

# History of Religion in North Bengal from 750 CE to 1947 CE: A Historical Study

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## Abstract:

The northern part of undivided Bengal lying to the north of the river Ganges or Padma and bounded by the Mahananda in the West, the Karatoya in the east and the kingdom of Kamarupa in the north was known as the Pundra Kingdom in the ancient period of history. The study focuses on socio-economic and religious background in north Bengal. This study explores the origins and expansion of different religions such as Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism, Vaishnavism, Islam, Christianity and various tribal religions in North Bengal. It examines the religious art and architecture in North Bengal. Here mentions Adina mosque, Bara Sona mosque founded by sultanate rulers. North Bengal have been ruled by different dynasties under different names such as - Pragjyotishpur, Kamrup, Kamatapur, Cooch Behar, Pundravardhana or Paundravardhana, Barindra, Gaur. There are various indigenous communities, such as Rajbansi, Rabha, Meche, Koch, Bhutia, Lepcha, Munda, Santhal, and Oraon. The majority of people in North Bengal are Hindus. Jainism was almost originated at the same time with the Buddhism in Northern Bengal. During the Pala rule, Buddhism spread throughout Bengal. This study applied analytical research methodology and empirical research methodology for the collection and analysis of data. This study is based on the literary and archaeological sources. It covers by review literatures, research questions, research objectives, research methodology and references.

**Key words:** Religion, North Bengal, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism.

## Introduction:

The history of religion is the study of the religious beliefs, thoughts, and feelings of humans. It has played a significant role in shaping human civilization, influencing various aspects of society, including culture, governance, ethics, and knowledge.

The northern part of undivided Bengal lying to the north of the river Ganges or Padma and bounded by the Mahananda in the West, the Karatoya in the east and the kingdom of Kamarupa in the north was known as the Pundra Kingdom in the ancient period of history. The same tract of land formed a province first under the Gupta empire and then under the Pala empire, being known as the Pundra-varadhana -bhukti. The Ganges was then flowing through the present south-east course of the Mahananda. Gradually the Ganges shifted several kilometres to the south. Consequently, the Mahananda lengthened its channel to the south-east passing through

Published: 30 May 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i3.301116>

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the bed left by the Ganges. In such a situation it is assumed that the Pundra country as well as the Pundravardhana- bhukti of the Gupta and Pala ages comprised the districts of Rajshahi, Pabna, Bogra, the southern half of the district of Dinajpur and the portion of the district of Malda lying to the north of the Mahananda, all as existing at that of the partition of India in 1947 CE.

There was no separate province or division of government, but it can be said that different parts of North Bengal have been ruled by different dynasties under different names such as - Pragjyotishpur, Kamrup, Kamatapur, Cooch Behar, Pundravardhana or Paundravardhana, Barindra, Gaur etc. During the colonial period, North Bengal meant the territory consisting of eight districts of Rajshahi division namely- Rajshahi, Pabna, Malda, Dinajpur, Bogra, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling. Most of the first six districts were covered by ancient Pundravardhana, Darjeeling district was part of Sikkim, Jalpaiguri district and Cooch Behar state belonged to Kamrup state or Pragjyotishpur.

North Bengal had a glorious past in the legacy of the ancient religions: pre-Vedic religion, Vedic religion, Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism, Vaishnavism. In medieval and colonial times, Islam and Christianity entered into the society of this region. The indigenous people worshiped various powers or deities to protect themselves from natural calamities and disease. There are various indigenous communities, such as, Rajbansi, Rabha, Meche, Koch, Bhutia, Lepcha, Munda, Santhal, and Oraon. The majority of people in North Bengal are Hindus. Jainism was almost originated at the same time with the Buddhism in Northern Bengal. During the Pala rule, Buddhism spread throughout Bengal.

