

Politics and Literary Activities in the Bengali Language during the Independent Sultanate of Bengal

Dr. A K M Golam Rabbani*

The development and decline of a language must ultimately have political, cultural, social and economic causes. The political establishment of the Muslim rule in Bengal in the early 13th century is one of the most crucial events for the development of vernacular languages in Bengal. The Bengali language passed its developing stage during the period of the independent sultanate of Bengal. This article evaluates the activities of Muslim rulers of the independent sultanate of Bengal to the development of Bengali language. It concludes that the Muslim rulers of Bengal purposefully patronized and cultivated the development of the Bengali language through the literary activities to establish their political dominance and to check the supremacy of the Sanskrit language. In this regard, they were partially successful.

1.0 Introduction

The physical features and linguistic characteristics of the Bengali people indicate that they have been formed with a mixture of the four races known to ethnologists as Kol, Dravidian, Mongolian, and Aryan. The Kols are the Neolithic people, who used to live over the whole of central Indian and the Gangetic plains as far as the base of the Himalayas. They have been the same as, or closely similar to the Mons and Khmers of Burma and Indo-China. As a member of the Austro-Asiatic family, their language has been almost totally absorbed by the Dravidian language and the later races who have conquered and superseded them. Similarly, in course of the time, the Dravidian and the Mongolian (or Tibeto-Chinese) languages have been absorbed in Bengali, the Aryan language (Ghosh, 1948, p.1).

2.0 Background

The Bengali language earned the status of a written language by the effort of Buddhists. With the march of the time, many more changes occurred in language. At the time of writing books the writers arranged and refined the language still further. Now the language was given two names-one was *Pali* and the other was *Apabhrangsha*. However, it experienced a sudden decline due to the revival of Hinduism in Bengal. During the period of the Pala and the Sena rules the Sanskrit

* Associate Professor, Dept. of Islamic History and Culture, University of Dhaka

language was profusely and extremely used. Therefore, the Bengali language did not flourish during this time. However, there are some exceptions that the ancient Bengali literature developed along with the rise and evolution of the language. For instance, in the ancient time, to some extent, Bengali literature was also cultivated and a kind of song named *Charjapada* was considered to be the earliest example of the Bengali literature. The Buddhist Saints composed these songs during the reign of the Pala and the Sena Kings. (Hossain and Begum, 1997, pp.105-106).

During the rule of Pala and Sena dynasties, the changes in political power in Bengal resulted the shifting of the political power of the Buddhist priests to the hands of Hindu clerics and scholars. These clerics and scholars were enthusiastic to popularize their creed and had not considered Bengali as an instrument of propagation of their religious views. Therefore, the Bengali language lost the patronage which it had secured of the lettered men of the country and its future seemed dark and uncertain. After these dramatic changes, the Sanskrit scholars, who brought about a revival of Hinduism in Bengal and obstructed the development of the Bengali Language. Consequently, this change adversely affected the progress of the Bengali language and literature and made it retarded. However, the first phase of Bengali culture appropriately takes its name from Gaur, the paramount political state in Bengal. The Muslim conquest made no difference to the political status which Gaur had achieved during the time of Pala and Sena dynasties. But there was a great difference in the cultural sphere (Ghosh, 1948, p. 9).

3.0 An Overview of the Bengali Language

Bengali is a member of the world's largest family of languages, called the Indo-European. The languages of this family are widely spoken throughout Europe, America and Asia. There are several major branches of Indo-European languages and According to Chatterji (1926, p.1) Bengali is a member of the Indic group of the Indo-Iranian or Aryan branch of the Indo-European family of languages. Bengali belongs to the eastern group of the modern Indo-Aryan branch, which is spoken all over northern and central parts of the Indian subcontinent. In India, the ancient Aryan language caused the birth of several Prakrits or spoken dialects and the literary language Sanskrit. Bengali is one of the modern Aryan languages which originated from the Prakrits, and it had always been influenced by the Sanskrit (Ghosh, 1948, p. 1-2).

The official language of the newly born Bangladesh is Bengali, spoken by over 98% of the population (Crystal, 1992, p. 39). In addition, a majority of the people

in the State of Tripura as well as almost entire population in the adjoining Indian State of West Bengal speak Bengali. At present, Bengali language is spoken by around 160 million people. Ratzner (1986, p. 191) points out that there are only five languages in the world which could claim as many speakers as Bengali.

