diluted or distorted offspring. This is perhaps why one often detects a note of disapproval in discussions of traditions such as *pir*-veneration or tomb cults, as if the people practicing such traditions did not understand 'true' Islam and, in their ignorance or confusion, had allowed these 'un-Islamic' influences to be carried into their devotions or beliefs.

An earlier tradition of scholarship viewed Indo-Muslim cultural history from the standpoint of the Arab 'heartland', understood as the natural home of an unadulterated, pure Islam. Such a perspective necessarily consigned India to the role of 'periphery' and hence, its vast and diverse populations of Muslims as practicing forms of religion that were to some degree debased or diluted. Recent scholarship, however, has adopted a more decentred perspective. Instead of viewing the Middle East as a net exporter of culture and South Asia an importer—a perspective underlying the idea of the 'spread' or 'expansion' of Islam—scholars have begun exploring the ways that South Asians actively engaged with Islamic traditions and creatively incorporated them into their lives and cultures, thereby making them their own. That is to say, what is commonly called 'conversion' to Islam was actually very much an interactive and creative engagement that, over a protracted period of time, served to indigenise Islamic culture and Muslim communities as natural parts of South Asia's cultural landscape. This seems to have occurred in much the same way that, for example, Christianity and Christian communities over time became indigenised as a natural part of Europe's cultural landscape.

[8] As K.A. Nizami writes, 'Since most [Indian Muslims] were converts from Hinduism, it was not possible for them to break away completely from their social background. In varying degrees and at different levels the Hindu traditions and customs were consequently continued among the Muslims. In certain rural areas, where conversion was not complete, many of the social customs, even some religious practices of Hinduism which had become a part of their social life, were accepted'. Nizami. 1965. 'Hind: v.—Islam', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam,* vol. 3: 436.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

Bengal

Let us look more closely at two regions of South Asia—eastern Bengal and western Punjab—where Muslim communities had already achieved demographic preponderance by the time British census takers began compiling statistics in the late nineteenth century. The religious change that occurred in eastern Bengal between the thirteenth and eighteenth century—conventionally glossed as 'conversion to Islam'—was actually one dimension of a total transformation of Bengali society, economy, culture and the land itself. An outstanding feature of Bengal—a flat, naturally forested riverine delta—has been the long-term eastward movement of its major river systems. By depositing the rich silt that made possible the cultivation of wet rice, these rivers established the material basis of Bengali society and culture. But they never remained fixed in place. Whenever the sediment carried by the rivers caused their beds to attain levels higher than the surrounding countryside, waters spilled out of their former beds and moved into adjoining channels.[9] In this way, the main course of the Ganges, which had formerly flowed down the present Bhagirathi–Hooghly channel by Kolkata in West Bengal, was replaced in turn by the Bhairab, the Mathabhanga, the Garai–Madhumati, the Arialkhan and finally, today's Padma–Meghna system.[10] Thus, the delta, as a whole, experienced a gradual eastward movement of civilisation as pioneers in the more ecologically active regions cut virgin forests, thereby throwing open a widening zone for field agriculture.[11]

Although these processes had been in motion for a very long period of time, they intensified dramatically after the late sixteenth century, when the great Ganges river system, abandoning its former channels in western and southern Bengal, linked up with the Padma. European maps drawn between 1548 and 1779 clearly reveal this eastward shift.[12] Already in 1567, the Venetian traveller, Cesare Federici, noted that ships were unable to sail north of Satgaon on the old Ganges, that is, today's Bhagirathi–Hooghly in West Bengal.[13] At about the same time, the Ganges

[9] Mukerjee, *Changing Face of Bengal*: 3–10; Majumdar, *Rivers of the Bengal Delta*: 65–72.

[10] Bagchi, *Ganges Delta*: 58.

[11] Mukerjee, *Changing Face*: 137.

[12] Eaton, *Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*: 196–97.

[13] Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus*, vol. 10: 113.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

silted up and abandoned its channels above Gaur, as a result of which that venerable city, which for nearly four centuries had served as the capital of Muslim rulers in the delta, suffered a devastating epidemic and had to be abandoned. Writing in 1574, just after Mughal troops marched down from Delhi and conquered Gaur, the chronicler Abu'l-fazl remarked that the Ganges River had divided into two branches at nearby Tanda: one branch flowing south to Satgaon and the other flowing east towards Sonargaon and Chittagong.[14] In the seventeenth century, the former branch continued to decay as progressively more of its water was captured by the channels flowing to the east, to the point that by 1666, this branch had become altogether unnavigable.[15] As the delta's active portion gravitated eastward, the regions in the west, receiving diminishing levels of fresh water and silt, gradually become moribund. Cities and habitations along the banks of abandoned channels declined as diseases associated with stagnant waters took hold of local communities.

To the east, however, these changes had the opposite effect. With the main waters of the Ganges now pouring through the channel of the Padma river, the combined Ganges–Padma system linked eastern Bengal with north India at the very moment of Bengal's political integration with the Mughal Empire. At the same time, the main body of Ganges silt, now carried directly into the east, was deposited over an ever greater area of the eastern delta during annual flooding. This permitted an intensification of cultivation along the larger rivers where rice culture had already been established, and an extension of cultivation into those parts of the interior not already brought under the plow. As a result, eastern Bengal attained levels of agricultural and demographic growth no longer possible in the western delta.

These changes are reflected above all in the statistics of the Mughal government's share (*khalisa*) of the land revenue demand (*jama*'). Since the revenue demand represents the government's estimate of the land's income-generating capacity, and since Bengal's major income-producing activity was the cultivation of wet rice, a labour-intensive crop, these statistics also suggest changes in the relative population density of different sectors within the delta. Between 1595 and 1659, the revenue demand for the northeastern portion of the delta increased by 97 per cent,

[14] Abu'l-fazl, *Akbarnama*, vol. 3: 153.
[15] Tavernier, *Travels in India*, vol. 1: 125.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

while that of the southeastern quadrant, the most ecologically active part of Bengal, increased by 117 per cent. On the other hand, the revenue demand for southwestern Bengal, an ecologically older sector, increased by only 54 per cent in this period, while that for northwestern Bengal, the most moribund part of the delta, actually declined by 13 per cent.[16] Bengal as a whole, but especially the eastern sector, was so productive that by the sixteenth century it had become the world's major exporter of rice. 'There is such a quantity of rice', observed the Frenchman, François Pyrard, after spending the spring of 1607 in the eastern port of Chittagong,

> ...that, besides supplying the whole country, it is exported to all parts of India, as well to Goa and Malabar, as to Sumatra, the Moluccas, and all the islands of Sunda, to all of which lands Bengal is a very nursing mother, who supplies them and their entire subsistence and food. Thus, one sees arrive there [Chittagong] every day an infinite number of vessels from all parts of India for these provisions...[17]

In short, Bengal in this period presents a moving economic frontier, the product of a long-term process, whereby land fertility, rice cultivation and population density, all grew at a faster rate in the east than in the west.

