

An Outline Of Educational System Developed In Muslim Bengal Under The Turko-Afghan Sultanate (1204-1576)

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Abstract

The first verse of the Holy Qur'an indicates that education is an integral part of Islam. Since then, educational development has been a parallel to the development of Muslim society. From the beginning of the Muslim conquest of Bengal by the Turks in the early 13th century, the society had also witnessed the rapid development of a new educational system. Before Islam in Bengal, The Buddhist and Brahmanic religious centres mainly served as educational centres. Cultivation of knowledge was instructed through the Sanskrit language and limited only to the upper classes people. But the scenario got a change under the Muslims both- Turko-Afghan Sultanate (1204-1576 A.D.) and the *Mughals* (1576-1757 A.D.). The period witnessed a rapid advancement in the educational field, which changed the traditional system. The Rulers patronized the spread of education considering it as their religious obligation. Besides *Sultans*, the *Sufis*, *Ulamas*, Nobles, Chieftains-all contributed in this regard. *Masjids* and *Madrasahs* mainly served as centre of Muslim education. In the *Masjids*, informal teaching was offered in all branches of Islamic studies, from elementary to the highest level. The *Imams* of the *Masjids* were acknowledged teachers of the community. *Madrasahs* were the most important institution, where formal education was instructed. *Maktabas* were used for primary education, which were organized either in the *Masjids* or private houses. *Majilises* were developed around individual scholars as higher educational centres such as the learning centre of *Shaikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi* at *Deotala*, *Shaikh Sharfuddin Abu Tawama* at *Sonargaon*, Dhaka etc. There was co-education at primary level, but the higher education for women was limited only to the higher & high-middle class families. Different branches of Islamic Sciences such as *Tafsir*, *Hadith*, *fiqh*-Jurisprudence, logic together with many diverse subjects such as natural sciences, mathematics, medicine, agriculture, astronomy, geography and Arabic & Persian languages and literature were taught in these institutions. To maintain these educational institutions, the rulers provided state patronage, granted rent-free lands as endowment. Thus, a very new and diversified educational system flourished in the society of Bengal under the Muslim rulers, which opened learning facilities for all the people, founding many educational institutions throughout the country. The paper is mainly aimed at discovering the nature and dimensions of educational system, which developed particularly during the Turko-Afghan Muslim Sultanate (1204-1576 A.D.) in Bengal and identify how the system can contribute to improve the present educational system of the country.

Keywords: Turko-Afghan Sultanate, Bengal, Educational development.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

“Recite in the name of your Lord who created (Surat-al-Alaq, v.1) - the first verse of the Holy Qur’an. The Prophet Muhammad said: “The seeking of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim- male or female,” (At-Tirmidhi, Hadith 74) “Allah makes the way to Paradise easy for him who treads the path in search of knowledge” (Nawawi, Hadith 1381). Thus Islam gave importance to the acquiring, cultivating and imparting knowledge. Islam considered the cultivation of knowledge as a religious duty and so there is no separation of education from Islam. Educational development was a parallel to the development of Muslim society wherever and whenever it founded from the very early time of the Prophet Mohammad who founded Suffah Madrasah¹ at Medina and instructed his followers to contribute in imparting knowledge. The era of Khulafa-al-Rashedin² (632-661 A.D.) and the Umayyad period (661-750 A.D.) had also witnessed the development of education in Muslim society. The Abbasid period (750-1258 A.D.) was marked as the golden period of Muslim history for the development of different branches of education and science in the society centering Baghdad which left a remarkable contribution to world civilization. “The general level of literacy was greater in the medieval Islamic lands than in Byzantium or Western Europe” (Bloom & Blair, 2002) Armstrong writes, “Muslim scholars made more scientific discoveries during this time than in the whole of previously recorded history” (Armstrong, 2002). Contemporarily, the Muslim rule in Spain (711-1492 A.D.) had set another great example of such development in Europe. Cordova turned into an excellent learning centre under the Muslims, while the rest of Europe was almost in dark. “For nearly eight centuries, under the Mohamedan rule, Spain set all Europe a shining example of a civilized and enlightened state... Art, literature and science prospered as they then prospered nowhere else in Europe. Mathematics, astronomy, botany, history, philosophy and jurisprudence were to be mastered in Spain, and Spain alone” (Lane-Poole, 1988). This development paved the way for European renaissance. Gaston Wiet comments, “People of the west should publicly express their gratitude to the scholars of the Abbasid period, who were known and appreciated in Europe during the middle ages” (Wiet, 1971).

From the very beginning of the establishment of Muslim rule in Bengal (comprising modern Bangladesh and West Bengal of India), in the early 13th century by the Turkish race led by *Ikhtiaruddin Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji* defeating the then *Sena* king *Lakhman Sena* (Chowdhury, n.d.), which ultimately emerged as an independent Sultanate in Eastern India, the society had been witnessed the development of a new educational system. Many formal and informal educational centres established in different parts of Bengal targeting at different aged groups and classes of people with diverse curricula. This development occurred under both the Sultanate period (1204-1576 A.D.) and the Mughal Empire (1576-1757 A.D.). As most of the contemporary writings mainly focused on political and biographical issues, it is difficult to determine the exact educational system during the Muslim rule in Bengal. This paper aims at accumulating the information together with a view to discover the integrated system of education developed in Bengal under the Muslim rule particularly under the Turko-Afghan Sultanate (1204-1576 A.D.). It also attempts to identify some basic defectives of the present educational system of the country and how the past system can contribute in recovering these deficiencies.