Bengali has a rich cultural heritage in literature. The literary tradition of Bengali goes back to the remote past and during the greater part of this time it was dominated by Sanskrit (Basham, 1975, p. 164). Crystal (1992, p. 41) noted that the literary development of the Bengali language started from the 12th century. In the first half of the 13th century the accession of the Muslims to the throne of Bengal added a new momentum to the progression and development of Bengali language and literature. As patrons of art and culture, the Muslim rulers of the independent Sultanate of Bengal made efforts to develop the literary activities in the Bengali language for two hundred years (1338-1538). Shahidullah (1963, p.5), however, observed that during this period the people of Bengal were influenced by a new foreign culture and the Persian language was the medium of this new cultur. Consequently, the cultural interaction of foreign people compelled Bengali language to absorb many words principally from Persian as well as Arabic and Turkish Languages. So researchers can not deny the influence of the Persian language on the Bengali literature during the Muslim period. As a result, the Bengali literature became bright by coming into contact with the subject-matters, ideas and thoughts of the Persian literature in their writings and poems (Hossain and Begum, 1997, p.114).

4.0 Objectives

The main objective of this article is to evaluate the contribution of the independent Sultanate of Bengal in the development of Bengali language in the Medieval Period. For this purpose, the literary activities during the Muslim period will be discussed. Finally, a critical evaluation of literature will be included in the last part of the article.

5.0 Language and Literary Development in Bengali before the Independent Sultanate

5.1 Rationale for the development of Bengali language

The political, cultural, social and economic conditions of Bengal caused the systematic starting and progression of Bengali literary activities during the Muslim period. As an indigenous language, Bengali has earned more attention from the Muslim rulers of the Independent Sultanate of Bengal than other

vernacular languages like Bihari, Assamese, Oriya. In fact, not only as lovers of knowledge and education, but also for political gain, the Muslim rulers extended their patronage to the development of Bengali language. In addition, the Muslim rulers paid attention to promoting the language of a large number of converted and immigrant Muslims of Bengal during their time. Moreover, to counter the influence of Hindu literature and ideas, the Muslim rulers considered Bengali to be their vehicle for the dissemination of their thoughts, traditions, history and heritage among the indigenous people of Bengal (Ali, 1985, p. 854)

5.2 Historical development of Bengali language

Bengali, Assamese and Oriya are members of the eastern group of languages within the Magadhan subfamily of Middle Indo-Aryan, which developed roughly between 1000 and 1200 AD. Texts dating from the above mentioned period show general Magadhan features, but are usually described as being in 'Old Bengali' (Campbell, 1998: 69). There are some evidences found in eastern India approximately between 1000 and 1200 AD (Opinions vary, the period between 11th and 13th centuries) that a collection of 47 Buddhist mystical and didactic poems (the celebrated Buddhist hymns) was composed by 24 persons called Charjapada (Comrie, 1987, pp. 490-1). The language of these poems is Old Bengali (650-1150) and the Charjapada are the earliest known texts in Bengali. In 1907, Haraprasad Sastri discovered the manuscript of the Charjapada (Zbavitel, 1974, pp. 34-35). The Charya poems are the first literary example of the vernacular language which had already gone through a long process of evolution (Tarafdar, 1965, p.11). These poems were published in 1916 under the title 'Hajar Bachharer Purana Bangla Bhasar Gan O Doha'-Buddhist songs in a thousand years' old Bengali (Ali, 1985, p. 855).

5.3 The literary tradition of Bengali language

According to Burrow (1925, p. 164), the literary tradition of Bengal goes back to more than 3000 years. Bengali, like Hindi, is descended from Sanskrit, which was written in a variety of the Sanskrit Devanagari alphabet (Katzner, 1986: 191). There is literary evidence that Sanskrit enjoyed its maximum use during the period 500-1200 AD. According to Ghosh (1948, p. 12) Bengali was both fortunate and unfortunate in having such a great language and literature as Sanskrit for its father. The influence of Sanskrit on it was similar to the influence of Latin on English, but much greater, because Sanskrit was not a foreign tongue and was living at the time when Bengali was born. Sanskrit ceased to be a living language after the conquest of Bengal by Muslim. Burrow (1925, p.164) states

that for the first time, the supremacy of Sanskrit was seriously threatened by the Muslim invasions. In addition to that, Middle Bengali (1350-1800) became the means for a very rich literature on traditional Indian themes during the Muslim period (Campbell, 1998, p. 69).

