

## **An outline of educational system in Muslim Bengal under the Turko-Afghan Sultanate (1204-1576)**

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**Abstract:** The Muslim Bengal under the Turko-Afghan Sultanate (1204-1576) witnessed a rapid advancement in the educational field, which changed the traditional Buddhist and Hindu Brahmanic system. This study, using primary and secondary sources, analyzes the role played by various individuals and institutions in bringing about the change in the educational system. The study found that the Rulers patronized the spread of education as they considered it their religious obligation. Besides *Sultans*, the *Sufis*, *Ulamā*, Nobles, Chieftains - all contributed in this regard. *Masjids*, *Madrasahs* and *Maktabs* were used as educational centres. Different branches of Islamic Sciences such as *Tafsīr*, *ʿadith*, *fiqh*, logic together with 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.

**Keywords:** Turko-Afghan Sultanate, Muslim Bengal, educational development, endowment, Islam.

### **Introduction**

Islam gives utmost importance to acquiring, cultivating and imparting knowledge. There are many Qur'anic verses and Prophetic traditions (أحاديث) that are supportive of the centrality of knowledge in Islam. The very first revelation of the Qur'an enjoins: "Recite in the name of your Lord who created" (al-Qur'an, 96:1). Prophet Muhammad (SAW) said: "The seeking of knowledge is obligatory for every Muslim male and female," (At-Tirmidhi, Hadith 74), and "Allah makes the way to Paradise easy for him who treads the path in search of knowledge" (Nawawi, Hadith 1381). In practice, education, from the beginning, remained at

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the centre of Islamic socio-political development. Prophet Mohammad (SAW) founded Suffah Madrasah, an educational center attached to the mosque of the Prophet (SAW) at Madinah, and instructed his followers to contribute to knowledge acquisition. The era of the first four rightly guided caliphs (khulafÉ-al-rashidÉn) (632 to 661 CE), and the Umayyad (661-750 CE) had also witnessed the development of education in Muslim society. The Abbasid period (750-1258 CE) is marked as the golden period of Muslim history for the development of different branches of knowledge. The development of knowledge in the Muslim world during the mediaeval period, centering in Baghdad and Cordova, was unprecedented and contributed to the initiation of the Renaissance and modernity in Europe later (Bloom & Blair, 2002; Armstrong, 2002; Lane-Poole, 1988; Wiet, 1971).

Islam formally established its presence in Bengal (comprising contemporary Bangladesh and West Bengal of India), in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century with the help of Muslim conqueror Ikhtiaruddin Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji from the modern day Afghanistan. This brought to the end of Hindu kingdom in the region. Under the Muslim sultanate, many formal and informal educational centers were established in different parts of Bengal. The tradition of Muslim education was further developed during the subsequent Mughal sultanate (1576-1757) in the sub-continent. The available writings on education in Bengal during this period focus more on political and biographical sketches of the prominent figures which makes it difficult to determine the exact educational system during the Muslim rule in Bengal. This paper aims at piecing the information together with a view to construct the structure of an integrated system of education developed in Bengal under the Muslim rule particularly under the Turko-Afghan Sultanate (1204-1576).

### **Education in pre-Muslim Bengal**

It is difficult to determine the system and nature of education that prevailed in pre-Islam Bengal due to the paucity of historical sources. However, the Buddhist and Brahmanic religious centers practically served as educational centers. It is reported that the Chinese monk, the pilgrim traveller, Fa-Hien (337-442), stayed at Tamralipti, an ancient settlement located on the east coast, near the confluence of the Bay of Bengal and River Ganga, for two years to study and copy various Buddhist manuscripts (Legg, 1886). This indicates that Brahmanic and Buddhist

learning centers had developed appreciably and became widespread by the time the 7<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist pilgrim Hiuen-Tsang (603-664), visited the region. He recorded the existence of 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: 444-445). Hiuen-Tsang's guru and vastly learned in all *shastras* and *sutras* was the mahacharya (head teacher) at *Nalanda*, where more than 10,000 *sramanas* resided to learn. All the Buddhist *vihars* and *sangharamas* in Bengal were centers for the cultivation of Buddhist learning. The curriculum included various subjects such as grammar, philology, medicine, astronomy, music and arts, *chaturveda*, *sankhya*, *Mahayana shastras*, *yoga shastra* etc. Thus, "by the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century Aryan language and learning primarily based on Brahmanic-Jaina-Buddhist religions had reached Bengal" (Islam, 2003, v-3: 445).

