

CONVERSION OF TEMPLE: AN EXAMPLE OF SOCIAL FUSION IN COASTAL BENGAL DURING EARLY MEDIEVAL TIMES

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Abstract

Triveni in Hooghly district of West Bengal was one of the most important cultural and as well as seafaring zone of coastal Bengal during early-medieval times. Several surveys were made here by many Colonial Administrators and Orientalists. W.W. Hunter and H.F. Blochmann were among them. Indian historian Rakhal Das Bandyopadhyaya was well aware about the place. However the present text mainly dealt with the various aspects of a famous mosque of Triveni named Zafar Khan Gazi Mosque. On the basis of various historical data available so far, it can be concluded that socio-cultural fusion and changes had been taken place at Triveni and the surrounding area constantly since early times. Tribeni was located two miles away from the bustling port of Saptagram which was also referred to as Satgaon or Satgan in ancient texts. But by the end of thirteenth century this Saptagram had effectively been replaced by Tamralipti or Tamluk, because it was gradually begun to dry up as a port since eighth century, though it was the most important “entrepôt” of trade in the deltaic lower Bengal. It is one of the famous places mentioned in the bengali ‘maṅgalakābya’ verse poetry. Images of Buddhas in the Bhumisparśa Mudra, image of Parsvatanatha, the twenty-third Tirthamkara, the coils of the serpent, ornate vase from which issues the stalks of some creeper, Goddess Saraswati with a veena in hand, Laksmi with a lotus stalk in her hand, three images bear inscriptions on their backs while the fourth is an image of Vishnu recognisable by the Gada and many other relics are available there in the mosque. Hence we have many questions which remain unsolved due to lack of actual research on the issue.

Keywords: *Triveni, Saptagram, Parsvatanatha, Buddhas, maṅgalakābya, Saraswati, Laksmi, Vishnu, W.W. Hunter, H.F. Blochmann, Rakhal Das Bandyopadhyaya, Siddhamatrika, sutradhar-artists, SitaVivahah, KharaTrisirasor= Vadhah, Sri-RamenaRavanaVadhah, Sri-Sita-Nirvasah, Sri Ramabhishek, BharataAbhishek, DhrishtadyumnaDussasanayor= Yuddham, Chanura-vadhah, Sri-Krishna Banasurayor=Yuddham, KamsaVadhah.*

There is an old mosque called Zafar Khan Ghazi Mosque at Triveni in the Hooghly district of West Bengal. Triveni is a junction of three rivers Bhagirathi, Yamuna and Saraswati. Zafar Khan was enigmatic figure there in Hooghly region since 1298 A.D. to 1313 A.D. and variously seen as the spearhead of the Turkish conquest in late thirteenth-century Bengal, a harbinger of early Islam, and a founder of the first Sufi lineages in the region.¹ He was the first Muslim ruler there and contemporary to bengali ‘maṅgalakābya’ verse poetry. Now the place is a mix of faith for both the Believer and Non-Believer.

During early-medieval times Bhatpara, Guptipara and the surrounding area of Tribeni was the center of cultural practices of Sanskrit. I take this place as “Coastal Bengal” because material

remains and historical experiences have been taken into consideration.²Etymologically the word “Coast” is defined as the adjoining part of land and the sea or water. But the word “Coastal” broadly means the attributes of or near to a coast. Hence coastal regions are the meeting line of the sub aerial and marine process of erosion and deposition. This Triveni was a major center of trade and commerce since the time of the Pala and the Sena dynasties and especially during the period of Turkish conquest in the thirteenth century.³During early-medieval times Tribeni was located two miles away from the bustling port of Saptagram which was also referred to as Satgaon or Satgan. But by the end of thirteenth century this Saptagram had effectively been replaced by Tamralipti or Tamluk, because it was gradually begun to dry up as a port since eighth century, thought it was the most important “*entrepôt*” of trade in the deltaic lower Bengal.⁴