2.0 EDUCATION IN PRE-MUSLIM BENGAL

To understand the educational development under the Muslim rule, it's important to understand the educational condition before the advent of Islam in Bengal. It is indeed difficult to determine the system and nature of education that prevailed in pre-Islam Bengal due to the paucity of historical sources. The available materials give us only a generalized idea about the education in Bengal before Islam. ‘The

¹ Suffah was an attached residential educational center with the mosque of the Prophet. The students were known as ahl-al-Suffa. Abu Huraira, Mua'z bin Zabl were among the famous students of this center.

² Khulafa-al-Rashedin (632-661), the time of four pious caliph of Islam- Hazrat Abu Bakr (632-634), Hazrat Omar (634-644), Hazrat Othman (644-656) and Hazrat Ali (656-661).

Buddhist and Brahmanic religious centres practically served as educational centres. *Fa-Hien*³ stayed at *Tamralipti*⁴ for two years to study and copy various Buddhist manuscripts. Brahmanic and Buddhist learning had developed appreciably and become widespread when *Hiuen-Tsang*⁵ (7th century) visited *Kajangal*, *Pundravardhan*, *Kamarupa*, *Samatata*, *Tamralipti* and *Karnasuvarna*. He noticed more than 300 Buddhist *shramanas* in 6/7 *vihars* at *Kajangala*; more than 3000 *shramanas* in 20 *viharas* in *Pundravardhan*; more than 2000 *shramanas* in 30 *viharas* in *Samatata* and more than 2000 *shramanas* in the 10 *viharas* both at *Tamralipti* and *Karnasuvarna*’ (Islam, 2003, v-3, pp. – 444-445). ‘*Hiuen-Tsang*’s *guru* and vastly learned in all *shastras* and *sutras*, was the *mahacharya* (head teacher) at *Nalanda*, where more than 10000 *sramanas* resided to learn... All the Buddhist *vihars* and *sangharamas* in Bengal were centres for the cultivation of Buddhist learning. The curriculum also included various secular subjects such as grammar, philology, medicine, astronomy, music and arts, *Chaturveda*, *Sankhya*, *Mahayana shastras*, *yoga shastra* etc... Thus by the 6th-7th century Aryan language and learning primarily based on Brahmanic-Jaina-Buddhist religions had reached Bengal’ (Islam, 2003, v-3, pp. 445).

Immediate decades before the conquest by the Turkish Muslims, Bengal was passing with socio-political anarchy. *M.N. Roy* remarked that “*After the downfall of Buddhism, the country found itself in a worse state of economic ruin, political oppression, intellectual anarchy and spiritual chaos. Practically, the entire society was involved in that tragic process of decay and decomposition*” (Roy, 1981). Cultivation of knowledge was definitely limited to the upper classes people of the society (Islam, 2003, v-3, pp. 445) for example Brahmins, ministers, military officers, members of royal families etc. In course of time some socio-religious groups created under the strict caste system in Hindu society such as *Brahman*⁶, *Kshatriya*⁷, *Vaishya*⁸, and *Shudra*.⁹ There were about nearly hundred castes and sub-castes existed in the then Hindu society among which social interactions were prohibited. The lower classes of Hindus had no social rights; even they had no permission to enter into the city (Majumdar, 1976). The caste system was strictly observed in educational system (Bari, 1972) and the lower classes of Hindus were extremely out of educational facilities. ‘Different religious *shastras* were taught in the Hindu temples such as *Veda*, *Agama*, *Niti*, *Mimangsa*, *Vedanta*, *Shruti*, *Smriti* and *Purana*... It is difficult to know how these *shastras* were taught. It may be assumed that *Brahman* Pundits used to establish *Chatuspathis* in their own houses or in and around the temples and take students as many as they could manage, under their care. Students used to study one or more subjects under one teacher (*acharya*) and then move to others for other subjects’ (Islam, 2003, v-3, p. 445). Recitation and listening were the methods of education and the *Brahman* himself was meant by the school (Ullah, 1969). The Vedic learning, Mythological stories of Hinduism, Mathematics and Astrological learning were among the main subjects of education (Hoque, 1976). The site of religious centre like temple, houses of *Brahmans*, guest houses and even sometimes the shadowed space under a big tree used as a place of educational practice. *Tol* was the educational centre only for the sons of

³ Fa-Hien (337-422), Chinese Buddhist monk, pilgrim traveler, and author of one of the earliest Chinese accounts of India. *Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms, being an account by the Chinese Monk Fa-hien of his travels in India and Ceylon*; translated and edited by James Legge, (Oxford, 1886); *Travels of Fah-Hian and SungYun, Buddhist pilgrims from China to India*, translated by S. Beal. (1869).

⁴ Tamralipti was an ancient settlement located on the eastern coast near the confluence of the Bay of Bengal and River Ganga. It was one of the most important trade centers of India which had multidirectional links with different geographical regions of South Asia, frequented by traders, travelers and pilgrims.

⁵ Hiuen-Tsang (603-664), 7th century Buddhist pilgrim who left behind an account about India and Bengal. He translated 657 Sanskrit Buddhist works. His most important work is the *Xiyu Ji (His-yu Chi)*.

⁶ Brahman is the one supreme, universal Spirit that is the origin and support of the phenomenal universe. Brahman is sometimes referred to as the Godhead in Hinduism.

⁷ Kshatriya means warrior. It traditionally constituted the military and ruling elite of the Vedic-Hindu social system.

⁸ Vaishya comprises merchants, cattle-herders and artisans. The Vaisyas eventually became land-owners, money-lenders and influential traders.

⁹ Shudras are the servants and laborers of Hindu society. They can be said to form about 75 to 80 percent of the population of Hindus.

Brahmans and *Pathshala* was for the *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya*. No education for the *Shudra*. The medium of education was *Sanskrit* language, which was not the language of common people.