5.4 The brief historical background of the Independent Sultanate of Bengal

At the beginning of the thirteenth century, Muslims proceeded from North India towards Bengal and a Turk, Ikhtiaruddin Mohammed Bakhtiar Khalji conquered Bihar and Bengal in 1203 AD. Following this invasion, the first phase of Muslim rule in Bengal was from 1204 AD to 1338 AD, whereas, the next two hundred years (1338 - 1538 AD), the Sultans of Delhi (the central authority of Indian Subcontinent including Bengal) could no longer keep Bengal under their control. As a result, during that period (1338-1538) Bengal enjoyed complete independence under the rulers of the Sultanate of Bengal (Hossain and Begum, 1997, pp. 72-78). The Muslim rulers brought Arabic and Persian languages along with their ideas and notions. From the very beginning, they have adopted Persian language as their official language. It was their strategy to dismantle social and political settings to establish their own political supremacy among indigenous people of Bengal. Eaton (1993, p. 47) notices that to achieve their goals and break the cultural hegemony from the mid fourteenth century on, they began to articulate their political authority in Bengal. For this reason, they employed the Persianized royal stuff in the courtyard. Besides, Muslim rulers adopted an elaborate court ceremony modelled on the Sasanian imperial tradition. Moreover, a hierarchical bureaucracy was established in Bengal for their own benefits. Publicly, the later Sultans placed a much greater emphasis on merging their interests with local society and culture of Bengal. It would be not unjustified to say that all these above mentioned approaches were politically and culturally motivated and aimed at establishing a self-consciously Persian model of political authority that would maintain their own political fabric and inheritance and traditions in Bengal. But this political and traditional symbolism seems to have been mostly confined within the royal court of Muslim Sultans in Bengal.

It is the fact that during their rule, there was no rich vernacular literature except that which was written in Sanskrit, but the use and study of this language were confined to the priestly Brahman class (Ali, 1985: 843). After considering social, religious and political factors, Muslim rulers wanted to counter the monopoly of Sanskrit. In order to do that they purposefully gave their royal supports in the development of Bengali language for two hundred years (1338-1538 AD). Sen

(1954, p. 10) observes that the Muslim conquest of Bengal was indisputably one of the major events which functioned as driving force in the elevation of Bengali to a literary status which would be discussed in the later part of this article.

6.0 The Development of Literary Activities during Independent Sultanate of Bengal

When Muslims came to Bengal there were no significant vernacular literatures, except Sanskrit. In fact, the patronage of the sultans and their nobles created an impetus for the scholarly activities in Bengal. These activities may be classified into four categories:

- a) works in Arabic and Persian languages
- b) patronization of the Hindus and Muslims scholars for the development of Bengali language and literature
- c) translation of Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian literary works into Bengali and
- d) documentation and preservation and publication of translated works

For better understanding of the content, however, this discussion will be confined within the development of the Bengali language and literature. Moreover, the main focus of this discussion would be on literary activities of the two ruling families namely Ilias Shahi (1338-1493) and Husain Shahi (1493-1538) dynasties of Bengal. Furthermore, the nature of the Vaishnava Movement will be discussed.

6.1 Ilias Shahi dynasty and the nursing of literary activities in the Bengali language

Bengal experienced an opening of a new chapter in the history with the accession of Ilias Shah (1342-1357 A.D) to the throne of Lakhnawati and the gateway of this kingdom of fabled prosperity which had not been previously seen was burst open by Ilias Shah (Sarkar, 1972. pp. 103-104). According to the Tarafdar the account of Bengali literary activities in Bengal begins with the establishment of the political independence of this region under the Ilias Shahi rulers (Tarafdar, 1965, p. 239). The first phase of the cultivation of literary activities started with this political event. In this respect, the first name that appeared in history was Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah (1393-1411 A.D). During his reign, Shah Muhammad Sagir composed his monumental lyrical work entitled 'Yusuf Zolekha'. Moreover, one of the most remarkable events in Bengali literature was the translation of the Sanskrit Ramayana by poet Krittivas, the wise poet, who