"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: 82-84). Cultivation of knowledge became definitely limited to the upper class people such as the Brahmans, ministers, military officers, and members of royal families (Islam, 2003, v-3: 445). However, it is not clear how the system worked. Probably the *Brahman* Pundits used to establish *Chatuspathis* in their own houses or in and around the temples and took 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: 445). Recitation and listening were the methods of education (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 center like temple, houses of *Brahmans*, guest houses and even sometimes under big trees were used as places of educational practice. The learning centers were segregated by castes. *Tola* was the educational center only for the sons of *Brahmans* and *Pathshala* was for the *Kshatriya* and *Vaishya*. No education for the *Shudra*. The medium of instruction was *Sanskrit* language, which was not the language of the common people. In sum, there must have been some predecessors of the *Tolas* and *Pathshalas* of medieval age and *Gurugrhas*, *Axramas* and Buddhist *Viharas* served as centers of education. They did impart secular as well as religious education. Yet, given the

paucity of information, it is difficult to arrive at a firm conclusion about the system of education (Islam, 2003, v-3: 446).

### **Education in the Muslim period**

In conformity with Islam's emphasis on cultivation of knowledge, Muslims in Bengal gave priority to education. With the Muslim conquest, the *Khalji* Turks carried with them the traditional practice of education and the rich cultural heritage of their society to Bengal. "Bakhtiyar Khalji and his successor Khalji Maliks established *Masjids*, *Madrasahs* and *Khanqahs* (seats of religious divines) in the capital city *Lakhnawati* and other important administrative centers of their conquered territories" (Siraj, 1881: 427). Gradually other parts of Bengal such as *Gaur*, *Pandua*, *Tabrizabad*, *Ghoraghat*, *Satgaon* and *Sonargaon* developed as urban settlements together with several educational centers. Muslim *Sultans* of Bengal encouraged the imparting of education from the very beginning. All the elites in Muslim society - the *Sufis*, '*Ulam*'s, Nobles, Officials, Chieftains, Philanthropists and well-to-do persons – contributed significantly 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 neighborhood, 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 society, many centers developed in different places of Bengal where education was cultivated. To maintain these educational institutions, the rulers provided scholarships and granted tax-free lands as endowments. As the education was closely related to religious studies, the Hindus and the Muslims developed separate educational structures 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 free with lodging-boarding facilities. An explanation of the system developed during the period is presented in the following section.

### **Educational institutions**

After the Muslim conquest of Bengal, different types of centers developed in different places of Bengal. The earliest center was *Masjid*, which was primarily a center for prayer. *Maktab* was developed as primary educational center. The formal educational institution was *Madrasah*. *Majilis*, *Khanqah* were developed

as centers of divinity around Sufi-saints, which in course of time turned into higher educational centers.

**Masjid:** 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. They considered the *masjid* as the corner stone of civil life of the Muslim society. After the establishment of Muslim rule in Bengal, *masjids* developed as the nerve centers of the society. In every administrative center 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 able to teach inhabitants of the locality. They sometimes had to instruct people how to perform prayers, or sometimes taught the children about the primary teachings of Islam or the correct recitation of the Holy Qur'an. The education practiced in the *Masjids* was related to Islamic learning and instructed through informal ways. Thus, *masjids* functioned as informal learning centers. 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: 627-628).

Of these *masjids*, 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: 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) (Islam, 2003, v-9: 246). Among other notable *masjids* are Zafar Khan Ghazi's *Masjid* (1298), at Tribeni, Hughli district of West Bengal, Baba Adam *Masjid* (1483) at Rampal, Munshiganj, Gopalganj *Masjid* in Dinajpur (1460), Darasbari *Masjid* (1479) in Gaur built by Sultan Yusuf Shah, *Masjidbari Masjid* (1471-1472) 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), Boro Sona *Masjid* (1526) in Gaur built by Nusrat Shah, Bagha *Masjid* (1523-24) of Rajshahi, built by Sultan Nusrat Shah (1519-32), Kusumba *Masjid* (1558-59) of Rajshahi, Bangladesh etc. (Islam, 2003, v-7: 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.