Summarizing the educational system in pre-Islam Bengal, *AM Chowdhury* writes “So it can be assumed with some amount of certainty that though we are not aware of institutionalized education there must have been a fairly large educated class who could produce those literatures. There must have been some predecessors of the *Tols* and *Pathshalas* of medieval age, where there were arrangements for education, if not for the common people, but definitely for the people belonging to the upper classes of the society. *Gurugrhās*, *Axramas* and Buddhist *Viharas* served as centres of education. That secular subjects were taught along with religious studies are clear from the books that have come down to us. But they do not, however, give us any indication about the system of education” (*Islam*, 2003, v-3, pp. 446).

3.0 EDUCATION IN THE MUSLIM PERIOD

As the cultivation of knowledge has been considered as an obligatory duty for the Muslims in Islam, as the educational development has been given priority in every Muslim society wherever it got sound footing, Bengal was not an exception from this tradition. With the Muslim conquest, the *Khalji* Turks also carried with them the traditional practice of education and the rich cultural heritage of their society to Bengal. ‘*Bakhtiyar Khalji* and his successor *Khalji Malik*s established *Masjids*, *Madrasahs* and *Khanqahs* (seats of religious divines) in the capital city *Lakhnawati* and other important administrative centres of their conquered territories’ (*Siraj*, 1881, p. 427). Gradually other parts of Bengal such as *Gaur*, *Pandua*, *Tabrizabad*, *Ghoraghat*, *Satgaon* and *Sonargaon* developed as urban settlements together with several educational centres. Muslim *Sultans* of Bengal encouraged impart of education from the very beginning, scholastic or elementary, to fulfil their religious obligations. All the elites in Muslim society- the *Sufis*, *Ulamas*, Nobles, Officials, Chieftains, Philanthropists and well-to-do persons paid their enthusiastic contribution in spreading education. ‘*It is said to have been the practice of the Musalman land proprietors to entertain teachers at their own private cost for the benefit of the children of the poor in the neighbourhood, and it was a rare thing to find an opulent farmer or head of a village who had not a teacher in his employment for that purpose*’ (*Long*, 1868, p. 40). With the patronization of the Muslim rulers and positive support from the surroundings, many centres developed in different places of Bengal where education was cultivated such as *Masjid*, *Madrasah*, *Maktab*, *khanqah*, *Majilis* etc. To maintain these educational institutions, the rulers provided scholarships and granted tax-free lands as endowments. As the education was closely related with religious studies, the Hindus and the Muslims developed separate educational structure on the basis of their religious traditions. The curricula included many diverse courses together with religious education. In most of the Muslim educational institutions, education was provided freely with lodging-boardings facilities. Here we tried to sketch out a picture of educational system developed in Muslim Bengal under the Turko-Afghan Sultanate (1204-1576 A.D.).

4.0 EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

After the Muslim conquest of Bengal, gradually different types of centres developed in different places of Bengal. The earliest centre was *Masjid*, which was primarily a centre of prayer. *Maktab* was developed as primary educational centre. The formal educational institution was *Madrasah*. *Majilis*, *Khanqah* were developed as centre of divinity around Sufi-saints, which in course of time turned into higher educational centres.

4.1 Masjid (Mosque)

The educational system in Muslim Bengal developed following the tradition of central Islamic lands as most of the rulers and officials were immigrants from the then Muslim world. From the early days of Islam, *Masjid* has been considered as the nerve centre of civil life of the Muslim society. Besides being a place of prayer, *Masjid* was also a learning centre, where teaching was offered in all branches

of Islamic studies, from elementary stage to the highest level to the different aged groups. The most learned personalities of the respective communities were selected as *Imams* of the *Masjids*. With the expansion of Islamic territories, *Masjid* retained the function of education along with its original purpose as place of prayers.

After the foundation of Muslim rule in Bengal, *Masjids* developed as the nerve centres of the society. In every administrative centre and other important places where there was a sizable Muslim population, the *Sultans* and their officers or wealthy persons constructed *Masjids*. The *Imams* of the *Masjids* were acknowledged teachers who were considered able to teach inhabitants of the locality. They sometimes had to instruct the prayer-offering people how to perform prayers, or sometimes teach the children about the primary teachings of Islam or the correct recitation of the Holy Qura'n. The education practiced in the *Masjids* was mainly related to Islamic learning and instructed through informal ways. Thus, *Masjids* functioned as informal learning centres. There were hundreds of *Masjids* constructed throughout Bengal. 'Of some 200 inscriptions so far discovered more than 100 relate to the construction of mosques' (Ali, 2003, pp. 627-628). Of these the most remarkable one is *Adina Masjid* of *Pandua* of *Maldah* district of West Bengal, built by *Sultan Sikandar Shah* in 1375 having a dimension of 507.5 feet north to south and 285.5 feet east to west with an enclosed open court (Ali, 2003, p. 888). *Khan Jahan's Masjid* at *Bagerhat* of Bangladesh is another notable example popularly known as *Shatgumbad* (sixty tombs) *Masjid*, one of the most impressive Muslim monuments in Indian subcontinent, built by *Khan al-Azam Ulugh Khan Jahan*, who conquered the greater part of southern Bengal during *Sultan Nasiruddin Mahmud Shah* (1435-59 A.D.) (Islam, 2003, v-9, p. 246). Among other notable *Masjids* *Zafar Khan Ghazi's Masjid* (1298), at *Tribeni, Hughli* district of West Bengal, *Baba Adam Masjid* (1483 A.D.) at *Rampal, Munshiganj, Gopalganj Masjid* in *Dinajpur* (1460 A.D.), *Darasbari Masjid* (1479 A.D.) in *Gaur* built by *Sultan Yusuf Shah, Masjidbari Masjid* (1471-1472 A.D.) at *Mirzaganj of Patuakhali*, built by *Khan Muazzam Aziyal Khan, Chota Sona Masjid* in *Gaur* built by *Wali Muhammad*, a high official in the court of *Sultan Alauddin Husain Shah* (1494-1519 A.D.), *Boro Sona Masjid* (1526 A.D.) in *Gaur* built by *Nusrat Shah, Bagha Masjid* (1523-24 A.D.) of *Rajshahi*, built by *Sultan Nusrat Shah* (1519-32 A.D.), *Kusumba Masjid* (1558-59 A.D.) of *Rajshahi*, Bangladesh etc. (Islam, 2003, v-7, pp. 81-90). Educational practice in the *Masjids* is also evident from its architectural features. In every *Masjid*, besides having a central prayer room, there were also other attached rooms which were mainly used for educational practice. There were also rooms for the scholars and learners together with ablution and other logistic facilities. Because of these facilities, many scholars used to establish their educational circles around the *Masjids*. Thus, an educational practice and education friendly environment developed in and around the *Masjids* in Bengal during the Turko-Afghan Sultanate.