After the establishment of Turkish rule at Gour in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Sufi saint came there and introduced Islam in the large portion of North Bengal. The spread of the Islamic religion in North Bengal among the local lower-class Hindu societies was converted by the help of the sultan of Gour and the liberal humanist Sufi saint of North Bengal. The great number of Muslims of North Bengal were Nashya sheikhs, especially those found in Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North and South Dinajpur, and the Malda district. Nashya sheikh was converted from the people of Hindu religion, namely Rajbangsi, Poliya, Koch, Mech etc. People of different races and castes have come to Bengal from Turkey, Arabia, Iran, Khorasan, Afghanistan, Abyssinia.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the British rule started in India. The English culture criticized feudal and religion- based society like various superstitions of both Hindus and Muslims. They started to spread western education and western culture gradually in our society. The British also wanted to abolish the old things like superstition, religion-based society and orthodox mentality. Christian missionaries established the churches, missionary schools in the village areas to spread Christianity among the people of North Bengal. Their main motive was to spread the Christian religion in India.

### **Statement of the Problem:**

There are several studies on socio-economic and cultural background in North Bengal. But unfortunately, there is no comprehensive and systematic study on the history of religion in North Bengal from 750 CE to 1947 CE. The study will focus on socio-economic and religious

background in north Bengal. This study will also try to understand the origins and expansion of different religions such as Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, Saivism, Vaishnavism, Islam, Christianity and various tribal religions in North Bengal. It will examine the religious art and architecture in North Bengal. There is a research gap regarding a holistic approach to studying the history of religion in North Bengal from 750 CE to 1947 CE.

### **Review of Literature:**

P. K. Palit (2004) in his book 'History of Religion in Tripura' covers the period from early times to 1775 CE., which marks practically the end of the Manikya dynasty when Mr. Ralph Leak was appointed the first British Resident of Tripura. The book deals with geographical and socio-ethnic background of Tripura. The author traces the political background of the pre-Manikya period and its development and progress in the Manikya period till 1775CE. Here discusses the various religious sects in Tripura like Buddhism, Saivism, Vaisnavism, Saktism and other minor sects. It also deals with tribal religion in Tripura. This book discusses the religion of Buddhist tribes, the Maghs and the Chakma. It also describes the origin of the Garia Puja, Ker Puja, Kharchi Puja, Lampra Puja etc.

M. Williams (1883) in his book 'Religious Thought and Life in India' focuses on Vedism, Brahmanism, and Hinduism are the three principal stages or phases of the Hindu religion. This book describes the origin and form of religion among the primitive Aryans. Here discusses the four Vedas Rig-Veda, Yajur-Veda, Sama-Veda and Atharva-Veda and also mentions some gods of Vedas - Agni, Indra, Vayu, Rudra, Savitri. The author examines the four phases of Brahmanism like Ritualistic, Philosophical, Mythological, Nomistic. It explores the distinction between Brahmanism and Hinduism and also defines the inter-relationship and distinction between Saivism and Vaishnavism. It discusses the systems of Saktism, village deities, demon-worship and spirit-worship, hero-worship and saint-worship. This book describes the religious life of the orthodox Hindu householder, Hindu fasts, festivals, holy days. It also mentions the temples, shrines and sacred places. This book explores the modern Hindu Theism.

Jitendra Nath Banerjea (1941) in his book 'Development of Hindu Iconography' focuses on the study of Hindu Iconography. This book discusses about the antiquity, origin and development of image-worship in India. The author describes the Brahmanical divinities, deities and their emblems on early Indian coins and seals. It explores the technique of the Iconoplastic art in India. The book explains the various technical terms and terminologies of Hindu Iconography. It examines the Indian canons of Iconometry.

R. C. Majumder (1943) in his book 'The History of Bengal' deals with physical and historical geography in Bengal. The author discusses the rise of Gaur and Vanga kingdom and also explores the political disintegration after Sasanka. Here describes the origin and history of Pala dynasty and Sena dynasty. The author delves the development of religious ideas and iconography in Bengal. He also examines the religious architecture, sculpture, painting during the Pala and Sena dynasty in Bengal. It deals with ethnological background, Aryanisation of Bengal. This book discusses the brahmanas and non-brahmanas caste. This book examines the socio-religious rites, ceremonies and festivals. The author mentions the Brahmanical religion. He also discusses various religious sects like Jainism and Buddhism, Saivism, Vaishnavism.