was of acquit nature, and peace, loving disposition and very popular, during the first quarter of the 15th century, most probably in the era of Sultan Jalaluddin Muhammad Shah (1415-1431 AD). It is the view of Smith (1961: 272) that the Ramayana, which is called the Bible of Bengal, was the most popular book in Bengal. Since the date of its composition, nearly six hundred years have gone, and still nearly more than a hundred thousand of copies are annually sold in Bengal in different segments of the society. This translated version of Ramayana at the present day is a curious medley in which the different elements of Pauranic religion have found a place, and it does not follow Valmiki's original poem very closely (Sen, 1954, pp.164 and 170). Tarafdar is in opinion that the translation of Sanskrit epics and pauranic stories into the Bengali exemplified by the Ramayana and the Shrikrnsna-vijaya was a prominent feature of the cultural life of Bengal (Taraftdar, 1965, p.12). The next notable work was presented by poet Maladhar Vasu, who lived during the time of Sultan Barbak Shah (1459-1474 AD) and his successor Sultan Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah (1474-1482 AD). Tarafdar notices that during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Krttivasa and Maladhar Basu paved the way for further development in the field of literature by composing poems in Bengali and translating Sanskrit works in Bengal. The legacy of this literary activity continued uninterrupted in the following Husain Shahi period when the vernacular literature witnessed a new movement of development in the Bengali language (Taraftdar, 1965, p. 239).

Not only that, under the latter's patronage the poet produced the Srikrishna-Vijaya in 1473 on the basis of the 10th and 11th chapters of the Bhagavatgita. Moreover, Maladarvasu, a native of Kulingram, was assigned to translate the Bhagavata into Bengali, and after two chapters of this works had been translated by him, in 1480. The work of Ali and sen (1985: 857) indicate that the poet Maladhar Basu was awarded with the title of 'Gunaraj Khan' (a man of quality) either by Sultan Barbak Shah or from Sultan Shamsuddin Yusuf Shah of Bengal (Ali, 1985, p. 857 and Sen, 1954, p. 11).

The son of Maladhar Basu was also honoured with the title of 'Satyaraj Khan' by the same rule for his literary contribution in Bengali language (Habib, and Nizami, 1982, p.1154). Himself a learned man, Sultan Barbak Shah also patronised scholars like Raimukut Misra, a highly accomplished and famous writer of several works in Bengali (Majumdar and others, 1949, pp.400-1). By the second half of the fifteenth century, the court was further patronizing Bengali literary works as well as Persian romance literature. Sultan Barbak Shah patronized the writing of the 'Sri Krsna-Vijaya' by Maladhar Basu (Eaton, 1993,

p.66). However, there are some other poets who also enjoyed the favour during the period of Ilias Shahi dynasty. Habib and Nizami (1982, p.1154) observe that during the time of Ilias Shai dynasty, several talented and liberal Sultans were produced who were great builders and were very popular in Bengal for their patronization of the development of Bengali language and literature.

6.2 Husain Shahi dynasty and the intellectual activities in the Bengali language

It is the view of Tarafdar that the Husain Shahi period (1394-1538 A.D.) in Bengal experienced the creation of vast literary activities which were unprecedented in those days (Tarafdar, 1965, p. 238). The Sultans of the Husain Shahi dynasty were the great patrons of Bengali language and literature. Sultan Alauddin Hussain Shah (1493-1519 AD) and Sultan Nasiruddin Nusrat Shah (1519 -1532 AD), the most remarkable kings of the Husain Shahi dynasty of Bengal, were exponents alike of Hindu and the Asvamedha Parva' was also completed. Sultan Nusrat Shah, the second great king of that dynasty, contributed for another Bengali version of the 'Mahabharata' which would be discussed in succeeding section of this article. Under their edifying influence, a fairly wide and varied literature was produced (Jaffar, 1972, pp.69-70).

Sultan Hussain Shah, who assumed the throne in 1493, launched a brilliant epoch in the history of Bengal. Sen (1954, p.11) is in the opinion that Hussain Shah was a great patron of Bengali language and literature. It is the view of Sarkar (1972, pp.143-4) that under the peaceful and enlightened rule of the Hussain shahi dynasty, the creative genius of the people of medieval Bengal reached its zenith. During this period the vernacular found its due recognition as the literary medium through which the repressed intellect of Bengal was to find its release. It was a period, in which the Bengali mind burst its bonds and found its voice in the sweet lyricism of the cult of *Radha* and *Krishna*. Moreover, in the emotional intensity of a resurgent Vaishnavism, and in poetry and song, social tolerance and religious fervour, the excitement of life continued uninterruptedly for the next four hundred years. With this renaissance and reappearance, the contributions of the Hussain Shahi rulers are inseparably linked. It would be wrong to think that the rise and progress of Vaishnavism or the development of Bengali literature and language at this period was possible without recalling to mind the tolerant and enlightened rule of the Muslim rulers of Bengal. Habib and Nizami (1982, pp.1155-56) observe that the vernacular language and literature witnessed a tremendous progress. This period allowed fairly liberal share of the Hindus in administration and other creative faculties of human being. According to the Sarkar (1972, p.151), with the true insights of a statement, Hussain Shah realised that the Ilias Shahi dynasty that he replaced represented Bengal's hopes and aspirations and had almost become a national institute. This national institution

created dynamism which inspired both Hindus and Muslims writers to produce legendary works in Bengali.