4.2 Maktab or Primary Educational Centre

Primary education was an immediate and important concern of the Muslim society as the Muslim children needed education to understand instructions of Islam and observe religious duties accordingly. *Maktab*s developed in the Muslim society of Bengal as the primary educational centres with a view to remove illiteracy by educating Muslim children. These were mainly concerned with the fundamentals of Islamic practices together with some basic education. The *Maktab*s were primarily originated with the *Masjids* and sometimes organized either in a house attached to the *Masjid* (Rawlison, 1937), or in a private house of respective locality. These were established either by wealthy individuals of the respective locality, *Sufi-Alims*, or by joint efforts of the inhabitants being supported by the state endowments as well as of individuals. The then historical evidences support the idea of widespread existence of *Maktab*s throughout the region and their effectiveness in promoting primary education in the society. *Mukundaram* states '*Maktab*s were also set up where Muslim children taught by *Makhdums* (teachers)' (Mukundaram, 1914). Education Commission of 1885 observed the spread up of *Maktab*s wherever the Muslims predominated in numbers (RBPCEC, 1886). 'There were 1,00,000 primary schools (*Maktab*s) in Bengal and Bihar, the population of which was estimated at 40,000,000, so that there would be a village school (*Maktab*) for more than three hundred school going boys

between the age of 5 and 12' (Long, 1868, pp. 18-19). This number referred us to the fact that how much widely primary educational facilities developed in Bengal. A *Masjid* is seldom found in the village area without a *Maktab*. Apart from the general *Maktab*s, there was another kind of special *Maktab* for memorizing the Holy Qura'n known as '*Hifzkhana*'. The wealthy persons often used to maintain private teachers in their houses for educating their own children in a better domestic environment. Adam states "There are many private Mohammedan schools (*Maktab*s) begun and conducted by individuals of studious habits who have made the cultivation of letters the chief occupation of their lives, and by whom the profession of learning is followed, not merely as a means of livelihood, but as a meritorious work productive of moral and religious benefit to themselves and their fellow creatures" (Long, 1868, p. 29). Thus, primary educational facilities widely expanded in the society during the Turko-Afghan sultanate rule, which remarkably contributed to remove illiteracy from the society of Bengal.

4.3 Madrasah or School/College

Besides *Masjid* and *Maktab*, the most important educational institution developed in the Muslim society was the *Madrasah*. A good number of *Madrasah*s were set up in the cities and important places by the Muslim rulers, nobles and philanthropic persons, the most notable example is *Nizamiya Madrasah* of Baghdad founded by *Nizam-al-Mulk* in 1065 A.D.. 'After the Muslim conquest of Bengal, *Bakhtiyar Khalji* and his successor *Khalji Malik*s established *Masjids*, *Madrasah*s and *Khanqah* (seats of religious divines) in the capital city *Lakhnauti* and other important administrative centres of their conquered territories' (Siraj, 1881, p. 427). So *Lakhnauti* became the earliest learning centre, which gradually extended throughout the region. *Madrasah*s were primarily established by an individual scholar-*Sufi-Alim*, and having congenial atmosphere and enthusiastic support from the local inhabitants, ruling elite, officials, wealthy individuals, philanthropic persons, they gradually turned into big institutions. Hundreds of students flocked into these *Madrasah*s not only from various localities of Bengal, but also from other parts of Indian subcontinent and even from different parts of the then Muslim world. Many historical-literary and epigraphic evidences provide us the information that there were many *Madrasah*s in different parts of Bengal, though it is difficult to identify definitely because of long lapse of time. *Ghiyath-al-Din Iwaz Khalji*, a lieutenant of *Bakhtiyar Khalji*, built a superb *Masjid*, a *Madrasah* and a caravanserai at *Lakhnauti* soon after his accession (Law, 1916, p. 106). *Darasbari*¹⁰ at Gaura comprising a large *Masjid*, gallery-cum-lecture hall, was a big *Madrasah* with *Jami masjid*. The discovered inscription of the reign of *Shams al-Din Yusuf Shah* (1474-1481 A.D.) from the debris of *Darasbari*¹¹ supports that a *Jami Masjid* was erected in 1479 A.D.. A few yards away on the east side of the *Masjid* another structural site was discovered which could be used as *Madrasah* building on the evidence of another inscription discovered from its debris of the time of *Sultan Ala al-Din Husain Shah* (1493-1519 A.D.), which records the construction of *Madrasah* in 1502 A.D. (JASB, 1979-81). It may be presumed that *Shams al-Din Yusuf Shah* started constructing a *Jami' Masjid* and *Madrasah* in *Darasbari*, the *Jami' Masjid* was completed in 1479 A.D., while the *Madrasah* building was finally completed in the reign of *Ala' al-Din Husayn Shah* in 1502-04 A.D. (Yaqub Ali, 1985, P. 423). The inscription begins with the well-known *hadith* 'Search after knowledge, even if it be in China' and states that the *Madrasah* was established 'for the teaching of the sciences of religion and for instruction in the principles which lead to certainty' (Ali, 2003A, p. 830). It indicates it was a higher educational institution. The name *Darasbari* (college compound/*Madrasah*) itself testifies that there was a good arrangement for education. *Dar al-Khayrat* (the house of benevolence) was another *Madrasah*, built at *Triveni* in *Hoogly* district of West Bengal. From the discovered inscription, it may be said that the *Madrasah* was founded by *Qadi Nasir Muhammad* in 1298 during the reign of *Sultan Rukn al-Din Kay-ka'us* (1291-1301 A.D.), which continued to flourish afterwards. It was rebuilt by *Khan Jahan Zafar Khan* in 1313 during the reign of *Shams al-Din Firuz Shah* (1301-