C. C. Sanyal (1965) in his book 'The Rajbansis of North Bengal' deals with historical geography, socio-economic and religious background of northern Rajbansis. This book discusses the religious beliefs and practices, divine orders, images, rituals of worship, religious festivals and rituals of the northern Rajbansis people. It mentions some old shrines and deities of Rajbansis people like mecen khela, modon kam, kali, Dhorom thakur, jogannath, gotsupuna, satyanarayan, jitna, othai-pothi, goroknath, devi, bhandani, Luxmi dhak, monosha, utthan-ekadasi, dhan-kata, naya- khawa, baruni, siva-ratri, dham, bisua, chorok, hudma, tista- buri, saleswari, Bhadra kali, dhap-chandi, mahakal, pet-kali. Here describes the census of northern Rajbansis. The author describes the marriage customs, types of marriage, marriage with other castes of Rajbansis. Here discusses the dress and food of Rajbansis people.

D. Roy (2000) in his book 'Dinajpur Jelar Itihas' covers the period from ancient age to modern period. This book discusses the socio-economic and cultural history of Dinajpur. The author explores the history and identity of Devokot, Bangarh, Barendrabhumi. This book mentions various movements of Dinajpur district such as swadeshi movement, non- cooperation movement, extremist movement, Quit movement, caste and tribe movement. It explores the cultural and administrative history of Dinajpur during the reign of Pala and Sena period. This book describes the relations between Hindu and Muslim. Here discusses festivals, rituals, language and literature of Dinajpur people. This book examines the contribution of Sufis for spread of Muslim society in Dinajpur. It also discusses the Afghan and Mughal administration system, religion, social, literature, art and architecture in Dinajpur district. This book mentions the structure of Dinajpur district and police station.

Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi (1983) in his book 'A History of Sufism in India' covers the period from sixteenth century to modern century. This book deals with the Qadiriyya, Shattariyya, Naqshbandiyya and the Chishtiyya orders. It also discusses the role of Indian Sufis in the wider Islamic world, as well as sufi perception of politics and Hinduism. This book gives an account of the important sufi centres and describes the life and teachings of the leading Sufis and their disciples. The work concludes with a summary of the Indian sufic contributions and impact of modernism on sufism. The author describes various Sufis of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.

N. R. Roy (1949) in his book 'Bangalir Itihas: Adi Parba' tries to analyze the social life, economic life, religion, culture and nature of Bengalis. This book discusses the origin of Bengali peoples and characteristics of the land of ancient Bengal. This book also traces on caste patterns, class patterns, village and towns and administrative patterns of Bengal. The author focuses on religious thought and practices, language, literature, and learning and also the fine arts and music. It also describes the various religious sects such as Brahmanism, Saivism, Vaishnavism, Buddhism, Jainism.

M. A. Rahim (1959) in his book 'Social and Cultural History of Bengal (1201- 1576)' delves the geography and social and cultural life of Bengal. This book discusses the name of Bangalah. It also highlights the origin and growth of the Muslims converts from upper class Hindus and Buddhists. This book describes social life of the Bengali Muslims and development of Muslim society. It also discusses festivities, ceremonials, and customs, social ceremonies, marriage, food, dress, ornaments, recreation and social customs in Bengal. The author delves the

interaction of Islam and Hinduism. This book describes the development of the art of warfare in Bengal.

‘History of North Bengal: Colonial Ideology, Entrepreneurship, Society and Culture’ (2020) by Anil Kumar Sarkar and Supam Biswas focuses on the History of North Bengal: colonial ideology, entrepreneurship, Society and Culture from medieval time to the first decade of the twenty-first century. Here discusses the north Bengal region has multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-cultural characteristic. The book delves when Bakhtiyar Khalji became successful in establishing the power of the Delhi sultanate in Bengal, the history and culture of this area opened a new chapter. The delhi sultanate established the cities of gour and pandua which had created a tremendous impact on the life and various activities of the people of this region. This book highlights the Sufi saints played a vital role to spread Islam and created a tolerant atmosphere between Hindus and Muslim.