Zafar Khan and his associations with the place Tribeni tell us about the relationship between history, folklore, and myth during the advent of Islam in Bengal. Originally this Mosque and Tomb was probably a Hindu temple. I am using the word “probably” because there are ample evidences of Buddhist and Jain religious cult. For Example, on the base there are four Buddhas in the Bhumisparsa Mudra, separated from each other by a small pilaster set in a recess. The inscription of Ruknuddin Barbak Shah has been incised on the back of the lower portion of an image of Parsvanatha, the twenty-third Tirthamkara. The feet of the image still remain noticeable and behind them are seen the coils of the serpent. On each side of the image is an exquisitely ornate vase from which issues the stalks of some creeper. The pedestal below is also ornamented with neatly arranged coils of snakes. These are the few examples. Hence primarily it might have been either a Buddhist pilgrimage site or Jain religious site. But it is needed a deep research to confirm.

Regarding Hindu cult we find Goddess Saraswati with a veena in hand and Laksmi with a lotus stalk in her hand. A closer examination shows that the room is an Antarala of the Hindu temple still standing intact, The plinth, the walls, door jambs, lintels, are all constructed of the same material. The fallen doorjamb, which is lying on the ground in front, may be replaced very easily. A small niche at the bottom contains a female figure, and by the side of the niche two squatting *Takas* bear Square ornamented pilasters supported on flower vases on their Backs. There are four images close to mihrabs, three images bear inscriptions on their backs while the fourth is an image of Vishnu recognisable by the Gada. Hence the temple at Triveni was most probably a Vaisnava Temple.

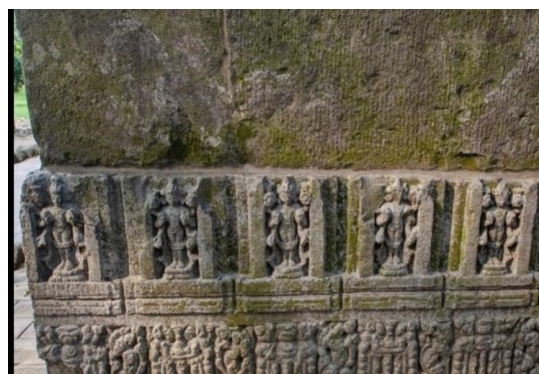


Image-I (Hindu God and Goddesses on South wall plinth) Image-II (Sculptures of Hindu God and Goddesses on South wall plinth); Images Captured by camera on 25th June 2022

Even today, the story of Ramayana is disclosed in Siddhamatrika Bengali script on the wall here.⁵ The words of Krishna from Mahabharata are also engraved on the wall. Besides there are various sculptures of Buddhist and Jain religion all over the wall proves such thinking reasonable. Here people of all religions irrespective of Hindu, Buddhists and Muslims come to pay their respects still now.



Image-III (Inscriptions in Siddhamatrika/Proto-Bengali scripts) Image-IV (Door Jumb similar to Buddhist and Jain Structures); Images Captured by camera on 25th June 2022

Most interestingly, Zafar Khan Ghazi's ruling period was end of the 13th century to very beginning of the 14th century. But all the sculptures we see in this mosque date back to the twelfth century or older than that. For this reason the term 'Early Medieval Age' is used in the present text. Even the date might have been older than I mentioned in the text.

The story of Ramayana and the story of Mahabharata which are engraved on the walls of the mosque and existence of sculptural signs of Buddhism and Jainism there indicate cultural fusion and change in large scale. That means people of Triveni and its surrounding area have changed their religion time to time but the mark of their worship is still present there.

There is a rumour that materials from the nearby Krishna temple were used during construction of the mosque. If it happened then there might have been sculptural revelation of Krishna cult or stories from Mahabharata. But why be there stories of Ramayana or traces of Buddhism and Jainism? It's a major question. Besides, in some cases there have been many attempts to destroy the sculptures of Hindu God and Goddesses by cutting off their noses and mouths with chisel. In some cases sculptures have been turned upside down. It has to be accepted that this is the proof of the religious madness of the Turks on the soil of Bengal. Still Zafar Khan Ghazi's eldest son Bara Khan Ghazi is the popular and holy name of the region. He married a daughter of a royal family of the region who was a Ganga devotee.

