



Aspects of Tolerance and Violence under the Late Mughal Ruling Groups of Bengal in the Eyes of Contemporary Counter-Narrative

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Abstract

*Many prominent historians have studied Mughal Bengal's history in depth, focusing on either the larger politico-military history or the administrative functions of ruling houses. The shift in writing socio-cultural history in a few aspects can be credited to R.C. Majumdar, Atul Chandra Roy, Tapan Raychaudhuri, and Anjali Chatterjee. However, despite their genius scholarship, these authors remained deficient in producing a total history of Mughal Bengal under the shadow of scientific historical methodology, as there was an incessant competition among them to create separate historiographies. That's why it has opened several research gaps to rewrite the history of Mughal Bengal. This paper is an analysis of conflict against the established historical paradigm known as "syncretism." The study is based on late-seventeenth-century counter-narratives of Mughal ruling groups, which have been completely avoided in the previous works. We will conduct a detailed analysis based on the primary Persian narratives of the time, as translated by Francis Gladwin from Salimullah's original Persian work, *Tarikh-i-Bangala*.*

Keywords: *Bengal, Medieval, Counter-Narrative, Mughal, Aurangzeb, Azim-us-Shan.*

Introduction

Before beginning this analysis, we must define exactly what "counter-narrative" means in this study. Commonly, narrative refers to stories, telling, and accounts of connected events, mostly derived from the past. Michel Foucault, a postmodernist scholar, insisted on narrative studies by challenging traditional historiographies. Although this paper is not that kind of an academic exertion. In this context, "counter-narrative" refers to a revision of medieval Indian history writings that are not formally oriented to any school and are not based on preconceived notions. Such allegations can be directed at the earlier Hindu and

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Muslim nationalist historians, and similarly to the Marxists or left-linear authors who tried to establish their respective approaches depending upon the specific sources. In this respect, several generalizations have been settled for medieval Indian history, viz., 1. the Sultanate and the Mughals were invaders who had no contribution to India, 2. the medieval rulers were not always intolerant in their treatment of infidels, and 3. the conflicts between the Hindu and Muslim ruling houses were not political but religious. 4. The action of temple demolition and the policy of conversion were not taken by the ruling house and had no impact on the larger society. 5. Emperor Akbar was always great, and Aurangzeb was only a fanatic. It is clear from those above-mentioned facets that either these conclusions were made depending upon specific sources or there was an invisible crisis of scientific historical perception.

The condition of writing a true history has lost its basis since the beginning of colonial historiography, which has made a great contribution to the formation of professional historical studies in India but also generated many more negative impressions for India. As a reaction, nationalist historians went to demonstrate India's great heritage in order to refute colonial ideas. Nevertheless, there was also some disease among nationalist scholars that cannot be denied who were indirectly influenced by the colonial model of Indian history, precisely in the context of periodization, like Hindu, Muslim, and British periods. Even so, sometimes they grouped themselves as Hindu and Muslim nationalists, which later inspired the communal "two-nation theory." The advent of Marxist historiography revolutionizes the academic circle, imparting new modes of authorship in the post-independence period. No one can indeed reject their relevance if it's concerned with the materialist interpretation of Indian history, even today. But being the dominant writers of Indian history, they have always assessed every aspect of medieval India, either in terms of economic perception or as a dynamic model of politics and socio-cultural relationships. Hence, they have disregarded many essential subjects that are controversial. It is high time that we save history from the tussles of different schools by insisting more upon scientific historical study for every period so that we can present an unblemished picture of our past to the forthcoming generation. However, we know that it is quite a difficult task for us because we are born as human beings, we are made of bone and blood, and it is very difficult to be unbiased because we are bound by various psychological behaviors on account of our diverse environment. In our pursuit of history, we can at least try to get as close to the truth as possible.