‘Cultural Plurality and Nation Making in India’ (2015) edited by Sanat k Adhikary and Chandana Saha focuses on Religion in the ancient Pundra Kingdom alias the province of Pundravardhana. This book discusses the god of shiva in North Bengal. Here discusses that Buddhism was in a prosperous condition in the Pundra country in the third century B.C.E, particularly during the reign of Asoka. Dibyavadana mentioned that both Jainism and Buddhism existed in Pundra country (north Bengal) during the reign of Asoka.

‘Exploring the History of Non- Hindu Religious Establishment of Maynaguri’ (2024) by Barsha Agarwalla tries to understand about the spread of Islam and Buddhism in Maynaguri with special reference of Maynaguri Town Mosque and Budhha Shanti Ashramic Bihar. Here discusses Islam entered North Bengal after 1204 CE. It exploring the history of non-Hindu religious establishment of Maynaguri tries to describe the cultural richness of the Maynaguri and enhancing the non-Hindu religion history. It contains a detailed history about Islam and Buddhism of North Bengal and how these religions are flourishing in different parts of North Bengal.

‘Religious and Cultural Syncretism in Medieval Bengal’ (2018) by Md. Shah Noorur Rahman tries to understand the syncretism between the Hindus and the Muslims was revealed in the religious and cultural spheres of life of the Bengalis through Sufism, Pirism, Nathism, Vaishnavism, Kartabhaja sect, Mullaism, life style of the scroll painters.

‘The development and Extinction of Buddhism in Ancient North Bengal’ (2022) by Kalikrishna Sutradhar describes how Buddhism has affected the northern part of Bengal. Here discusses Buddhism spread in Bengal during the reign of Pala period.

### **Objectives:**

1. To explore the Historical Geography, Socio-Economic and Religious background in North Bengal from 750 CE to 1947 CE.
2. To explore the Political History of North Bengal from 750 CE to 1947 CE.
3. To study the Religious History of North Bengal from 750 CE to 1947 CE.
4. To study the Religious Art and Architecture in North Bengal from 750 CE to 1947 CE.

### **Research Questions:**

1. What was the historical geography, socio-economic and religious background in North Bengal from 750 CE to 1947 CE?
2. What was the political history of North Bengal from 750 CE to 1947 CE?
3. What was the religious history of North Bengal from 750 CE to 1947 CE?
4. What was the impact of various religious sects in North Bengal 750 CE to 1947 CE?
5. What were the religious art and architecture in different parts of North Bengal from 750 CE to 1947 CE?

### **Research Methodology:**

For this study, analytical research methodology and empirical research methodology will be applied for the collection and analysis of data. This study is based on the literary and archaeological sources. Analytical research methodology involves the in-depth study and evaluation of available information in an attempt to explain complex phenomenon. Empirical research methodology is also used for this study because this research will be done based on experiences and data collected by the researcher based on observing and measuring the phenomena. This research methodology allows researchers to better monitor and evaluate the impact of field experiments. Empirical research methodology allows to study the field work which involves archaeological sites and remains.

The proposed study will be followed on the basis of primary and secondary sources. The primary sources like inscriptions, monuments, coins (archaeological sources). The secondary sources like relevant books, foreign accounts, articles published in journals, periodicals and proceedings of seminars.

### **Results and Discussion:**

North of the main branch of the Ganges, known as Padma and west of the Brahmaputra lies the extensive region of North Bengal which embraces the modern Rajshahi division and the state of Coochbehar. Geography of North Bengal is not only a geographical expression but a historical development of a geo- historical concept. There was no separate province or division of government, but it can be said that different parts of North Bengal have been ruled by different dynasties under different names such as - Pragjyotishpur, Kamrup, Kamatapur, Cooch Behar, Pundravardhana or Paundravardhana, Barindra, Gaur.

North Bengal is the medium of communication between north East India and aryabarta. North Bengal was the capital city of Bengal during the ancient times. It played an important role after Gupta rulers and Sasanka rule. North- Eastern Region of India was one of the greatest migration region of mankind. There were various races such as Aryans, Alplaine, Iranian, Tibeto, Burman. They were non-Hindus groups in North Bengal. Coochbehar was the main centre of the tribes of Koch, Rajbansi, Poliyas. It gained importance in the history of North Bengal during Muslim rule. During vedic and puranic period, North Bengal was called pragjyotishpur, Kamrupa. After the Maurya period North Bengal became main centre of culture. Here founded large number of Kushan coins. The Muslim attacked in Bengal during the rule lakshman sen ruler of sena dynasty. The dehli sultans of North Bengal established new cities such as Gaur

and Pandua. These cities were great impact on life and different activities of the people of North Bengal.