Bengal's agricultural boom coincided not only with the consolidation of Mughal power in the province but also with the growth in overland and maritime trade that linked Bengal ever more tightly to the world economy. Ever since the Turkish conquest of the delta in the thirteenth century, the export of Bengali textiles into Indian Ocean markets increased.[18] Later, during the twilight years of the Bengal sultanate, Portuguese merchants intruded into the Bay of Bengal, establishing trading stations in both Chittagong and Satgaon in the mid-1530s. In the last two decades of the sixteenth century, while Mughal troops were pushing into the heart of the active delta and establishing their provincial headquarters in Dhaka, the Portuguese built the major port of Hooghly (adjacent to modern Kolkata), expanded their community in Chittagong and planted mercantile colonies in and around Dhaka. In the early seventeenth century, the Dutch and English trading companies gradually replaced the over-extended Portuguese as the dominant European

[16] Eaton, *Rise of Islam*: 199.
[17] Pyrard, *Voyage of Francois Pyrard*, vol. 2: 327.
[18] Varthema, *Travels of Ludovico di Varthema*: 212; Pires, *Suma Oriental*, vol. 1: 92.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

merchants in Bengal's port cities. Granted permission by the Mughal court in 1635 to trade in Bengal, the Dutch East India Company opened a trading station at Hooghly the following year. By the end of the seventeenth century, the export of raw silk and cotton textiles had grown so rapidly that Bengal emerged as Europe's single most important supplier of goods in all of Asia.[19]

As a consequence of this manufacturing boom and the commercial connection with Europe, substantial quantities of silver poured into the province from outside. In the 1550s, the Portuguese found themselves shipping so much treasure to Bengal that the value of silver currency in Goa actually fluctuated with their sailing seasons to Bengal and Malacca.[20] Between 1709 and 1717, the Dutch and English East India companies together shipped cargoes averaging Rs 4.15 million in value into Bengal annually, 85 per cent of which was silver.[21] Advanced to Bengali agents, merchants or weavers, this treasure got absorbed into the regional economy, adding considerably to the existing stocks of rupee coinage already in circulation.[22] Yet, despite the well-documented influx of silver during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Bengal did not experience price inflation. This was because the production of agricultural and manufactured goods, together with the population base, grew at levels high enough to absorb the expanding money supply created by the influx of outside silver. Indeed, newly minted silver percolated freely throughout Bengali society, penetrating ever lower levels and facilitating the kinds of land transfers and cash advances that necessarily accompanied an expanding agrarian frontier.

The importance of ready cash in this process is suggested in the *Candi-Mangala*, a religious poem composed around 1590 by the Bengali poet Mukundaram. In it, the Goddess Chandi gives the poem's hero, Kalaketu, a valuable ring and tells him to exchange it for cash. With the money thus obtained—seventy million *tankas*—Kalaketu is to clear the forest and establish a city and temple in honour of the goddess. Once the land is ready for agricultural operations, Kalaketu promises to advance to Kayastha landlords as much cash as they need for their own thousands

[19] Prakash, *Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal*: 75.

[20] Subrahmanyam, 'Notes on the Sixteenth-Century Bengal Trade': 269, 279.

[21] Prakash, *Dutch East India Company*: 162–63.

[22] Chaudhury, *Trade and Commercial Organization in Bengal*: 100–25.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

of labourers to come and settle on the newly-claimed lands.[23] This points not only to the high level of monetisation in late sixteenth century Bengal but to the role that cash played in transforming virgin jungle into settled agrarian communities. In sum, a number of factors—natural, political and economic—combined to create the seventeenth century's booming rice frontier in the eastern delta: the eastward movement of Bengal's rivers and hence, of the active delta; the region's political and commercial integration with Mughal India; and a growth in the money supply as outside silver poured into the region in payment for locally manufactured textiles.

What is most relevant to our discussion of 'conversion', however, is that these changes in eastern Bengal coincided in time and place with the earliest appearance of a Bengali Muslim peasantry. In 1567, Cesare Federici noted that the entire population of Sondwip, a large island in Bengal's southeastern corner opposite Chittagong, was Muslim.[24] In 1599, a Jesuit missionary named Francis Fernandez, touring the rural districts near Narayanganj in southeastern Dhaka district, noted that 'the people are nearly all Mahometans'.[25] In 1638, the Mughal governor of Bengal complained to the Raja of Arakan about Portuguese raids along eastern Bengal's Noakhali coast, where, the governor claimed, the Portuguese had been committing 'depredations on the Muslim masses'.[26]

Two facts are relevant to understanding the connections between eastern Bengal's agricultural boom and the appearance of a Muslim peasantry. First, prior to the advent of Mughal rule in Bengal, from the 1590s, the masses of eastern Bengal, unlike those of the western delta, were not yet firmly integrated into a Hindu social–religious order. Writing in 1595, at the very dawn of the Mughal age, Abu'l-fazl 'Allami, the foremost spokesman for Mughal imperial ideology, wrote that the indigenous peoples of the eastern delta were of dark skin, had little or no beard and practiced a religion 'said to be different to that of the Hindus and Muhammadans'.[27] This suggests that when the growth of Islam did occur in this region, its population did not move from a Hindu to a Muslim identity. Rather, the religious culture of the fishing, hunting and

[23] Bhattacharya, 'La Déesse et le royaume': 33.
[24] Federici, 'Extracts of Master Caesar Frederike': 137.
[25] Hosten, 'Jesuit Letters from Bengal': 59.
[26] Askari, 'Mughal-Magh Relations': 210.
[27] Abu'l-fazl, *A'in-i Akbari*, vol. 2: 132.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

slash-and-burn farming communities of eastern Bengal was saturated with local forest cults that focused especially on female deities such as Manasa or Chandi. By contrast, the western portion of delta, where Islam would make little headway, was, at the time of the Mughal conquest, already populated by settled, wet rice-cultivating communities of hierarchically ordered Hindu castes. As was noted by Father Martin S.J., who toured the Hooghly region of west Bengal in 1699, 'nearly the whole country is given to idolatry'.[28]

Second, from at least the sixteenth century on, the arduous business of forest clearing and land reclamation in the eastern delta was associated with the activities of Muslim holymen (*pir*) or more accurately, charismatic or enterprising men who were popularly—and often retroactively—identified as holymen. In popular memory, some of these men swelled into vivid mythico-historical figures, saints whose lives served as metaphors for the expansion of both religion and agriculture. They have endured precisely because, in the collective folk memory, their careers captured and telescoped a complex historical socio-religious process, whereby a land originally forested and non-Muslim became arable and predominantly Muslim.