**Maktab or primary educational center:** 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. These were mainly concerned with the fundamentals of Islamic practices together with some basic education. The *maktabs* primarily originated from the *masjids* and sometimes organized either in a house attached to the *Masjid* (Rawlison, 1937), or in a private house of the respective locality. These were established either by wealthy individuals of the respective locality, *SEft*-‘*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 *Maktabs* throughout the region and their effectiveness in promoting primary education in the society. Education Commission of 1885 observed the spread up of *Maktabs* wherever the Muslims predominated in numbers (RBPCEC, 1886). “There were 1,00,000 primary schools (*Maktabs*) 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: 18-19). This sheer number is indicative of the importance and availability of primary educational facilities developed in Bengal. A *Masjid* is seldom found in the village area without a *Maktab*. Apart from the general *Maktabs*, there was another kind of special *Maktab* for memorizing the Holy Qur’an known as *Hifzkhana*. Wealthy persons often used to maintain private teachers in their houses for educating their children in a better domestic environment. “There are many private Mohammedan schools (*Maktabs*) 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: 29). Thus, primary educational facilities widely expanded in the society during the Turko-Afghan sultanate rule.

**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 *Madrasahs* were set up in the cities and important places by the Muslim rulers, nobles and philanthropic persons. “After the Muslim conquest of Bengal, Bakhtiyar Khalji and his successor Khalji Maliks established *Masjids*, *Madrasahs* and *Khanqah* (seats of religious divines) in the capital city *Lakhnauti* and other important administrative centers of their conquered territories” (Siraj, 1881: 427). So *Lakhnauti* became the earliest learning centre, which gradually extended throughout the region. *Madrasahs* were primarily established by an individual scholar-*Šaykh*-‘*Alim*, having congenial atmosphere and enthusiastic support from the local inhabitants, ruling elites, officials, wealthy individuals, philanthropic persons. These madrasahs later gradually turned into big institutions. Hundreds of students flocked into these *Madrasahs* 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 *Madrasahs* in different parts of Bengal. 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: 106). *Darasbari*, a locality 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) from the debris of *Darasbari* supports that a *Jami’ Masjid* was erected in 1479 (Dani, 1960: 31). A few yards away on the eastern side of the *Masjid*, another structural site was discovered which could have been 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), which records the construction of *Madrasah* in 1502 (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, while the *Madrasah* building was finally completed in the reign of Ala’ al-Din Husayn Shah in 1502-04 (Yaqub Ali, 1985: 423). The inscription begins with the well-known *Ī adġth* “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, 2003: 830). It indicates that it was a higher educational institution. The name *Darasbari* (teaching house) 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), which continued to flourish afterwards. It was rebuilt by Khan Jahan Zafar Khan in 1313 during the reign of Shams al-Din Firuz Shah (1301-1322) (Ali, 2003: 832). The *Navagrama* (a village in Tarash of Pabna) inscriptions support the idea of having an academy of learning together with a *Masjid*, a *Madrasah* in the *Khittah Simlabad* during the reign of Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (1442-1459) (Yaqub Ali, 1985: 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 1502, testifies to 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 belong to one of *Gaur* (*Blochmann*, 1968), while *Stapleton* viewed that the *Madrasah* either of *Darasbari* or *Belbari* (*Stapleton*, 1930). *Ghiyath al-Din Azam Shah* (1392-1410), a famous *Sultan* of Bengal founded *Madrasahs* at the two holy cities of *Makkah* and *Medina* (*Karim*, 1987). The *Madrasah* provided advanced learning on different branches of Islamic sciences specially *Ilm-al-Fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence. This information testifies to the extent the *Sultans* of Bengal patronized education whether 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, it may be concluded that *Madrasahs* were set up in almost all the administrative centers 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*.