This Sultan Hussain Shah, the founder of the dynasty earned a reputation for his scholastic enthusiasm in inspiring the cultivation of Bengali language and literature. The literary appreciation of Hussain Shah was not confined to Arabic and Persian only, but was extended in an increasing degree to the development of vernacular literature and language (Sarkar, 1972, p.152). Therefore, Hossain and Begum (1997: 110) has drawn attention to the fact that a number of prominent poets like Maladhar Basu, Vijayagupta (Chhota Vidyapati), Vipradas Piplai, Yasoraj Khan, Kavindra Prameswara and Srikara Nandi were favoured by Sultan Hussain Shah and presented their creative works for the people of the society. Most of them have mentioned his name with gratitude. There is no doubt that his enthusiasm for Bengali literature was infectious and his governor of Chittagong, Paragal, had been immortalised by his patronage of Parameswar, the earliest translator of the 'Mahabharat' (Sarkar, 1972, p.152). At the beginning of Husain Shah's rule, between 1494 and 1495, poet Vijayagupta produced his renowned book 'Padma Purana'. Similarly, Vipradas Piplai wrote the 'Manasamangala' - an epic on the snake cult, about the same time. Moreover, poet Yasoraj Khan composed his 'Srikishna Vijaya' during the time of same ruler. Furthermore, Hussain Shah's general and the governor of Chittagong, (presently the port city of Bangladesh) Paragal Khan gave patronage to Kavindra Prameswara. As a result, Paragal Khan translated a part of the 'Mahabharata'- an epic in the Sanskrits language, the holy book of the Hinduism - into Bengali. The story of Mahabharata is not so compact as that of the Ramayana. The Mahabharata is an encyclopaedic collection-an essence of Indian thought and civilization, the successive stages of which are, as it were, mirrored in it. The translation of Mahabharata offered an opportunity for the general people. It was like an ocean of impenetrable darkness, is now removed the barrier and allowed an access of masses. Paragal Khan used to call his ministers, attendants and courtiers every evening to his palace and before this illustrious audience, the translation of the Mahabharata had to recite portions from his poems- the Governor himself giving cheers in appreciation of beautiful and interesting passages. The poet flattered his noble patron by calling him an incarnation of 'Hari in Kaaliyuga'. It is interesting to note that the Pathan chief, who was a devout Muslim, enjoyed this compliment of the Hindu poet and did not take it as an offence (Sen, 1954, pp.13 & 186). Besides, Bipradas, Bijay Gupta and Jasoraj Khan, the renowned Bengali writers, also contributed during his enlightened rule. It was also reported that Husain

Shah has shown great respect to famous Sri Chaitanya of Navadip, who was the leader of the Vaishnava Movement in Bengal (Habib, and Nizami, 1982, p.1158). Frequent references are found in old Bengali literature indicating the esteem and trust in which the Husain Shah was held by the Hisdus (Sen, 1954, 12). Moreover, the Husain Sultans also patronized Persian miniature painting traditions. Twenty-six miniature paintings illustrating a copy of Jami's 'Yusuf and Zulaykha' were apparently produced under the patronage of Sultan Husain Shah in 1507-1508. There is also an illustrated copy of part of Nizami's 'Sikandar-nama', dated 1531-1532 and dedicated to Sultan Nusrat Shah (Norah, 1983, pp.179 and 182-83).