For example, the epic poem, *Ray-Mangala*, composed by Krishnaram Das in 1686, concerns a conflict between a tiger-god named Daksin Ray and a Muslim hero named Badi' Ghazi Khan. As Daksin Ray means 'King of the South' or Lower Bengal, the tiger-god was evidently understood as a sovereign deity of the Sundarbans forest generally, whereas Badi' Ghazi Khan likely represents a personified memory of the penetration of these same forests by Muslim pioneers. Although the encounter between these two was initially hostile, the conflict was ultimately resolved in compromise: the tiger-god would continue to exercise authority over the whole of Lower Bengal, yet, people would show respect to Badi' Ghazi Khan by worshipping his burial spot, marked by a symbol of the tiger-god's head.[29] In this way, Badi' Ghazi Khan, probably the legendary residue of some sanctified pioneer, was remembered as having established the cult of Islam in the Sundarban forests.

It was also in the seventeenth century that traditions concerning Bengal's most famous Muslim saint, Shah Jalal Mujarrad (d. 1346) of

[28] Hosten, 'Earliest Recorded Episcopal Visitation of Bengal': 217.
[29] Bhattacharyya, 'Tiger-cult and its Literature in Lower Bengal': 49–50.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

Sylhet, became transformed in ways approximating present-day oral accounts. Whereas the earliest written record of Shah Jalal's life, composed in the mid-1500s, identified the saint as a Turk sent to India by a Central Asian *pir* for the purpose of waging war against the infidels,[30] later hagiographical traditions substantially reinterpreted his career. The *Suhail-i Yaman*, a biography compiled in the mid-nineteenth century but based on manuscripts dating to the seventeenth century, identifies the saint not as a Turk from Turkestan but as an Arab from Yemen sent to India by a Sufi master in Mecca. Handing him a clump of soil, the master instructed Shah Jalal to wander through the world until he found a place whose soil exactly corresponded to it. Only after he had reached Bengal and assisted in the defeat of the Raja of Sylhet, did he discover that the soil there exactly matched his clump. He therefore selected the mound of earth he had tested as the site of his *khanaqah* or Sufi hospice.[31] An almost identical version of this story is found in oral traditions recounted in the 1970s by villagers of Pabna district, nearly two hundred miles west of Sylhet, in the central delta. When asked about the Islamisation of Bengal, the villagers responded with the story of Shah Jalal and his clump of soil, maintaining that one of the reasons Islam had flourished in the delta was that *the soil had been right for Shah Jalal's message.*[32] Thus, if sixteenth century biographers depicted Shah Jalal as a holy warrior and used his career as a vehicle for explaining the political transition from Hindu to Muslim rule, traditions dating from the seventeenth century saw Shah Jalal through the prism of agrarian piety, viewing the saint as representing Bengal's transition not only from pre-Islam to Islam, but from a pre-agrarian to an agrarian economy.

The sixteenth century is the earliest firm horizon for the appearance of pioneering shaikhs in either Persian or Bengali sources. Composed in the Burdwan region around 1590, at the dawn of Mughal rule in Bengal, Mukundaram's *Candi-Mangala* celebrates the Goddess Chandi and her human agent, the hunter Kalaketu. As noted earlier, the goddess entrusted Kalaketu with temporal sovereignty over her forest kingdom on the condition that he, as king, renounce the violent career of hunting and bring peace on earth by promoting her cult. To this end, Kalaketu was

[30] Ikram, 'Unnoticed Account of Shaikh Jalal of Sylhet': 63–68.
[31] Wise, 'Note on Shah Jalal, the Patron Saint of Silhat': 278–80.
[32] Thorp, 'Masters of Earth': 63–64.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

enjoined to oversee the clearing of the jungle and to establish there an ideal city, whose population would cultivate the land and worship the king's divine benefactor, Chandi. Just as the goddess extended her protection to the king, so also Kalaketu extended his protection to the peasants, to whose chiefs he gave golden earrings symbolising his intermediary role between them and the goddess. To assist the beginnings of agriculture, Kalaketu promised not to collect any revenue for six years. He also gave each cultivator a document (*patta*) recognising his tenure, and specified that the collection of taxes would be based on the number of plows. Attracted by such favourable terms, peasants and other rural castes, representing the full spectrum of Bengali society as Mukundaram saw it, emerged in the new forest kingdom and took an oath of loyalty to the king by accepting a piece of betel from his mouth.

Mukundaram's poem can thus be read as a grand epic dramatising the process of civilisation building in the Bengal delta and specifically, the eastward movement of the delta's ecological frontier, as agrarian civilisation pushed into formerly forested lands. It is true that the model of royal authority that informed Mukundaram's work is unambiguously Hindu. Yet, it was Muslims who were the principal pioneers responsible for clearing the forest, making it possible for both the city and its rice fields to flourish. 'The Great Hero [Kalaketu] is clearing the forest', wrote the poet,

> Hearing the news, outsiders came from various lands.
> The Hero then bought and distributed among them heavy knives, axes, battle axes, and pikes.
> From the north came the Das [people], one hundred of them advanced.
> They were struck with wonder on seeing the Hero, who distributed betelnut to each of them.
> From the South came the harvesters, five hundred of them under one organiser.
> From the west came Zafar Mian, together with twenty-two thousand men.
> Sulaimani beads in their hands, they chanted the names of their *pir* and the Prophet.
> Having cleared the forest they established markets.
> Hundreds and hundreds of foreigners ate and entered the forest.
> Hearing the sound of the ax, tigers became apprehensive and ran away, roaring.[33]

[33] Mukundaram, *Kavikankana-Candi*: 299–300.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

In this passage, Muslim pioneers are unambiguously associated with important events taking place in the poet's time—the clearing of forests and the establishment of local markets. Moreover, the Muslims involved in forest-clearing operations are said to have come from the west, suggesting origins in upper India or beyond, in contrast to the Aboriginals ('the Das people') who came from the north and the harvesters, who came from the south, that is, from within the delta. Far surpassing the other pioneers in point of numbers, the 22,000 Muslims were led by one 'Zafar Mian', evidently the chieftain or the organiser of the Muslim work force. Significantly, members of that force of labourers chanted the name of a *pir*, quite possibly that of Zafar Mian himself. In sum, while the poem cannot be read as an eyewitness historical narrative, we know that its author drew the themes of his poem from the culture of his own day. Even if there had been no historical 'Zafar Mian', the poet was clearly familiar with the theme of thousands of Muslims attacking the forest under the leadership of charismatic *pirs*.