**Majilis or academy/seminary:** Besides *Madrasah*, another kind of learning center, known as *Majilis*, grew up in different places in Bengal. 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: 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 *Tafsīr*, *ʾadlth*, *Fiqh*, literature and even various branches of natural sciences. With the growth of *Majilises*, a significant 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. Some examples of *Majilis*, developed in Bengal, are described as follows:

**Tabrizabad:** The learning center of Shaikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi at *Deotala* of Pandua was one of the earliest *Majilises*. The site of his academic center 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 13<sup>th</sup> century (Karim, 1985: 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), Nasir al-Din Nusrat Shah (1519-1531) and Sulaiman Karrani (1566-1572), he constructed one '*Jami*' (university) and two other *Masjids* there (Ali, 2003C: 833). His circle gradually extended towards Pandua. Several old buildings there indicate that a *Masjid*, two *Chillakhanas* (seminar buildings), a *Tanurkhana* (Kitchen) and a *Bhandarkhana* (storehouse) were set up by Shaikh Tabrizi. These architectural remains indicate that the center was largely equipped with the boarding-lodging facilities for the scholars and learners. The center was supported by several personal and government endowments including of *Bais Hazari* estate (twenty-two thousand *bighas* of landed property) by the government.

**Sonargaon:** Another important learning centre was founded at Sonargaon, near 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) and then to Bengal accompanying his pupil Sharf al-Din Yahya Maneri from Bihar in the late 13<sup>th</sup> century (Ali, 2003: 834). Shaikh Abu Tawama was a highly learned personality who excelled in diverse branches of knowledge including religious studies, chemistry, natural science, etc. He built an academy at Sonargaon, which soon earned its fame as an excellent center 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 *Tafsīr*,

×*adʿth*, *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 center at Maner of Bihar. Shaikh Abu Tawama was buried in Sonargaon, near his center. He wrote a famous book on Sufism ‘Maqamat’ (Karim, 1985: 96-102). The institution continued to be a great centre of learning for long time after his death. It produced illustrious scholars like Sharf al-Din Yahya Maneri and a good number of scholars came here such as Shaikh Alaul Haque, Shaikh Anwar, Shaikh Rafi al-Din, and Shaikh Zahid. Thus, this *Majilis* played an important role in spreading education in East Bengal during the successive period of Bengal Sultanate.

**Pandua:** Another seminary together with a hospital was organized by Shaikh Ala-al-Haque at Pandua, an important trading and learning center of medieval Bengal. Shaikh Ala-al-Haque devoted to the promotion of education and cultural pursuits there by establishing seminary, which was equipped with the boarding-lodging and hospital facilities for scholars and learners. After the death of Shaikh Ala-al-Haque in 1398, Shaikh Nur Qutb al-Alam, his son and student, continued to run the center. 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 center, 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, 2003: 836-837). Thus, it turned into a centre of spiritual and cultural activities of medieval Bengal.

**Mahisantosh:** Shaikh Taqi al-Din Arabi founded a *Majilis* at Mahisun (Rahim, 1963), identified as Mahisantosh of present Rajshahi district most probably in the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> 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) 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 center in medieval Bengal.

**Gangarampur:** Another important academy was founded at Gangarampur, Dinajpur by Shaikh Ata in the early Sultanate period of Bengal. The center received patronage and support from several Sultans. Sultan Sikandar Shah built a domed structure there in 1363, Sultan Jalal al-Din Fath Shah reconstructed a stone building there in 1482, Sultan Shams al-Din Muzaffar Shah constructed a *Masjid* there, Sultan Ala al-Din Husain Shah constructed another *Masjid* in 1512. All the inscriptions mentioned Shaikh Ata with great respect as ‘Shaikh al-Mashaikh, Qutb al-Aulia, Siraj al-Haq wa al-Shar’ etc (Ali, 2003: 835-836).

**Bagha:** Another important learning centre of Husain Shahi period was founded by Shah Muazzam Danishmand known as Shah Daula at Bagha, Rajshahi (Ahmad, 1960: 212). Sultan Nasir al-Din Nusrat Shah (1519-1531) erected a Jami *Masjid* there in 1523-24 (Ahmad, 1960: 214), and centering this *Masjid*, a learning center was developed. From the accounts of Abdul Latif it is known that Hawda Mian ran a learning center 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 center during his time. William Adam in his report marked that ‘The Madrasah at Kushba, Bagha is an endowed institution of long-standing’ (Long, 1868: 112). Thus the institution continued to flourish through generations.