Sultan Nasiruddin Nusrat Shah of Gaur was an equally enthusiastic Patron of learning and literature like his father Sultan Husain Shah. Nusrat Shah's Chittagong governor Chhuti Khan extended his co-operation to the poet Srikara Nandi. Consequently, a Bengali version of the 'Asvamedha Parva' of the 'Mahabharata' came into being (Smith, 1961: 272), which would perhaps be the earliest of its kind. It was to the active interest of one of his officers, Chuti Khan of Chittagong, that we owe Srikara Nandi's translations of this epic. Srikara Nandi's translation has lately published by the Sahitya Parishad of Calcutta (Sen, 1954, p.12). As well as Nusrat Shah himself initiated another translation of the 'Mahabharata', but that piece of work has not come to light. Another of his officers, named Kaviranjana, was himself a poet of repute and had made affectionate mention of his sovereign (Sarkar, 1972, p.159). Vidyapati says much in praise of this Sultan and also of Sultan Ghiyas-uddin. (Majumdar and others, 1949, p. 401). Another poet, Dvija Sridhara, composed an epic in the nature of a religious composition than a human love-story called 'Vidyasundra' under the favour of prince Firuz Shah, son of Nusrat Shah. Indeed, Bengali literature, however, had reason to remember him with gratitude, for he demonstrated, at an early age, a keen interest in letters. Unfortunately, his untimely death made an end to what gave promise of an enlightened reign (Sarkar, 1972, p. 159). In addition, Sultan Mahmud Shah (1532-1538) even dedicated a bridge using a Sanskrit inscription written in Bengali characters, and dated according to the Hindu calendar (Eaton, 1993, p. 66). In short, the poetry was produced and contributed to the development of the Bengali literature and language in this period had at least five verities in so far as its themes were concerned. These were (a) the poems dealing with the snake cult, (b) the versified translation of the Mahabharata, (c) the Vaisnava Padavali, (d) a poem on yoga philosophy and (e) romantic poems represented by the Vidya-Sundara of Shridhara (Tarafdar, 1965, p.240).

6.3 The Vaishnava movement and the cultivation of Bengali language and literature

Besides producing far-reaching social and religious impacts, the reform movements also created a great momentum for the progression and development of Indian literature in different parts of India including Bengal (Majumdar and others, 1949, p. 400). The reign of Husain Shah witnessed the Vaishnava movement in Bengal under the leadership of Sri Chaitanya of Navadip. One of the main issues of the campaign was to control the progress of Islamic values among the Hindus. For this reason, a number of Chaitanya's disciples wrote about his life and teachings in the middle and the following part of the 16th century. There are three kinds of Vaishnava poetry were produced during this period from 1500 A.D- 1800 A.D. These are (a) exposition of Vaishnava doctrine and practice, (b) biographies of Chaitanya and other Vaishnava leaders, and (c) the Pads (short songs). According to the critic, out of these three, the last two works have any literary value ((Ghosh, 1948, p.49). Vaishnavism and the medieval cults welcomed Hindus and Muslim alike. Nadiya became the leading centre of Vaishnavism in Bengal and the key scene of Chaitanya's life and works. It became a renowned place in India for its Navya Nyaya or new logic and scholastic mannerism and developed a great school, the greatest in Bengal of classical learning, philosophy, metaphysics and vernacular poetry. In this regard, Ali (1985: 858) observes that the most memorable of these literary creations were the 'Chaitanya Bhagavat', which was written about Nadiya of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century by Vipradasa, the 'Chaitanya Charitamrita', which was produced between 1527 and 1537 by 'Krishnadas Kaviraj' and the 'Chaitanyamangala' by Jayananda. Though the main aim of their works was to check the progress of Islam among the Hindu population, in fact the literary environment of the royal court of the Sultanate inspired Hindu writers. Apart from the above mentioned works, a considerable number of literary works on the snake cult also appeared during the century and this blow was continued in the subsequent period and around the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries with vigour and inspiration. Consequently, the great Vaishnava movement in Bengal made an enormous contribution to a rapid development of Bengali language and literature due to the patronage and favour of the Muslim Sultans of Bengal (Sen, 1954, p.14). In one hand, the Bengali literature is owes a heavy debt to the Vaishnava scholars for their scholastic contributions. On the other hand, the scholars were also in debt to the Muslim rulers for the patronage of the princely courts that considerably inspired the growth of Bengali literature and language (Majumdar, R. C. and others, 1949, p.400).