It is instructive to place such early modern literary evidence side by side with administrative records dating to the seventeenth century, when Mughal authorities were consolidating their rule throughout the delta. In these records, one finds evidence of Muslim pioneers opening up virgin forest for rice cultivation by mobilising labour, advancing capital and clearing the forests preparatory to the launching of rice cultivation operations. As a condition of their receiving Mughal support and authorisation, these men were also required to build primitive mosques of bamboo and thatching, thereby establishing the earliest Muslim institutions in what had theretofore been dense forest. For example, soon after the Mughals annexed the heavily forested Chittagong region to their growing Bengal province in 1666, mosques and shrines began proliferating throughout the area, as local imperial authorities issued orders (*sanad*s) to district revenue officers authorising the transfer of jungle lands from the royal domain to members of an emerging local gentry. These tax-free grants set in motion important social processes: forest lands became rice fields, and indigenous hunters, fisherfolk or slash-and-burn farmers became wet rice cultivating peasants. They also became clients of the pioneers who had opened up particular tracts of land. Since these grants were renewed over time, subsequent generations of villagers became clients of descendants of those pioneers. And many of those

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

same pioneers in turn, over time, became venerated as Muslim holy men, while their gravesites became shrines.

Politically, such land grants aimed at deepening the roots of Mughal authority on an unruly frontier. Virtually every grant specified that the grantee 'must assiduously pray for the survival of the powerful state'. Through such intermediaries, the state also sought the loyalty of those persons described as the grantee's dependents (*va-bastigan*). These were people who, having assisted the grantee in clearing the forests and building the mosque, continued to serve that institution by cultivating the lands attached to it. The grantees themselves were pioneers of diverse social origins. Of 75 grantees sampled from seventeenth and early eighteenth century Chittagong, 21 bore titles like 'chaudhuri', 'ta'alluqdar' or 'khan', associating them with the rural landholding aristocracy, whereas the rest bore titles like 'shaikh', 'khwandkar' or 'darvish', associating them with Islamic piety or charisma.[34] Whatever their origins, however, all these men were entrepreneurs who had arranged to get necessary authorisation from a local landholder (*zamindar*) to clear the forest, while also arranging with local labourers to work the land as shareholders. As such, they played key roles in transforming the jungle to paddy, in introducing Mughal and Islamic culture into the forests and in integrating forest communities into that culture. Each new mosque in the forest became the nucleus for new communities of Muslim peasants. In Bengali literature of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, one sees a gradual process in which Islamic superhuman agents were initially *included* in local religious cosmologies alongside indigenous agents such as Manasa, Chandi, Satya Pir, Dharma or Daksin Ray. Over the time, Islamic superhuman entities became *identified* with those indigenous agents. And finally, by the nineteenth century, particularly with the diffusion of literacy and thus of scriptural authority, they began to *displace* indigenous agents.[35]

In sum, the twin processes of peasantisation and Islamisation appear to have proceeded simultaneously along the delta's eastern frontier, both of them stimulated by the activities of pioneer–developers acting under the authority of an expanding Mughal state. The association of agrarian and religious change perhaps explains why religious texts of the period

[34] Eaton, *Rise of Islam*: 249.

[35] *Ibid.*: chapter 10.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

are saturated with Bengal's frontier ethos. A late sixteenth century Bengali biography of the Prophet Muhammad and other prophets of Islam, the *Nabi-Bangsa*, characterised the patriarch Abraham as a man who, born and raised in a forest, travelled to Palestine, where he attracted tribes from nearby lands, mobilised local labour to cut down the forest and built a holy place—Jerusalem's temple—for offering prayers to God.[36] Clearly, the main themes of Abraham's life, as recorded in this epic, precisely mirrored the careers of the hundreds of pioneers who, during the sixteenth–eighteenth centuries, mobilised local clients in the Bengali countryside for just such activities.

Punjab

The Islamisation of western Punjab between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries shared some similarities with those of eastern Bengal. Both regions were located along the margins of expanding, Delhi-based empires; both had indigenous populations that were not well incorporated into a Hindu socio-religious world at the time of their earliest contact with Muslims; and both societies experienced a transition to settled agriculture at the time that Islam took hold among common folk. That said, the two cases also differed in certain respects. In rural Bengal, the movement was spearheaded and institutionalised primarily by hundreds of humble, thatched mosques established by forest-clearing pioneers. In the Punjab, that role was played by large, state-funded shrine complexes built over the gravesites of prominent Sufi saints. These shrines were often located by or near the great rivers of the Punjab: on the Indus river, Taunsa and Makhad; on the Jhelum river, Shah Jiwana and Sial Sharif; on the Chenab river, Uch, Jalalpur Pirwala, Multan and Chiniot; on the Ravi river, Sharaqpur and Lahore; on the Sutlej river, Chishtian and Pakpattan. A closer look at the last shrine can illustrate how Muslim communities appeared and grew in this part of South Asia.

Pakpattan, a major nexus of east–west trade between the Delhi region and Multan, is the site of the shrine of the Chishti mystic, Shaikh Farid al-Din Ganj-i Shakar, who died in 1265. Popularly known as Baba Farid, the shaikh maintained two traditions of Islamic piety. For an elite group of full-time residents at his convent, the shaikh gave instructions in the

[36] Sultan, *Nabi-Bangsa*, vol. 1: 348, 420–21.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

mystical practices of the Chishti order. For ordinary folk, he handed out amulets (*ta´widh*), seen as a protection against evil, a boon for good fortune or an agent for the cure of an illness. Contemporary observers noted that huge crowds would gather daily to offer gifts in return for the shaikh's blessings. In time, his convent became a nexus for the circulation and redistribution of much material wealth in the region. It seems that the spiritual authority of Baba Farid and other great shaikhs of the Punjab—and later, the authority of their shrines—was displaced onto specific tracts of territory, in the same way that a governor's jurisdiction is limited to certain territory. An early sixteenth century account records that Baba Farid's spiritual power protected one 'Abd Allah Rumi from highway robbers as he travelled from Pakpattan to Multan, for the saint had told the traveller that 'from here [Pakpattan] to such-and-such a village is in my charge, and from such-and-such a reservoir is the frontier of Shaikh Baha' al-Din Zakariya [the great shaikh of Multan], beyond which is in his charge'.[37]

After his death, Baba Farid's spiritual power, or *baraka*, was believed to have adhered to his gravesite, and soon Pakpattan became a major pilgrimage centre, its affairs administered by a succession of the shaikh's descendants called *diwan*s. The *Jawahir-i Faridi*, a biography of Baba Farid's spiritual progeny compiled in 1623, records that all the major rituals of the shrine had become instituted within several decades of the shaikh's death. These included the tying of the turban indicating formal inheritance of the saint's spiritual authority, the regularising of ecstatic singing at the shrine, the establishing of a public kitchen and the tradition of the *diwan* opening the shrine's southern door—the so-called *bihishti darwaza* or 'gate of heaven'—on the occasion of the annual *`urs* or death-date of Baba Farid.[38] The fourteenth century historian and poet, Amir Khusrau, described this celebration in detail. In 1315, he writes, the shaikh's 50th death anniversary was celebrated by the pilgrimage of pious persons to Baba Farid's shrine, the recitation of his wonderful deeds and entertainment provided by an ensemble of devotees.[39]

[37] Dihlawi, *Siyar al-'arifin*: 115.