Methodology

Since this work is not archival, it is therefore based on one published, translated Persian source and a few secondary works. The Persian text is known as "Tarikh-iBangala," and it describes the major political events in Bengal from the last decades of Emperor Aurangzeb to the eve of the battle of Plassey, including the viceroyships of Azeem-us-Shan, Jaffar Khan, Shuja Khan, Sirafrax Khan, and Alyvardy Khan, respectively. There is a background story about its composition; it is said that Henry Vansittart, the Governor of Fort William, Calcutta (1760–4), appointed Salimullah to write the history of the Bengal Subah. Salimullah covered the history of sixty years (1695–1756) up to the time of Alivardi Khan. His work appeared in regional political history, and it was useful for the British rulers. After twenty-five years, Francis Gladwin translated *Tarikh-iBangala* into English in 1788 and

entitled it "A Narrative of the Transactions in Bengal during the Subahdarees of Azeem-us-Shan, Jaffar Khan, Shuja Khan, Sirafraz Khan, and Alyvardy Khan." Salimullah's *Tarikh-i-Bangalah* was completed in 1763 (2020:6). The study of this historical framework of the counter-narrative is not a new initiative in medieval Indian discourse. We have carefully noticed this aspect in the earlier secondary works like those of Athar Ali, Aziz Ahmed, and Raziuddin Aquil. M. Athar Ali wrote *Mughal India*, which is a collection of his essays, but regretfully he was unable to see its printed version due to his sudden demise. However, Irfan Habib took on the great task of publishing this work with his introduction. There are some important chapters here, such as "Sulh-i-Kul and the Religious Ideas of Akbar," in which he discovers that Akbar's deeply rooted goal behind his religious policy was "a process of forming an integrated nobility, including Hindus and Shias, and diminishing the power of hostile classes" (2008:169). Through his other work, entitled "The Religious World of Jahangir," he gave equal dignity to emperor Jahangir for his harmonious religious policy (2008:196). In one of his articles, "Epic and Counter-Epic in Medieval India," Aziz Ahmed shows how great poets like Amir Khusrau, who considered the victory of the Sultans as the victory of Islam, even praised their valor for destroying idolatry (2006:39). Simultaneously, he also brings forward the example of Malik Muhammad Jayasi, who was born into a Muslim family but brought up in an atmosphere of Hindu neighbors. Gradually influenced by the folklore of Hindus, he became a prominent author of the Hindu epic of resistance, through which he glorified the Rajputs against the Muslim rulers (2006:45). Prof. Raziuddin Aquil, a genius medievalist from Delhi University, has identified in his book entitled "Sufism, Culture, and Politics: Afghans and Islam in Medieval North India" the political roles, predictions, miraculous actions, and most notably their hostile attitudes towards infidels, as they often used to inspire the soldiers to participate in a holy war or Jihad against the non-Muslim chieftains (2012:204).

Act of Violence during the Viceroyship of Azim us-Shan

The beginning of the viceroyalty of Prince Azim-us-Shan in Bengal witnessed so many rebellions or skirmishes that took place in different corners of Bengal. We have instances of discontent by Shobha Singh, a petty zamindar of the Chandrakona subdivision of Midnapur, who, with the assistance of Rahim Khan, an Afghan chief, revolted against Krishnaram Ray, the zamindar of Burdwan. However, the Dutch were also involved in this clash to subdue the rebellion. The actions of Shobha Singh seem to be very aggressive in this condition. In this regard, we have a long terracotta inscription from the eka-ratna brick temple of Gopinath of the Das family, which speaks of Sobha Singh as more than a cruel zamindar. He mercilessly ordered his men to cut off the head of Shyama Das, who was said to have been the founder of this temple (2000:349). This fact contradicts the common explanation offered by a group of authors who claim that oppression in this period was always directed from the Mughals toward non-Muslims. Undoubtedly, it is true that so many incidents are like that. But, very surprisingly, we have another piece of evidence from a contemporary Bengali poet, Krishnaram, who wrote a panegyric of Emperor Aurangzeb:

"Aurangzeb, the ruler of the land, is more dreadful than the fiercest enemy. And his kingdom is said to be Ram-Rajya"(1374 BS:13)

Here we can see that the notions of power and exploitation are varied from one to another, and one common justification for selective circumstances is not historically appropriate as far as the above two motives are concerned.