7.0 Evaluation

7.1 Evaluation of the Literature

Bengali is now one of the major languages in Asia. Hudson (1965, p.v) is of the opinion that Bengali is the richest and most developed language along with its literary tradition going back to many centuries. Around 1000 AD the Bengali language had begun to emerge and the growing period of the vernacular languages and literatures including Bengali was between the 12th and 15th centuries (Garratt, 1937, p.375). At the beginning of the 13th century the foundation of the Muslim rule in Bengal resulted in the disruption of the dominance of Sanskrit language and literature. As a result, the vernacular languages were benefited from and found room to grow in the gap left by Sanskrit. However, the Muslim rulers took initiatives to establish Persian in Bengal as the new classical language, but it remained confined within the royal courts and the upper class Muslims and Hindus. Consequently, a large number of Muslims and Hindus could not accept the Persian language as the medium as their writings, which ultimately became dead language like Sanskrit. So the vernaculars were the only living language for the indigenous people and many writers from both communities (Muslim and Hindu) have involved themselves in the cultivation of Bengali language and literature. On the other hand, when the Muslim rulers failed to establish the Persian language, they wanted to explore a local substitute for Persian as the language of administration. Moreover, it is Ali (1985, p.844) who observes that there was a well-recognised conventional practice with the Muslim rulers that wherever they have established their rule they made efforts to understand the scholarly tradition of the indigenous people and that was also followed in Bengal. With regards to the literary activities of the Muslim rulers, it would be more relevant to discuss some positive and negative features of their activities.

7.1.1 Positive features of activities of Muslim rulers

In the medieval era, there is no satisfactory evidence that the Muslims were involved in writing Bengal literature except two poets, namely Shah Muhammad Saghir and Amir Zain al-Din. However, a good number of Hindu poets produced a considerable number of literary works in Bengal. In fact, the impact of patronisation of the Muslim rulers inspired the muslim poets in literary activities, which ultimately created a new literary age in Bengal. Sen (1954, p.11) notices that Muslim rulers appointed such Hindu and Muslims scholars to translate the monumental literary works into Bengali who were capable and enthusiastic as well as they know how to speak and understood them. On the other hand, the historical record reflects the fact that general

attitudes of the Muslim rulers to their Hindu writers were fairly acceptable. The evidence seems to indicate that the lower caste Hindus welcomed the Muslim rulers as their saviours from the priestly yoke (from the hands of Hindu Brahmins class) and mentioned the name of rulers in their popular poetry as their Gods.

According to Haig (1928, p.276) it may be mentioned that as enlightened patrons, the Muslim rulers encouraged vernacular's language and literature other than the previous Hindu Raja's (rulers) of Bengal. Moreover, documented evidence of Bengal indicates that the writers of Bengal have mentioned the names of some Muslim Sultans in Bengali literature with affection and respect. All these historical facts indicate that the support of the royal court for literary activities added new course and inspiration in the creative faculty of the poets and writers of Bengal. It is Wolpert (1977: 118) who says that Bengali translations of the epic literature were highly encouraged by court patronage during the era of independent Sultanate of Bengal. Furthermore, the accession of the independent dynasties in Bengal, not only weakened the grip of Brahman but also provided the national mortar of a literary vernacular language to this culturally productive domain. It is said that the Brahmins were jealous of the gradual development of Bengali language and literature and its recognition as a written language. They desired that all principals and thoughts of their religion would be written as Sanskrit texts. They had propagated that any attempt to publicize them through the medium of a popular dialect, meant a loss of the great power which they had to enrich the Bengali language, with jealousy and mistrust. Tarafdar observes that there was a popular reaction against the Brahminical culture in Bengal that had dominated the life of Bengal for centuries (Tarafdar, 1965, p.11). These orthodox Brahmins bitterly opposed the movement to translate the scriptures of holy works. But Muslim Sultans did not listen to them and encouraged translations of Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian works into Bengali (Sen, 1954: 8 & 15). Despite the jealousy and opposition of the Brahmins and Hindu clerics, the Vernacular language and literature of Bengal found recognition in the courts of the Muslim Sultans of the independent Sultanate as well as during the succeeding rulers of Bengal. Historical documents that have been discussed above are likely to help us to have a conclusion that the patronization of the Muslim Sultans of the imperial courtyard to literary activities made it possible by dint of the virtues of creative faculty of the poets and writers of Bengal. It was in the late fifteen and early sixteenth centuries, too, that the state sponsored were extended towards the local scholars and the court also lent vigorous support to Bengali language and literature. For instance, already in the early fifteenth century, the Chinese traveller Ma Huan observed that Bengali was "the language in universal use".