[38] Chishti, *Jawahir-i Faridi*: 298–300.

[39] Amir Khusrau, *Raha al-muhibbin*, Urdu edition, Lahore, 1957: 63–64. Cited in Chaghatai, 'Pakpattan and Shaikh Farid': 131.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

The shrine soon caught the attention of the court of the Delhi sultanate (1206–1526). The fourteenth century historian, Shams-i Siraj 'Afif, recorded that the future Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Tughluq (r. 1321–25) was told by the shrine's *diwan* that he, his son and his nephew were all destined to rule India. These three men did indeed rule over the Delhi sultanate, comprising the principal sultans of the Tughluq dynasty (1321–98). Ghiyath al-Din's son, Sultan Muhammad bin Tughluq (r. 1325–51) commissioned several engineers to construct the most imposing structure in the shrine complex. From this point on, the shrine's *diwan*s became increasingly pliable to the court's will. Sultan Muhammad managed to enlist one of the shrine's *diwan*s in government service. He also granted endowments to support the shrine's public kitchen. According to historian Zia al-Din Barani, Sultan Firuz Tughluq (r. 1351–88) not only repaired the tomb of Baba Farid but 'granted robes of honour to his descendants and confirmed them in possession of their villages and lands'.[40] Subsequent rulers went out of their way to patronise the shrine. In October 1398, Timur, amidst his infamous raid of north India, took the time to visit the shrine.[41] In 1571, Akbar opened his sixteenth regnal year in Pakpattan, where he implored strength at Baba Farid's shrine.[42] In 1629, Shah Jahan issued a *farman* (order) that confirmed those of earlier rulers guaranteeing that specified land revenues be reserved for the shrine's expenses.[43]

Who were the rural folk who frequented the shrine of Baba Farid? Beyond the urban settlements lying along the Punjab's rivers lay vast tracts of sparsely populated land, the so-called *barr* country, situated between the province's five rivers. Although scanty rainfall hindered agricultural operations in this region, the *barr* country was well suited for pastoral nomadism. As pastoralists brought their goats and camels down to the rivers in the dry season, they came in regular contact with urban peoples, on whom they depended for trade. These pastoralists were composed mainly of Jat groups that had been moving north from Sind into the southern Punjab between the seventh and eleventh centuries. Sources dating to the seventh and eighth centuries describe socially

[40] Barani, *Tarikh-i Firuz Shahi*, Calcutta, 1862: 543, cited in Rose, vol. 1: 495.
[41] Emperor Timur, *Malfuzat-i Timur*, vol. 3: 421.
[42] Abdu'l-fazl, *Akbarnama*, vol. 2: 525–56.
[43] West Pakistan Board of Revenue. n.d. : file 131/6/24/24.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

marginal pastoralists called 'Jatts' who lived in the lower Indus valley and lacked a sense of social hierarchy.[44] From this, it would seem that such peoples had not yet been integrated into Hindu society. By the eleventh century, we hear of Jats fighting Mahmud of Ghazni in the Multan region, though their social standing was still low, as al-Biruni refers to them as 'cattle-owners, low Sudra people'.[45] By the thirteenth century, when Baba Farid was living in Pakpattan, Jat communities had migrated further north and occupied the *barr* country of the western Punjab.[46] In the early sixteenth century, Babur encountered Jat clans in the Punjab's upper Jhelum and Chenab region.[47] By the end of that century, they were reported to be the dominant landholders (*zamindar*) in fully half of the districts of the Punjab.[48] That is, by that time they had become settled cultivators. Over the course of several centuries, then, the Jats had migrated northward into the Punjab, and they had evolved from a pastoral to an agrarian people—a change probably assisted by the recent introduction to the Punjab of a revolutionary irrigation device, the Persian wheel.[49] By the 1650s, the word 'Jat' had become virtually synonymous with peasant agriculturalist.[50]

Significantly, as the Jats of western Punjab adopted field agriculture, they also gradually acquired a Muslim identity, as also happened in eastern Bengal. Although in recent times over a dozen Jat clans have claimed Baba Farid himself as the agent of their conversion,[51] most of these groups were not yet present in the Punjab in the thirteenth century, when Baba Farid was living. Rather, the agent of change seems to have been Baba Farid's shrine, which, ever since 1265, had sustained the *baraka* of the saint through its succession of *diwan*s and its round of

[44] I. Habib, 'Jatts of Punjab and Sind': 94.

[45] Sachau, *Alberuni's India*, vol. 1: 401.

[46] Zia al-Din Barani mentioned that Balban, when governor of Lahore, waged campaigns against the 'Jats, the Khokhars, the Bhattis, the Minas, the Mandahars, and other similar tribes'. Barani, 'Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi', vol. 3: 109.

[47] Thackston, *Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur*: 280, 315.

[48] Abu'l-fazl, *A'in*, vol. 2: 320–25, *passim*.

[49] Habib, 'Jatts': 98.

[50] Ashraf, *Dabistan-i madhahib*: 276. The author of this work wrote that in Punjabi 'Jat' meant 'villager' (*dihistani, rusta'i*).