The contribution of the Bengali sutradhar-artists remains alive in the creation of architecture and sculpture here. The decorations seen in the mosque depict various stories and narrative of early-medieval times. Apart from this, many stories of the social life of that time can also be seen in these mosque decorations. This mosque definitely was a Vishnu or Vaishnava temple during Hindu rule. But before that it might have been either a Buddhist pilgrimage site or Jain religious site. But it is needed deep research to confirm. Later on the Muslim rulers converted it into a Mosque and Dargah. Primarily the entrance of the temple was facing the river but after conversion the high entrance was closed with latticed window. Many idols of Hindu Gods and Goddesses are there. Hence the original structures of the mosque were renovated

many a times. Some of the scenes from Ramayana and Mahabharata which are depicted on the exterior walls are⁶:-

[From Ramayana]

SitaVivahah

KharaTrisirasor=Vadhah

Sri-RamenaRavanaVadhah

Sri-Sita-Nirvasah, SriRamabhishek

BharataAbhisek

[Mahabharata]

DhrishtadyumnaDussasanayor=Yyuddham

Chanura-vadhah

Sri-Krishna Banasurayor=Yyuddham

KamsaVadhah

The use of mythological objects in temple shrines even in coastal Bengal has been a customary practice. A 9th century AD Buddhist temple at Paharpur in Present-day Bangladesh also features several plaques depicting the story of the Ramayana. From these things, the way of life of the contemporary people, their religious beliefs and even various aspects of their culture can be easily traced. We all know that religious and social change does not happen easily. There must have conflicts between or among local communities. Triveni and the surrounding areas of Hooghly have precedents for such incidents, as I find in several references.



Image-V ('MannalaGhat', Vase, Hindu God); Image Captured by camera on 25th June 2022

W.W. Hunter and H.F. Blochmann made a broad survey there and prepared an account of oral history and first-hand observations which are particularly valuable to recreate the historical narratives. One instance I want to mention here, the first tenets of Islam in Bengal, nephew of Zafar Khan, Shah Safiuddin once hosted a large feast during the circumcision ceremony of his son at Pandua in Hooghly district, for which he killed a cow. This was the time during which a Hindu king, known as the Pandu Raja, had just banned the slaughter of cows in the nearby region of Mahanad or Mahanath in Hooghly. When Raja Pandu came to know the incidents later seized Safiuddin's son and offered as a human sacrifice at the altar of a temple of the Goddess Kali there.⁷ But W. W. Hunter recorded different version of the story that, the king sacrificed his own son who was born on the day of cow-slaughter.⁸ After this

incident Delhi Sultan sent a large army under the leadership of Zafar Khan to suppress the king Pandu. Primarily Raja Pandu won the battle but later on he was defeated.



Image-VI (From western wall of Dargah) Image-VII (Sculptures of different God and Goddesses on western wall and sculptures of deities turned upside down); Images Captured by camera on 25th June 2022

On the basis of all these historical evidences and based on the various historical data available so far, it can be concluded that socio-cultural fusion and changes had been taken place constantly at Triveni and the surrounding area. The 7th century account of Hiuen Tsang indicates that there were large numbers of Buddhists and Jains in the region.⁹ Although there are many Buddhist and Jain sculptures, but their script is sorely lacking. Now the question comes, was a large part of the people here illiterate in the 7th and 8th centuries? This must be a matter of discussion. However, later on spread of Brahmanism in the region changed the whole scenario. Here also have question, whether the strictures of Brahmanical casteism were present there. It is also deserves discussion. Because the script we find there is of the period under discussion. It seems that people had some knowledge of letters at that time and this trend was continued during Muslim rule.

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5. Bandyopadhyaya, Rakhal Das, "Saptagrama or Satganw", *JOURNAL & PROCEEDINGS OF THE ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BENGAL*, New Series, Vol.V, Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta, 1910, Plate. II. ; [I went to Triveni on 25th June 2022 and have found those scripts are still there. I have taken some photos which I put in this article].
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