¹⁰ Darasbari, a locality in the suburb of Gaur is now situated in Shibganj of Rajshahi of Bangladesh.

¹¹ The epigraph is now preserved in the Indian National Museum, Calcutta. For details see A.H. Dani, *Bibliography of the Muslim Inscriptions of Bengal*, Asiatic Society of Pakistan Dacca, 1960, p. 31.

1322 A.D.) (Ali, 2003B, p. 832). The *Navagrama* inscriptions¹² support the idea of having an academy of learning together with a *Masjid*, a *Madrasah* in the *Khittah Simlabad*¹³ during the reign of *Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah* (1442-1459 A.D.) (Yaqub Ali, 1985, P. 423). It may be presumed from the inscription that the *Madrasah* was founded by *Ulugh Rahim Khan*, the head of *Khittah Simlabad*. Another epigraph discovered in a little *Masjid*, of *Englishbazar* police station in *Malda* district, of the reign of *Ala al-Din Husain Shah* dated with 1502 A.D., testifies the erection of a *Madrasah* by the order of *Sultan* (Dani, 1958), though the location of this *Madrasah* could not be identified because of unclear inscription. *Westmacott* and *Blochmann* opined that the *Madrasah* may belonged to one of *Gaur* (Blochmann, 1968), while *Stapleton* favoured that the *Madrasah* either of *Darasbari* or *Belbari* (Stapleton, 1930). *Ghiyath al-Din Azam Shah* (1392-1410 A.D.), a famous *Sultan* of Bengal founded *Madrasahs* at the two holy cities of *Makkah* and *Medina* (Karim, 1987). The *Madrasah* provided with advanced learning on different branches of Islamic sciences specially *Ilm-al-Fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence. This information supports us to realize how much the *Sultans* of Bengal patronized education wherever it was at home or abroad. *Ala al-Din Husain Shah* received his fame for establishing a good number of *Madrasahs* throughout the region. From the above description we may conclude that *Madrasahs* were set up in almost all the administrative centres and important localities of Bengal as the official educational institution during the Turko-Afghan sultanate period by the Muslim rulers, their subordinates, administrative officials, wealthy individuals or *Sufi-Alims*.

4.4 *Majilis* or Academy/Semin`ary

Besides *Madrasah*, another kind of learning centre grew up in different important places of Bengal, which was known as *Majilis*. *Abu al-Fadl* said, “All civilized nation have schools for the education of their youth, but Hindustan is particularly famous for its seminaries” (Law, 1916, p. 161). The *Majilises* developed around distinguished individual scholars in response to the desire of inquisitive students for higher learning. They provided higher educational facilities in different branches of Islamic studies such as *-Tafsir, Hadith, Fiqh*, literature and even various branches of natural sciences. With the growth of *Majilises*, a remarkable number of scholars migrated from different parts of the then Islamic world into Bengal; most of them worked in the *Majilises* and devoted themselves in spreading higher education in Bengal. They were generally held at private premises. Here are some examples of *Majilis* developed in Bengal:-

4.5 TABRIZABAD

The learning centre of *Shaikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi* at *Deotala* of Pandua was one of the earliest *Majilises*. The site of his academic centre acquired the designation of *Tabrizabad* after his name. *Shaikh Tabrizi* originally came from *Tabriz* of Persia and settled down at *Deotala*, most probably in the beginning of 13th century (Karim, 1985, pp. 123-128). He devoted fully to the spread of education and with the support of contemporary rulers particularly of *Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah* (1459-1474 A.D.), *Nasir al-Din Nusrat Shah* (1519-1531 A.D.) and *Sulaiman Karrani* (1566-1572 A.D.), he constructed one ‘*Jami*’-university and two other *Masjids* there (Ali, 2003C, p. 833). His circle gradually extended towards Pandua. Several old buildings there indicate that a *Masjid*, two *Chillakhana*s (seminar buildings), a *Tanurkhana* (Kitchen) and a *Bhandarkhana* (storehouse) were set up by *Shaikh Tabrizi*. These architectural remains lead us to think that the centre was largely facilitated with the boarding-lodging facilities for the scholars and learners. The centre was supported by several personal and government endowments including of *Bais Hazari* estate (twenty-two thousand *bighas* of landed property) by the government.

¹² Navagrama is now a village in Tarash of Pabna. The epigraphs with ID No. 3171, are now preserved in the Varendra Research Museum, Rajshahi. It has been first published in the Journal of the Varendra Research Museum, Vol. 6.

¹³ Khittah Simlabad. Generally the term khittah is applied to an administrative zone with a city fortified with ramparts and walls. Khittah Simlabad comprised with northern Pabna, south-western Bogra and south-eastern Rajshahi.