In this discourse, we have to examine Azim-us-Shan's policies during his Bengal Subahdari. After fixing his residence at Burdwan, he built a palace and a mosque as symbols of royalty. He used to attend Islamic theological discourses gathered by scholars on this subject, imitating Emperor Aurangzeb. He resumed tax collection, which had been suspended in previous articles. But in this regard, he promptly initiated discriminatory policy among the Muslims, Hindus, and Europeans, and directed that "Muhammadans (Muslims) should pay two and a half percent, and the Hindoos and Europeans five percent" (1788:24). We have noticed in this period that the Sufi saints played vital roles in the formation of any ruling house or the accession of monarchs to the throne. There was an established belief among the rulers that the blessings of Sufi saints brought prosperity, durability, and peace to their reign. As a result, Azim us Shan had the same opportunity in Burdwan when he met Sufi Baizeed (Byazid), who was well-known for his sanctity at the time. An interesting story is that Azim sent his two sons, Sultan Farrukhsiyar and Sultan Karimuddin (Muhammad Karim Mirza), to invite him to his court. Being proud of his superior status, Karimuddin did not descend from his horse; on the contrary, Farrukhsiyar eagerly went to visit him with huge respect and veneration. The Sufi placed him in the palanquin with the hand of Farruksiyar and said, "You are a king, seat yourself; and may the almighty prove favourable to your wishes." (1788:26) Farruksiyar and the Sufi together reached the court in one palanquin, and Azim us Shan took him to his chamber. Azim came here to ask for his blessing so that he could be the next emperor after the current one died. The Sufi answered, "That which you require, I have already bestowed upon Farruksiyar; my prayer, like the arrow which has left the bow, cannot be recalled" (1788:26). Hearing these unexpected words from the Sufi, Azim Us Shan was bitterly dissatisfied, but he controlled himself, knowing the further effect of the Sufi's anger, and bid him farewell with great honor.

Azim-us-Shan and Tolerant Perception

Nonetheless, we have seen Azim Us Shan's dealings, such as his discriminatory tax collection methods, fondness for Islamic seminaries, and patronage of Sufis. But we also have Azim's liberal participation in many Hindu ceremonies, such as playing holy and wearing a yellow or crimson turban during the Basant (spring) festival (1788:29). Emperor Aurangzeb was very much disappointed by such an act of his son Azim us Shan and wrote a strict letter to him, saying, "to wear a yellow turban, and a crimson robe at the age of forty-six is making a blessed used on your beard" (1788:29).

We can draw attention to Azim us Shan's tolerant aspiration through another of his acts. It was a case from Murshid Quli Khan's time. A fakir asked for charity from Brindaban, a talukdar, who, having been displeased by his manner, drove the fakir away from his house. Later, the fakir, collecting several bricks, constructed a petty mosque on Brindaban's road and called the people for prayer. Whenever he saw Brindaban passing, the way he used to vociferate Azaan, he became enraged and threw down some of the bricks from the wall and

abused the fakir. This fakir petitioned Murshid Quli Khan, also known as Jaffar Khan, to sentence Brindaban to death. Although Murshid Quli was not willing to do that and asked the Qazi whether there was any provision to save this person, all his efforts were futile. Brindaban, on the other hand, was granted mercy by Azim-u-Shan on behalf of Emperor Aurangzeb. Regretfully, Brindaban was already killed by the Qazi's arrow. Azim-ud-Shan was bitterly displeased by this wrongdoing and wrote to the emperor that Qazi Mohammad Sharif killed Brindaban out of his madness. But the emperor replied, "Qazi Sharif is on the side of God" (1788:119).

In that case, we should make one generalization between the approaches: firstly, we must admit Azim Us Shan's liberal involvement with regional culture is contradictory to his father's expectation of adopting the above practices, and secondly, we should not refute his narrow policy of taxation in which he gave much exemption for Muslims and less for the infidel Hindus and Europeans.

Acts of Murshid-Quli-Khan

Murshid Quli Khan is another prominent Bengali figure of the twentieth century. Sir Jadunath Sarkar informed us that he was actually born as a Hindu but later converted to Islam. Over time, he had become an endearing associate of Emperor Aurangzeb because of his role in providing Shariah-based instruction on imperial finance strategies. Murshid Quli Khan is best known for his dynamic initiative of the Bengal province's revenue system, replacing Jagirdari with the Malzamini system; he was also the founder of the famous late Mughal Bengal city "Murshidabad." However, many details about Murshid Quli Khan have gone unnoticed in previous works, which provide both positive and negative perspectives on him.