[51] See Eaton, 'Political and Religious Authority': 346.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

rituals and festivities. As they moved up the Indus valley and settled in the Punjab, Jat clans became integrated into the orbit of the shrine's socio-political influence. For the shrine was very much an intermediate institution, patronising Jat clans while being itself patronised by the court at Delhi. The *Jawahir-i Faridi* states that the service Jat clans rendered to the progeny of Baba Farid also included military obligations.[52]

The ties between Jat clans and the shrine's leaders even extended to marital alliances. Dependent Jat groups gave their daughters to the *diwan*s and their immediate family, whereas daughters of the *diwan*'s family were kept within the family. The *Jawahir-i Faridi* not only lists the clans that, as of its composition in 1623, had entered into a bride-giving relationship with the *diwan* and his family, but even names the groom and the bride's father in such alliances. Thus, of 13 known marriage alliances between the Khokhar Jats and the shrine, seven Khokhar brides were daughters of clan *malik*s or chiefs. And of these same 13 alliances, three brides went to the *diwan*s themselves and six went to sons of various *diwan*s. Such alliances can be dated back to the mid-fifteenth century, and similar marital alliances with the shrine can be traced for other Jat clans, such as the Bhattis, Hans and Dhudhis.[53]

Crucially, as Jat tribes entered into economic, political and marital relations with the shrine of Baba Farid, they also adopted an Islamic identity. This is seen, above all, in the pattern of names they chose for their children. Richard Bulliet has perceptively suggested that when parents select names,

> one overriding motivation in many instances is the specific desire either to display group membership in a name, or to conceal group membership. Unless there is some peculiar reason for doing so, parents are generally loath to burden their children with names that will cause them to be ostracised. In other words, naming for many parents is an act that reflects, usually unconsciously, their view of the society around them at that particular point in time.[54]

[52] 'In these environs the Khokhars, Dhudhis, Jo'iyas, Bhattis, Wattus and other groups who became Muslim from the time of Baba Farid, until now are busy in prayer and fasting. For they are the possessors of dignity in the environs of Pakpattan. They can place ten thousand cavalry and foot soldiers in his [the *diwan*'s] service, and have complete faith in Baba Farid and his descendants, and are their *murid*s [disciples]'. Chishti, *Jawahir-i Faridi*: 397–98.

[53] *Ibid.*: 323–24.

[54] Bulliet, 'Conversion to Islam and the Emergence of Muslim Society in Iran': 43.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

The Siyal clan of Jats of Jhang district, according to both the shrine's hagiographic accounts and the earliest known history of the clan itself, were introduced to Islam by Baba Farid himself, who is said to have converted the clan's founder, Ray Siyal. After this event, according to these accounts, all Siyals were presumably Muslim. But if one applies Bulliet's reasoning to the 14 genealogical charts of prominent Siyal families given in that clan's own chronicle, a different picture emerges. These charts record twenty generations of leading Siyals from Ray Siyal to the time of the book's composition in 1862. Knowing, as we do, the dates of the Siyal chiefs in the ninth and seventeenth generations, we can estimate the approximate date of each generation by using the rule-of-thumb of three generations per century. This would place Ray Siyal's life in the early thirteenth century.

As the accompanying Table 1 of Siyal naming patterns indicates, all masculine given names through the sixth generation remained Punjabi secular names; it was only in the early fifteenth century that specifically Muslim names began appearing at all. Gradually, between then and the early seventeenth century, the incidence of Muslim given names edged up from 10.24 per cent of the total to 39.21 per cent, not achieving parity with Punjabi secular names until about the middle of that century. It was not until the early eighteenth century that Muslim names became clearly dominant (81.81 per cent), and it was not until the nineteenth century that they achieved totality. The whole process of Islamisation, thus, involved a period from the sixth to the nineteenth generation, or from the late fourteenth to the early nineteenth centuries. If these data are at all indicative of the process experienced by other client–tribes of Baba Farid's shrine, then we may conclude that Islamisation among Punjabi clans was indeed a slow process. It was also probably unconscious. Historically, then, the shrine of Baba Farid served to incorporate local systems of culture into larger systems, connecting rustic clans politically with Delhi and religiously with Islam.

Conclusions

The image of a pebble dropped in a pond of water, pushing concentric rings that ripple out towards water's edge, suggests why predominantly Hindu, Muslim—and later, Christian[55]—communities appeared where

[55] See Eaton, 'Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876–1971': 1–44.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

Table 1

Changes in Names of Males of the Siyal Clan, c. 1217–1862

Generation	*Year*	*Total Names Recorded*	*Number of Punjabi Secular Name*	*Number of Muslim Names*	*Percent of Muslim Names to Total*
1	c. 1217	1	1	0	0
2	c. 1250	3	3	0	0
3	c. 1283	13	13	0	0
4	c. 1316	11	11	0	0
5	c. 1349	9	9	0	0
6	c. 1382	15	15	0	0
7	c. 1415	39	35	4	10.25
8	c. 1448	27	20	7	25.19
9	Mal Khan, d. 1481	51	45	6	11.76
10	c. 1514	51	38	13	25.49
11	c. 1547	53	41	13	24.52
12	c. 1580	61	42	18	29.50
13	c. 1613	51	31	20	39.21
14	c. 1646	34	15	19	55.88
15	c. 1679	12	5	7	58.33
16	c. 1712	22	4	18	81.81
17	Walidad Khan, d. 1749–50	12	3	9	75.00
18	c. 1782	8	3	5	62.00
19	c. 1815	10	0	10	100.00
20	1862	8	0	8	100.00

Source: Nur Muhammad, *Tarikh-i Jhang Siyal*: 15–28.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

and when they did in South Asia. By the time Muslims first reached the South Asian interior in the eleventh century, Hindu social and religious institutions had already become deeply entrenched in the heart of upper India. They had also begun to expand outward into the eastern and western extremities of the Indo-Gangetic Plain—in western Punjab and eastern Bengal. But, as of the eleventh century, indigenous peoples of those two provinces had been only lightly influenced by Brahmanical ideology or institutions. Scripturally-based religious institutions had yet to take firm hold; Brahmin settlements were relatively sparse.

The pattern of the diffusion of Hindu institutions within South Asia—recalling the pebble and pond image—can be discerned in early Sanskrit legal texts. The *Baudhayana-Dharmasutra*, a late Vedic text dating to the sixth or the fifth century BC, divided the subcontinent into three concentric circles, each one containing distinct socio-cultural communities. The first of these, Aryavarta or the Indo-Aryan homeland, corresponded to the upper Ganges–Jumna region of north-central India; there lived the 'purest' heirs to Brahmanic tradition, people styling themselves as high-born and ritually clean. The second circle contained an outer belt—Avanti, Anga–Magadha, Saurastra, Daksinapatha, Upavrt and Sindhu–Sauvira—corresponding to Malwa, east and central Bihar, Gujarat, the Deccan and Sind. These regions lay within the pale of Indo-Aryan settlement, but they were inhabited by people 'of mixed origin' who did not enjoy the same degree of ritual purity as those of the first zone. And the third concentric circle contained those outer regions inhabited by 'unclean' tribes considered so far beyond the pale that penances were prescribed for those who visited such places. Peoples living in this third circle included the Arattas of Punjab, the Sauviras of southern Punjab and Sind, the Pundras of northern Bengal and the Vangas of central and eastern Bengal.[56]