4.5.1 SONARGAON

Another important learning centre was founded at *Sonargaon*, near to Dhaka city by *Shaikh Sharf al-Din Abu Tawama*, who travelled from Bukhara to Delhi during the time of *Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Balban* (1266-1286 A.D.) and then to Bengal accompanying his pupil *Sharf al-Din Yahya Maneri* from Bihar in the early 80s of 13th century (Ali, 2003D, p. 834). *Shaikh Abu Tawama* was a highly learned personality who accomplished in diverse branches of education including Religious studies, Chemistry, Natural science etc. He built up an academy at Sonargaon, which soon earned its fame as an excellent centre of higher education. The students from all over the subcontinent and other parts of the world flocked to this institution to receive higher studies in different branches of Islamic learning such as *Tafsir*, *Hadith*, *Fiqh* as well as many diverse subjects such as Logic, Mathematics, Chemistry, Medical science, Language etc. Religious and secular sciences were taught in this great educational seminary. *Shaikh Sharf al-Din Yahya Maneri* was one of his prominent students, who married to the daughter of *Shaikh Abu Tawama* and established a similar centre at *Maner* of Bihar. *Shaikh Abu Tawama* was buried in Sonargaon, near to his centre. He wrote a famous book on Sufism '*Maqamat*' (Karim, 1985, pp. 96-102). The institution continued to be a great centre of learning for long after his death. It produced illustrious scholars like *Sharf al-Din Yahya Maneri* and a good number of scholars came here such as *Shaikh Ala-ul-Haque*, *Shaikh Anwar*, *Shaikh Rafi al-Din*, *Shaikh Zahid*. Thus, this *Majilis* played an important role in spreading education in East Bengal during the successive period of Bengal Sultanate.

4.5.2 PANDUA

Another seminar together with a hospital organized by *Shaikh Ala-al-Haque* at *Pandua*, an important trading and learning centre of medieval Bengal. *Shaikh Ala-al-Haque* devoted to the promotion of education & cultural pursuits there by establishing seminary, which was extensively supported with the boarding-lodging and hospital facilities for the scholars and learners. After the death of *Shaikh Ala-al-Haque* in 1398 A.D., *Shaikh Nur Quthb al-Alam*, his son and student continued to run the centre. Many contemporary *Sultans* such as *Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah*, *Jalal al-Din Muhammad Shah*, *Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah*, *Shams al-Din Yusuf Shah* and *Jalal al-Din Fath Shah* patronized the scholars and learning activities there. To support the centre, *Sultan Ala al-Din Husain Shah* endowed 42 villages, *Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah* built a *Masjid* there in 1490-91, while Mughal prince *Shah Shuja* granted rent-free land. Famous students of this academy were *Mir Syeed Ashraf Jahangir*, who came from central Asia, *Shaikh Nasir al-Din*, *Shaikh Hussain Dhukarposh*, *Husam al-Din of Manikpur*, *Shams al-Din of Ajmer*, *Shaikh Kaku of Lahore* (Ali, 2003E, pp. 836-837). Thus, it turned into a centre of spiritual and cultural activities of medieval Bengal.

4.5.3 MAHISANTOSH

Shaikh Taqi al-Din Arabi founded a *Majilis* at *Mahisun* (Rahim, 1963), identified as *Mahisantosh*¹⁴ of present Rajshahi district most probably in the mid of 13th century (Yaqub Ali, 1984). *Yahya Maneri* (d. 1291), the father of the renowned scholar *Shaikh Sharaf al-Din Maneri* is reported to have received education under *Mawlana Taqi al-Din Arabi* at *Mahisun* (Maneri, 2010). Considering the importance of its geo-economic location, *Sultan Rukn al-Din Barbak Shah* (1459-1474 A.D.) established a mint there (Karim, 1960). Some architectural structures including a *Masjid*, city ramparts, and tombs are witnessing to its being an important trade and educational centre in medieval Bengal.

4.5.4 GANGARAMPUR

Another important academy was founded at *Gangarampur*, Dinajpur by *Shaikh Ata* in the early Sultanate period of Bengal. The centre received patronage and support from several *Sultans*. *Sultan Sikandar Shah* built a domed structure there in 1363 A.D., *Sultan Jalal al-Din Fath Shah* reconstructed a stone building there in 1482 A.D., *Sultan Shams al-Din Muzaffar Shah* constructed a *Masjid* there, *Sultan Ala al-Din Husain Shah* constructed another *Masjid* in 1512 A.D.. All the inscriptions

¹⁴ *Mahisantosh* is about 75 miles distant from *Rajshahi* city to the north.

mentioned *Shaikh Ata* with great respect as ‘*Shaikh al-Mashaikh, Qutb al-Aulia, Siraj al-Haq wa al-Shar*’ etc (Ali, 2003F, pp. 835-836).

4.5.5 BAGHA

Another important learning centre of *Husain Shahi* period was founded by *Shah Muazzam Danishmand* known as *Shah Daula* at Bagha, Rajshahi (Ahmad, 1960, p. 212). *Sultan Nasir al-Din Nusrat Shah* (1519-1531 A.D.) erected a *Jami Masjid* there in 1523-24 A.D. (Ahmad, 1960, p. 214), and centering this *Masjid*, a learning centre was developed. From the accounts of *Abdul Latif* it is known that *Hawda Mian* ran a learning centre in a mud-built house (Sarkar, 1928). *Hawda Mian* is possibly a corrupt form of the original name of *Hamid Danishmand*, son of *Shah Muazzam Danishmand*. Mughal emperor *Shah Jahan* made an endowment of 42 villages to this centre during his time. William Adam in his report marked that ‘The *Madrasah* at Kushba, Bagha is an endowed institution of long-standing’ (Long, 1868, p. 112). Thus the institution continued to flourish through generations.