At the very beginning of his rule, he advised several strict orders for the Zamindars; examples can be taken from the course of his actions, like the fact that he displaced the less trusted Zamindars, he did not allow the inferior Zamindars in public access, and he neither permitted the local Rajahs nor any of his officers to be seated in his presence. One fact of his narrowmindedness appeared when he forbade the riding of Zamindars and Hindus in a palanquin and merely allowed them to use straight bamboos for their travels. expertise in revenue administration Murshid Quli Khan knew that the Hindus had hereditary experience in revenue administration; in this regard, we have seen that Emperor Aurangzeb was also much more dependent on his Hindu chief finance minister, Raghunatha. The same goes for Murshid Quli Khan as well, because he employed none but Bengali Hindus in the matter of revenue collections. Here the reasons were two, of which one was convenient power dominance and another was the theocratic approach, as he understood that they could easily be discovered from malpractices committed in the name of punishment. But we have a very bad impression of him because when he detected that a Hindu Amil or Zamindar had dissipated the revenue and failed to balance the report properly, at that time he forced this perpetrator, his wife, and children to be converted to Islam. Many times, we have noticed in previous scholarly works of renowned historians who have frequently rejected this forceful process of conversion or skilfully attempted to overlook them through multiple exaggerated

historiographical dimensions meant to please a specific group of dominant readers who control our academia. Upholding this above evidence, we cannot just deny the entity of "forceful conversion" in our period of study equally with other good circumstances.

Another remarkable divine orientation of Murshid Quli Khan can be seen in one of his acts, which occurred during his first phase of Subedari: the Katwal of Hoogly forcibly abducted a girl from her father's house, but the faujdar of this place, Ahsanullah, was unable to intervene on its behalf. The father of this helpless girl carried the complaint to Murshid Quli Khan, and hearing this from him, he promulgated that the criminal should be stoned to death by the ordinance of the Holy Quran.

One of the most sensitive issues in medieval Indian history is temple destruction or the construction of mosques after destroying temples, which has been understudied in our modern historical writings in order to emphasize more on economic and political aspects. We have a wonderful scientific work by Richard M. Eaton entitled "Temple Desecration and the Indo-Muslim States," in which he explains the modes of temple demolition from early medieval to late Mughal times. He defined the instances of temple destruction in early medieval Hindu kingdoms, where he has shown how conflicting Hindu kingdoms attacked the temples of each other and plundered the "Rastra Devata" (state deity), which symbolized their hereditary worship. Here, Eaton tried to identify the cause of the attack as being to diminish the enemy state's glory. In his study of both the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods, he interpreted this process on two grounds: firstly, temple desecration and state-building, where he described the same reason for raiding temples as mentioned in the case of early medieval India: to curb the authority of the respective Hindu state. Secondly, he also analyzed another facet of temple protection and state maintenance, in which he enumerated how the medieval ruling house conserved many temples under their care. But Eaton has not properly defined the manner of replacing the temples with a mosque in this period, even though no such case has been adequately cited in his work from the later Mughal period. As we are working on Murshid Quli Khan, we have some notable examples of this process that should be considered a reflection of his intolerance.

It appeared that Murshid Quli Khan's health declined in his last life, and he became much more concerned about heaven and hell. He also ordered the construction of his tomb and a mosque, following in the footsteps of Muslim monarchs. He appointed a person named Murad to supervise this work. He pitched upon a spot located in the Khas Taluk of the city's east side. But the most heinous job he did was by pulling down all the Hindu temples nearby and using the materials for erecting the new work. The Zamindars had the intent to protect the temples, even using bribes, but this was not allowed. Here we can look at the cases of violence under the direct authority of this ruling group. In the remote villages close to Murshidabad, many of the Hindu houses were threatened with destruction, though some of them were forgiven instead of receiving payments. The officer compelled the servants of Hindus of all ranks to work for the construction unless they paid for their release.

Conclusion

Thus, we have discussed various facts hitherto unnoticed in earlier works in which we tried to be as impartial as possible. There has been a long-established belief in composite identity in medieval Bengal, but these facts defined the contrary facets of late Mughal Bengal. Indeed, an unblemished picture of that era has been painted in order to revisit historical approaches. This paper correctly elucidated the phenomenal comparative outlook of medieval India by using the examples of the two most prominent Mughal viceroys, Azim-Us-Shan and Murshid Quli Khan, who have never been included in many previous works. Through this study, we may conclude that both violence and tolerance existed equally in medieval Bengal.

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