It is true that some 1,500 years separated the composition of the *Baudhayana-Dharmasutra* and the arrival of Muslim Turks in the Indo-Gangetic Plain. But throughout this period, the greater degree of Brahmanisation in upper India—Aryavarta—compared to that in western

[56] *Baudhayana-Dharmasutra*, vol. I: 1.9–14, in Georg Buhler (tr.), *Sacred Laws of the Aryas as Taught in the Schools of Apastamba, Gautama, Vasishtha, and Baudhayana*, part 2, *Vasishtha and Baudhayana,* in F. Max Muller (ed.), *Sacred Books of the East*: vol. 14: 147–48.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

Punjab and eastern Bengal had remained relatively constant. In the eleventh century, history's first Indologist, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (d. 1050), described the Jats of the middle Indus Valley—ancestors of future Muslims in the Punjab—as 'cattle-owners, low Sudra people'. That is, they were enlisted at the lowest rung of the *varna* system of social classification. On the other side of the subcontinent, Brahmanical institutions appear to have been progressing still more slowly. As late as the seventh century, the easternmost tracts of Bengal were described as lying 'outside the pale of human habitation, where there is no distinction between natural and artificial; infested by wild animals and poisonous reptiles, and covered with forest out-growths'.[57] The persistently weak status of Brahmanical social institutions in eastern Bengal and western Punjab meant that in both regions, Islam, a scripturally-based tradition, had little competition from another such tradition.

Also favouring the growth of Islam in these regions was its association, and ultimately its identification, with a major socio-economic change, that is, the transition to, or intensification of, settled agriculture: wheat in the Punjab, wet rice in Bengal. Because this transformation was conceptually linked with the pioneers or shrines through whose agency it had occurred, communities undergoing the transition gradually integrated Islamic superhuman agencies into their religious cosmologies. They also began giving their children Arabic or Persian names, reflecting their slowly evolving cultural identity.

This kind of religious change in Bengal and Punjab was not, however, unique to Islam. In 1898, when the colonisation of east Bengal's forests was still within living memory, a native of northern Sylhet recalled that whenever a new village was founded, a temple to the Goddess Kali was built if the founding landlord were a Sakta Hindu, and a temple to Vishnu if he were a Vaishnava. If the majority of the villages were Vaishnava, they would build a shrine to Radha and Krishna. And if the village were founded by Muslims, a shrine to some Muslim *pir* would be established.[58] In other words, grants made out to Hindu colonisers tended to integrate local communities into a Hindu-ordered cultural universe, while grants authorising Muslims to establish mosques or shrines tended to integrate them into an Islamic-ordered cultural universe. Facilitating this was

[57] Niyogi, *Brahmanic Settlements in Different Subdivisions of Ancient Bengal*: 41.

[58] Bhattacharjee, 'Folkcustom and Folklore of the Sylhet District': 133.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

the fluid socio-cultural environment of east Bengal's rice frontier, where even the efforts of Christian pioneers had demographic consequences. In 1713, the French Jesuit Père Barbier journeyed through Chittagong and into the interior of what is now Noakhali district, where he encountered a community of Christian peasants organised around the authority of a local patriarch. Evidently, the man had managed to forge for himself a clientele from amongst the local population, in effect functioning as a petty *zamindar* of a local farming community to which he gave both religious and economic leadership.[59]

Two final points emerge from this discussion. First, rather than use the word 'conversion', which suggests sudden and total change, we might best understand the growth of Islam in Bengal and Punjab as a form of 'creative adaptation', which suggests both the gradual pace and the interactive nature of the process.[60] And second, although scholars are accustomed to seeing the world through the lens of distinct, isolated disciplines, in the real world, religion, geography, economics, technology and politics are all fused together, each interacting with the others. This was certainly the case in early modern Bengal and Punjab, where specifically religious changes—for example, the inclusion of Qur'anic agencies in local cosmologies or the adoption of Arabic or Persian personal names—were embedded in larger socio-economic, indeed environmental, transformations. Changes in the religious domain cannot be analytically separated from the larger, non-religious historical contexts in which they occur.

References

Abu'l-fazl, 'Allami. 1897–21 (repr. 1979). *Akbarnama*. Translated by H. Beveridge, Calcutta and New Delhi.

Abu'l-fazl, 'Allami. 1927 (repr. 1977–78). *A'in-i Akbari*, vol. 2 (2nd edition). Translated by H.S. Jarrett and edited by Jadunath Sarkar, Calcutta and New Delhi.

Ahmad, Aziz. 1965. 'Hind: vi—Islamic Culture', *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (new edition), vol. 3, Leiden.

[59] Hosten, 'Earliest Recorded Episcopal Visitation of Bengal, 1712–1715', *Bengal Past and Present,* 1910: 210. Le Gobien, *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*: 282–83.

[60] I borrow this formulation from one of my esteemed teachers, the late John R.W. Smail. See his, 'On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia': 91.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