### **Content and curricula of education**

It is difficult to determine the content and course-curricula of education in the institutions developed in Muslim Bengal. The *Maktabs* were the primary educational centers 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 time prayers (*ĪalĒh*), fasting, Pilgrimage (*Īajj*), *zakĒh*, and basic teachings from the Holy Qur’an, *×adĒth* 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 *Maktabs*. As the Muslim children are instructed to start observing prayers at

the age of seven, 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), *UsŪl-al-Fiqh* (Principles of Islamic law), *Tasawwuf* (Mysticism), *Adab* (Literature), *Nahu* (Grammar), *Kalam* (Scholasticism), *Mantiq* (Logic) were mainly taught in the *Madrasah* and *Majilis* (Nizami, 1961). Important *Tafsīr* books, collection of *ḥadīth* like those of *Bukhārī* and *Muslim*, important books on *Fiqh* were used in those institutions. Development of Islamic scripts such as transcribing the *Sahih al-Bukhari* by Muhammad b. Yazdan Bakhsh in 1503 (Karim, 1985), 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: 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: 113-116). The chief aim was to attain such proficiency in the Persian language as might enable them to earn their livelihood (Long, 1868: 29). Analytical study of the Holy Qur'an, *ḥadīth* *Fiqh* and *UŪl-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 centers. 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: 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 center. 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*, *Mu'allim*, *Ustadh*, *Shaikhs*, *Mu'addith*, *Mufassir*, *Faqih* etc.

### **Women education**

There was co-education for both the boys and girls at primary level in the *Maktabs*. 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.

### **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 centers. Gradually *Pathshala*, which developed as primary educational center 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 centers. Adam mentioned the number of *Pathshalas* of some districts: Midnapore 548, Murshidabad 62, Birbhum 407, Burdwan 629, and Dinajpur 119 (Long, 1868: 153-156). Together with the Hindu religious education, Sanskrit and Bangla languages were also taught there. It is reported that "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: 97). For higher education, *Tole* was developed in the Hindu society, where learning was practiced only through the *Sanskrit* language. It was affordable only for the upper class people of Hindu society such as *Brahman* and *Kshatriya*. Hindu religious teaching was the core together with courses such as history, philosophy, astronomy etc. *Nabadvip* was the principal centre of education for the Hindus. Among other important Hindu educational centers, *Saptagram*, *Sylhet*, and *Chittagong* were well known, where students and religious devotees gathered to satisfy their educational and spiritual needs (Islam, 2003, v-3: 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 one 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: 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: 153, 164).

### **Characteristics of educational system**

From the above description, the following general characteristics are identified:

- Education was provided free.
- There was no discrimination based on caste and creed in providing educational facility.
- Lodging-boarding-medical facilities together with educational materials including books-papers and even clothing were also provided free of cost 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 centers were 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 were determined by the respective teachers and heads.
- Teachers and students could move freely from one institution to another 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.

### **Conclusion**

Islam and education are inseparable. Islam puts high importance on education. In fact, seeking for knowledge, researching on it and its dissemination are considered worship in Islam. Therefore, Muslim political authorities, societies and families have always seen education with high regard. From the beginning of Islam and throughout its civilizational spread and development, cultivation of knowledge and education remained at the center.

The Bengal region under the Turko-Afghan sultanate (1204-1576) experienced equal vigor in patronizing and developing educational system and facilities. Even though the state patronized education extensively, it never maintained an official ministry for education. However, the duty and responsibility of education during the time was taken as collective one. Rich landlords, religious saints, scholars and social philanthropists mainly patronized

the education through personal and social initiatives. States always subsidized through allocating waqf lands and large sums of donations. As such traditional institutions of education developed. Initially attached to the mosques, these institutions later gained separate identities such as maktab, madrasa, and majlis with particular level of education.

During the Turko-Afghan sultanate in Bengal the education system was much systematized, developed, and it was made a public commodity offered and shared by public-private joint undertaking. The content and quality of the education was excellent and comprehensive. The system of education they developed was capable of providing a high degree of intellectual training. The system was founded on principles not wholly unsound, though presented in an antiquated form, and was infinitely superior to any other system of education then existing in India (Hunter, 1872). It may therefore be concluded that a very moderate educational system developed in Bengal during the times of Turko-Afghan Sultanate in Bengal (1204-1576).

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