5.0 CONTENT AND CURRICULA OF EDUCATION

It is difficult to determine the content and course-curricula of education in the institutions developed in Muslim Bengal due to the shortage of information; rather we can only sketch an outline. The *Maktabas* were the primary educational centres for the Muslim children. The content of primary education included all the basic courses of Islamic studies and practices such as correct recitation of the Holy Qur’an, principles relating to ablution, five prayers (*Salat*), fasting (*Ramadhan*), Pilgrimage (*hajj*), *zakat*, basic teachings from the Holy Qur’an, *Hadith* and *Fiqh*. Along with these subjects, the elements of Arabic, Persian and Bangla languages, some basic education on diverse subjects such as arithmetic, history, mathematics, geography etc. were also taught to the students in the *Maktabas*. As the Muslim children are instructed to start observing prayers at the age of seven (Dawud, 1952), it is assumed that they had to start primary education at the age of five. Generally, *Imams* of the *Masjids* were entitled with the responsibility of teaching the children in the *Maktabas*. After completing primary education in the *Maktabas*, The students would proceed to the *Madrasah*.

The *Madrasahs* were institutions of secondary and higher secondary level education and the *Majilises* were the institutions used for higher education. Different branches of Islamic Sciences, such as *Tafsir* (Exegesis), *Hadith* (Traditions of the Prophet), *Fiqh* (Islamic law), *Usul-al-Fiqh* (Principles of Islamic law), *Tasawwuf* (Mysticism), *Adab* (Literature), *Nahu* (Grammar), *Kalam* (Scholasticism), *Mantiq* (Logic) and etc (Nizami, 1961) were mainly taught in the *Madrasah* and *Majilis*. Important *Tafsir* books, collection of *Hadith* like those of *Bukhari* and *Muslim*, important books on *Fiqh* were necessarily used in those institutions. Development of Islamic scripts such as transcribing the *Sahih al-Bukhari* by *Muhammad b. Yazdan Bakhsh* in 1503 (Karim, 1985A), writing *Nam-i-Haq* a work on *Fiqh* supposed to be written by *Sharaf al-Din Abu Tawamah* or by some of his disciples (Karim, 1985, pp. 76-79), support the idea of incorporating *Hadith* and *Fiqh* studies into the courses of study at higher levels. Learning Arabic as the language of the Holy Qur’an and Persian as the court language (Mallick, 1961, p. 153) had been given importance in the courses of study even from the primary to higher level. They learnt Persian books *Panjnama*, *Gulistan*, *Amadnama*, *Bostan*, *Yusuf-Zuleikha*, *Sikandarnama*, *Bahar Danish* and Arabic books *Mizan*, *Munshaib*, *Sarf Mir*, *Miat Amil*, *Sarh-i-Miat Ami* and others (Long, 1868, pp. 113-116). The chief aim was to attain such proficiency in the Persian language as might enable them to earn their livelihood (Long, 1868, p. 29). Analytical study of the Holy Qur’an, *Hadith Fiqh* and *Usul-al-Fiqh* formed the principal courses of the advanced studies in the *Majilises*. Besides these, diverse subjects such as natural sciences, logic, mathematics, medicine, arithmetic, agriculture, astronomy, home-economics, geography, alchemy, geometry (*hindasa*), history and others were also taught in the higher educational centres. Though of later period, *Abu al-Fadl*’s statement supports the idea. He writes, “Every boy ought to read books on morals, arithmetic, agriculture, mensuration, geometry, astronomy, anatomy, physiognomy, household matters, rules of governmental, medicine, logic, higher mathematics, science and history, all of which may gradually be acquired”

(Al-Fadl, 1873). ‘Works of *Euclid* on geometry, and of *Ptolemy* on astronomy, in translation, and those of *Ibn-Sina* and *Ibn-Rushd* on medicine were used as textbooks’ (Long, 1868, p. 161). Intensive course on Arabic & Persian language and literature were also taught in these institutions for advanced learners. Observing the beautiful writing on the inscription slabs and transcribing books, we may assume that the penmanship was taught in the higher learning centre. Courses were designed to suit the needs of students. They were not required to study every subject. Academic activities were informal. The courses of studies and general policies were determined by their respective teachers and heads known as *Mudir*, *Mudarris*, *Muallim*, *Ustadh*, *Shaikhs*, *Muhaddith*, *Mufasssir*, *Faqih* etc.

6.0 WOMEN EDUCATION

There was co-education for both the boys and girls at primary level in the *Maktabas*. But in the *Madrasah* and *Majilis*, there was no arrangement for co-education or separate education for the women. The aristocratic Muslim families used to establish private educational arrangements for the women of their families. Thus, the higher education for women was limited to the aristocratic, royal, higher and high-middle class families only. Sometimes, the teachers used to go to the private houses and teach the girls individually. So the number of educated women was limited.

7.0 HINDU EDUCATION

As the education was closely related to religion, it developed in Muslim and Hindu societies separately. With the positive development of educational system in Muslim society, a change also came into the Hindu society. Prior to Islam, learning was limited to the *Brahmans* and higher classes people of Hindu society, but the masses had no access into the educational centres. Gradually *Pathshala*, which developed as primary educational centre in Hindu society, made open for the boys and girls of Hindu society irrespective of caste system. Mainly the wealthy persons of Hindu society and the ruling classes patronized these centres. Adam mentioned the number of *Pathshalas* of some districts: Midnapore 548, Murshidabad 62, Birbhum 407, Burdwan 629, and Dinajpur 119 (Long, 1868, pp. 153-156). Together with the Hindu religious education, Sanskrit and Bangla languages were also taught there. Adam states ‘the students were taught *Saraswati Bandana* or salutation to the goddess of learning, the rhyming arithmetical rules of *Subhankara*, the *Cowrie* Table, the Numeration Table, the *Katha* Table, the rules of arithmetic, agriculture, commerce, letter writing, the *Ramayana*, the *Manasamangala* etc. were included’ (Long, 1868, p. 97).