Arnold, T.W. 1913. *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith*, New York.
Ashraf, Nazir (ed.). 1809. *Dabistan-i madhahib*, Calcutta.
Askari, S.H. 1960. 'The Mughal-Magh Relations down to the Time of Islam Khan Mashhadi', *Indian History Congress Proceedings*, 22nd session (Gauhati, 1959), Bombay: 201–13.
Bagchi, Kanangopal, 1944. *The Ganges Delta*, Calcutta.
Barani, Ziau-d din. 1964. 'Tarikh-i Firoz Shahi', in H.M. Elliot and John Dowson (tr and eds), *History of India as Told by its Own Historians,* vol. 3, Allahabad: 93–268.
Bhattacharjee, P.N. 1930. 'Folkcustom and Folklore of the Sylhet District of India', *Man in India*, vol. 10(1): 116–49.
Bhattacharya, France. 1981. 'La Déesse et le royaume selon le Kalaketu Upakhyana du *Candi Mangala*', in Madeleine Biardeau (ed.), *Purusartha, Vol. 5: Autour de la déesse hindoue*, Paris: 17–53.
Bhattacharyya, Asutosh. 1947. 'Tiger-cult and its Literature in Lower Bengal', *Man in India*, 49–50.
Buhler, Georg (tr). 1882. 'Sacred Laws of the Aryas as Taught in the Schools of Apastamba, Gautama, Vasishtha, and Baudhayana, Part 2, Vasishtha and Baudhayana', in F. Max Muller (ed.), *Sacred Books of the East*, Oxford: 143–336.
Bulliet, Richard. 1979. 'Conversion to Islam and the Emergence of Muslim Society in Iran', in Nehemia Levtzion (ed.), *Conversion to Islam*, New York: 30–51.
Chaghatai, M. Abdullah. 1968–69. 'Pakpattan and Shaikh Farid', *Iqbal Review*, vol. 9: 116–31.
Chatterji, Joya. 1996. 'The Bengali Muslim: A Contradiction in Terms? An Overview of the Debate on Bengali Muslim Identity', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, vol. 16(2): 16–24.
Chaudhury, Susil, 1975. *Trade and Commercial Organization in Bengal, 1650–1720*, Calcutta.
Chishti, 'Ali Asghar. 1883–84. *Jawahir-i Faridi*, Lahore.
Dihlawi, Shaikh Jamali Kamboh. 1893. *Siyar al-'arifin*, Delhi.
Eaton, Richard M. 1984. 'Conversion to Christianity among the Nagas, 1876–1971', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 21(1): 1–44.
———. 1984. 'The Political and Religious Authority of the Shrine of Baba Farid', in Barbara D. Metcalf (ed.), *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, Berkeley: 333–56.
———. 1993. *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, Berkeley.
——— (ed.). 2003. *India's Islamic Traditions, 711–1750*, New Delhi.
Federici, Cesare. 1625 (repr. 1905). 'Extracts of Master Caesar Frederike his Eighteene Yeeres Indian Observations', in Samuel Purchas, *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes*, *Vol. 10*, Glasgow: 83–143.
Friedmann, Yohanan. 1975. 'Medieval Muslim Views of Indian Religions', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 95(2): 214–21.
———. 1977. 'A Contribution to the Early History of Islam in India', in Myrian Rosen-Ayalon (ed.), *Studies in Memory of Gaston Wiet*, Jerusalem: 309–33.
Habib, Irfan. 1976. 'Jatts of Punjab and Sind', in Harbans Singh and N.G. Barrier (eds.), *Punjab Past and Present: Essays in Honour of Dr. Ganda Singh*, Patiala: 92–103.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

Habib, Mohammad. 1952. 'Introduction to Elliot and Dowson's *History of India*, vol. 2', in Nizami, K.A. (ed.), *Politics and Society during the Early Medieval Period: Collected Works of Professor Mohammad Habib*, New Delhi: 1974: vol. 1: 33–110.

Hardy, Peter. 1979. 'Modern European and Muslim Explanations of Conversion to Islam in South Asia: A Preliminary Survey of the Literature', in Nehemia Levtzion (ed.), *Conversion to Islam*, New York: 68–99.

Hosten, H. 1910. 'The Earliest Recorded Episcopal Visitation of Bengal, 1712–1715', *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 6(2): 200–27.

———. 1925. 'Jesuit Letters from Bengal, Arakan and Burma (1599-1600)', *Bengal Past and Present*, vol. 30(1): 52–78.

Hourani, Albert. 1962. *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939*, London.

Ibn Battuta, 1953. *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta*. Translated by Mahdi Hussain, Baroda.

Ikram, S.M. 1957. 'An Unnoticed Account of Shaikh Jalal of Sylhet', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan*, vol. 2: 63–68.

Le Gobien, Charles (ed.). 1781. *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses écrites des missions étrangères*, Paris.

Lewis, Bernard. 1953. 'The Impact of the French Revolution on Turkey: Some Notes on the Transmission of Ideas', *Journal of World History*, vol. 1(1): 105–25.

Majumdar, S.C. 1942. *Rivers of the Bengal Delta*, Calcutta.

Mukerjee, R.K. 1938. *The Changing Face of Bengal: A Study of Riverine Economy*, Calcutta.

Mukundaram. 1974. *Kabikankan-Candi*. Edited by Kumar Bandyopadhyay and Bisvapati Caudhuri, Calcutta.

Niyogi, Puspa. 1967. *Brahmanic Settlements in Different Subdivisions of Ancient Bengal*, Calcutta.

Nizami, K.A. 1965. 'al-Hind: v.—Islam', *Enclyclopaedia of Islam* (new edition), vol. 3: 428–38.

Nur Muhammad, Maulawi. 1863. *Tarikh-i Jhang Siyal,* Meerut.

Pires, Tome. 1944. *Suma Oriental of Tome Pires*. Translated by A. Cortesao, London.

Prakash, Om. 1985. *The Dutch East India Company and the Economy of Bengal, 1630–1720*, Princeton.

Purchas, Samuel. 1625 (repr. 1905). *Hakluytus Posthumus or Purchas His Pilgrimes*, Glasgow.

Pyrard, François. 1964 (repr. n.d.). *The Voyage of Francois Pyrard of Laval to the East Indies, the Maldives, the Moluccas and Brazil*. Translated and edited by Albert Gray, London and New York.

Qureshi, Ishtiaq Husain. 1962. *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent (610–1947)*, Hague.

Rose, H.A. (ed.). 1970. *Glossary of the Tribes and Castes of the Punjab*, Patiala.

Sachau, Edward (tr.). 1964. *Alberuni's India*, New Delhi.

Smail, John R.W. 1961. 'On the Possibility of an Autonomous History of Modern Southeast Asia', *Journal of Southeast Asian History*, vol. 2(2): 72–102.

Subrahmanyam, Sanjay. 1987. 'Notes on the Sixteenth-Century Bengal Trade', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 24(3): 265–89.

Sultan, Saiyid. 1978. *Nabi-Bangsa*. Edited by Ahmed Sharif, Dhaka.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014

Tavernier, Jean Baptiste. 1889 (repr. 1976). *Travels in India*. Translated by V. Ball, London and Lahore.
Thackston, Wheeler M. (tr). 1996. *The Baburnama: Memoirs of Babur, Prince and Emperor*, Washington DC.
Thorp, John P. 1978. 'Masters of Earth: Conceptions of "Power" among Muslims of Rural Bangladesh', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago.
Timur, Emperor, 1964. 'Malfuzat-i Timur', in H.M. Elliot and John Dowson (tr and eds), *History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, vol. 3, Allahabad: 389–477.
Varthema, Ludovico di. 1863 (repr. n.d.). *The Travels of Ludovico di Varthema in Egypt, Syria, Arabia Deserta and Arabia Felix, in Persia, India, and Ethiopia, A.D. 1503–1508*. Translated by John W. Jones and edited by George P. Badger, London and New York.
West Pakistan Board of Revenue, Lahore.
Wise, James. 1873. 'Note on Shah Jalal, the Patron Saint of Silhat', *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, vol. 42(3): 278–80.

Downloaded from mhj.sagepub.com at UNIV CALIFORNIA DAVIS on December 26, 2014