7.1.2 Negative features of literary activities of Muslim rulers

The Muslim rulers were foreign in origin (mostly Turks and Persians). They came to Bengal as warriors and conquerors but not as pioneers of art and culture. In one hand, they were familiar with different traditions and sentimentally attached to Arabic and Persian languages and literature. On the other hand, they nurtured the development of the Bengali language, not only as the worshippers of knowledge and education, but also for their own benefits. Eaton notices that the royal patronage of Bengali culture was selective in nature (Eaton, 1993, p. 67). Because, they purposefully dismantled the supremacy of one of the widely used languages like Sanskrit to establish their influences in the all walks of society. So, it became a dead language and it never recovered from this blow during the period of the independent Sultanate of Bengal (Garratt, 1937, p.375). As Comrie (1987: 492) states, most of the popular literature in Bengal had a sacred basis and the Muslim rulers did not welcome the motifs and themes of other religions as they were the followers of a particular religion called Islam. This political proposition created tension among the learned society and it discouraged both Muslim and Hindu writers from using such popular themes in their writings.

7.2 Historical value of the literary activities of Muslim rulers

The literary activities in Muslim Bengal followed the same traditions. First of all, the Muslim rulers extended their liberal patronisation to men of letters in Bengal. Secondly, they appreciated the translation works of the popular vernacular literatures in the Bengali language. All above activities not only strengthened the Bengali language but also opened a new window for Bengali literatures and its readers. As a result, in the latter period Bengali become the means for a very rich literature on traditional themes. On the other hand, the Muslim rulers had a very far-reaching effect on the Bengali language in that the most important non-Indian elements in the vocabulary of Bengali are Persian. This is because a linguistic repercussion took place during the two hundred years of the Muslim regime. At the very beginning of the 13th century, the Muslim conquest of Bengal introduced many Persian, Arabic and Turkish words mainly relating to administration. The Arabic and Turkish words were mostly introduced through Persian. In addition, there was a further entry of Persian words after 1576, when Bengal became a part of Mughal Empire after the conquest of Emperor Akber. Ghosh (1948, p. 4) identifies that Persian has contributed a little over three per cent of the Bengali vocabulary, and English and other European languages (the Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, the Greek) have contributed a little over one per cent. Furthermore, the most lasting legacy from Persian is words related to some aspects of the culture of Muslims in Bengal. It is established that there are about 3000 words of Persian origin in modern Bengali (CFLTR, 1985, p.3).

In fact, Bengali literature developed along with the rise and evolution of the Bengali language. The progress of the Bengali language and literature took place in the medieval period. Although, the literary development of Bengali language starts from the 12th century, the cultivation of this language made progress during the independent Sultanate of Bengal. The patronisation, nurture and practice of the Bengali language continued uninterrupted in the Muslim period. As a result, the Hindu and Muslim poets involved themselves in the literary activities more vigorously than in the past. On the other hand, the long-term stability of the independent Sultanate of Bengal possibly led to a distinctly national style of literary and cultural expression evolving more or less unaffected by religious distinctions. Eaton rightly summarised that apart from the Persianized political ritual that was in practised within the royal courtyard itself, from the early fifteenth century on, the Sultanate articulated its authority through Bengali language as medium of communication (Eaton, 1993, pp.66-67). Thus the Sultanate period seems to have marked the evolution of a national life which had a homogeneity of language used as a medium of literary expression in different parts of the country. It was possible for the Independent Sultans of Bengal who became Bengalized due to their close relationship with the local people. These socio-political interactions gave status and dignity to Bengali language which now began to play the role that was played by Sanskrit in pre-Muslim Bengal (Tarafdar, 1965, p.12 and 240).

There are many similar instances that Muslims rulers and governors initiated and patronised translations of Sanskrit and Persian works into Bengali. It reveals that when the powerful Sultans of Bengal granted this recognition to the Bengali language, in their courts, Hindu Kings also naturally followed the same legacy in succeeding period of time. As a result, in spite of their social and political footholds, however, the Brahmans were unsuccessful to resist the influence and progression of this high patronage of Muslim rulers of Bengal. Not only that they were, therefore, compelled to favour the language they had hated so much, and latterly they themselves came forward to write and compile works of translation in Bengali. From the account contained in some of the Bengali works of translation, it can be discussed that how court patronage was recorded by the Bengali poets in their works with due honour and respect. It is the observation of Carey, Marshman, Ward and other distinguished linguists of modern times that Bengali undoubtedly occupied the first place in India as literary and spoken language in the eighteenth century. Carey, who was a master of eleven vernaculars of India, distinctly refers to the intrinsic merits of Bengali and declares that it undoubtedly occupies the foremost position amongst all the languages of India (Sen, 1954, pp.12-13 & 16).

It should be noted that a detailed examination of other factors affecting the development of Bengali language is not included in this article and further study could be undertaken in this area in the future. The finding of this article will help the historians to write the literary history of medieval Bengal.

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