For higher education, *Tole* was developed in the Hindus society, where learning was practiced only through the *Sanskrit* language. It was affordable only for the higher class’s people of Hindu society such as *Brahman* and *Kshatriya*. Hindu religious teaching was the core of study together with some diverse courses such as history, philosophy, astronomy etc. *Nabadvip* was the principal centre of education for the Hindus. Among other important Hindu educational centres, *Saptagram*, *Sylhet*, and Chittagong were well known, where students and religious devotees gathered to satisfy their educational and spiritual needs (Islam, 2003, v-3, pp. 446). As Persian was the state language, Many Hindus also received education together with the Muslims in Arabic and Persian schools to qualify themselves for different governmental positions. According to Adam’s report, ‘of the some 193 Arabic and Persian schools which he traced in *Murshidabad*, *Burdwan* and *Birbhum* districts, there were a total of 786 Muslim boys and 784 Hindu boys (Long, 1868, p. 33). Of the five districts of Bengal and Bihar, there were 215 Muslim teachers and 14 Hindu teachers in the Persian-Arabic schools of that area. But the Hindu scholars numbered 2096 as against Muslim scholars of these schools ((Mallick, 1961, pp. 153, 164).

8.0 CHARACTERISTICS OF EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM

From the above description, it can be said that the educational practice developed in Muslim Bengal through informal ways. We may summarize the major characteristics of that educational system as below:-

- Education was provided freely and it was free from all kinds of fees.
- There was no discrimination based on caste and creed in providing educational facility.
- Lodging-boardings-medical facilities together with educational materials including books-papers and even clothing were also provided freely to the learners.
- Though there was no separate department of education in the state administration, promotion of learning was considered an important duty of the state.
- The state generously used to assign the income of *Waqf*-endowments, tax-free land, scholarships for the scholars, for the maintenance of educational institutions. Higher learning centres were, in all fairness, financed by the Muslim rulers of Bengal.
- The rulers, high officials, scholars, wealthy individuals enthusiastically used to contribute in the educational activities by private charity, endowments and other logistic supports.
- The Institutions established for the specific purpose of strengthening the Islamic learning. Also it served as the centre of higher education comprising various subjects.
- The syllabus-curricula, recommended books for study, class schedule, examination and evaluation process, publication of result are determined by the respective teachers and heads.
- Teachers and students could move freely from one institution to another freely according to their needs.
- Generally the students used to sit around the teacher on the floor. The environment was very intimate and learning friendly. The students had to obey the instruction of teacher strictly.
- On successful completion of higher study, the students were honoured with giving Sanad-certificate.

9.0 CONCLUSION

The above study gives us a picture of the education system developed in Bengal during the Turko-Afghan Sultanate. Following the teachings of Islam, construction, maintenance and patronage of learning and educational institution regarded as one of the greatest virtuous deeds. The *Sultans*, Officials, the *Sufis*, *Ulamas*, Nobles, Chieftains, and well-to-do individuals paid their enthusiastic contribution in support of education. The royal court of the *Sultans* had become the meeting places of scholars, who were also granted handsome allowances. For example *Minhaj-i-Siraj*, the great historian, received patronage from *Malik Izz-ud-Din*, the governor of *Lakhnauti*, *Shams-ud-Din Dabir* and *Qazi Asir*, two great poets patronized by *Bughra Khan*, The Independent Ruler of Bengal, Poet *Ibrahim Qawwam*, *Zahid-ud-Din*, *Mansur Siraji*, *Yusuf bin Hamid*, *Syed Husain*, the physician *Shahab-ud-Din* received the patronage of *Sultan Rukunuddin Barbak Shah*, famous *Muhaddith Muhammad bin yazdan* was patronized by *Ala-ud-Din Hussein Shah*, Poet *Shah Muhammad Sagir*, writer of '*Yusuf Zulaikha*' received patronage of *Sultan Gias-ud-Din Mahmud Shah* (Karim, 1985, pp. 62-92). Sometimes scholars from other countries were invited to come and settle in Bengal, who left remarkable contribution in the field of scholarly development (Karim, 1985, pp. 93-114). Thus almost all the *Sultans* of Bengal, from beginning to the end of the period, paid due attention towards educational and scholarly development in Bengal. Finding this positive atmosphere, the learned personalities established many learning centres in different towns, cities and important localities of Bengal. Though the educational system was informal, but the syllabus and courses followed in those institutions testify that the study was not limited to Islamic religious studies, rather it included many diverse subjects to meet the demand of the contemporary society. Speaking about the education during the Muslim rule, W.W. Hunter writes, "*They possessed a system of education ... which was capable of affording a high degree of intellectual training and polish, was founded on principles not wholly*

unsound, though presented in an antiquated form, and which was infinitely superior to any other system of education then existing in India, a system which secured to them an intellectual as well as a material supremacy” (Hunter, 1872). We, therefore, undoubtedly conclude that a very moderate educational system developed in Bengal during the times of Turko-Afghan Sultanate in Bengal (1204-1576 A.D.).

This developed system and policy obviously can contribute to improve the present educational system of the country, while it has been facing several challenges. The present educational system is seriously lagging behind in moral development of the learners, mainly because of disintegration with religious teachings, while the past system developed combining together religious and general courses, which successfully produced morally developed citizens for the country. The present system makes the learners and teachers bounded by hundreds of rules and obligations, which seriously loses enthusiasm in learning and teaching. Without enthusiasm, no learning or teaching can properly be successful. During Muslim rule, the teachers and students enjoyed freedom of movement from one class to another, from one teacher to another, and even from one institution to another to learn and teach on their choice. It developed a very enthusiastic environment, which is essential for any educational journey. Student-teacher relation was very intimate, while the present system has been failed in developing an intimate student-teacher relation, which is one of the fundamental element for any good educational policy. Thus, there are many learnings and instructions, which can remarkable contribute to make the present educational system successful and effective one in creating morally developed and patriotic citizens for the country.

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