North Bengal had a great connections with pragjyotishpur, mithila and magadha. Ganga and Mahananda in west, Karatowa in East padma in South and Coochbehar and Terai region in the North. During the sultanate period Varendra as the region eastern part of Ganga and east of Laksmanavati. North Bengal was the centre of political life of Bengal. The Mughal emperor Akbar conquest of Bengal and transfer of capital from Tajmahal to Dhaka. The beginning of Nineteenth century the probability of emergence of a unitary politically controlled geographical region in the North of Ganga and western plains of Brahmaputra developed with the expansion of British commercial and political domination in different parts of north- east India. After the grant of Dewani of Bengal in 1765CE by the English East India Company from the Mughal emperor of Delhi. In the early nineteenth century whole of Bengal divided in five divisions such as Rajshahi, Bardhaman, Presidency, Dhaka and Chattagram. Varendra region was within the Rajshahi division. During the colonial period, North Bengal meant the territory consisting of eight districts of Rajshahi division namely- Rajshahi, Pabna, Malda, Dinajpur, Bogra, Rangpur, Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling. Most of the first six districts were covered by ancient Pundravardhana, Darjeeling district was part of Sikkim, Jalpaiguri district and Cooch Behar state belonged to Kamrup state or Pragjyotishpur.

There are several communities such as the Rajbansi, Rabha, Toto, Lepcha, Mech, Santhal, Munda. The Rajbansi deities such as dharm thakur, tistaburi, garam thakur, kali bishoori. In North Bengal Hinduism gradually increase through the political expansion, sanskritization. Vaishnavism became popular after the bhakti movement led by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu in North Bengal. Buddhism played a major rule in North Bengal during the pala dynasty. Buddhism became popular in the himalayan regions of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. The hills area became centres of Buddhism and Christianity. Other, the plain area became centres of Hindu and Islamic. The establishment of Turkish rule at Gour. the Sufi saint came there and introduced Islam in the large portion of North Bengal. The spread of the Islamic religion in North Bengal among the local lower-class Hindu societies was converted by the help of the sultan of Gour and the liberal humanist Sufi saint of North Bengal. The great number of Muslims of North Bengal were Nashya sheikhs, especially those found in Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, North and South Dinajpur, and the Malda district. Nashya sheikh was converted from the people of Hindu religion, namely Rajbangsi, Poliya, Koch, Mech etc. People of different races and castes have come to Bengal from Turkey, Arabia, Iran, Khorasan, Afghanistan, Abyssinia. The Muslim entered into North Bengal during sultanate rule through Turkish conquest, Sufi missionaries, migration, trade and agrarian expansion. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the British rule started in India. The English culture criticized feudal and religion-based society like various superstitions of both Hindus and Muslims. They started to spread western education and western culture gradually in our society. The British also wanted to abolish the old things like superstition, religion-based society and orthodox mentality. Christian missionaries established the churches, missionary schools in the village areas to spread Christianity among the people of North Bengal. Their main motive was to spread the Christian religion in India. Christianity spread mainly during the colonial period through various

activities such as European missionaries, tea plantations, economies, missionaries schools, healthcare institutions. Their main motive was to spread the Christian religion in India.

North Bengal had also been a centre of art and architecture. Jatileswar temple is the famous temple in the doars area of North Bengal. It is one of the oldest temples in the region. It has religious as well as historic significance. The main temple was built in the Gupta rule of Bengal about 320CE to 600CE. The Jatileswar temple is dedicated to Jatileswar or Lord Shiva. The Jatileswar temple is blended with Buddhism, Jainism and Hinduism. Jalpesh temple is famous temples of Jalpaigudi. It was built by Bisu Singh king of Coochbehar in 1524CE. The main attraction of Jalpesh temple is the elephant-shaped archway. It is dedicated to Lord Shiva. The Shraboni mela or Jalpesh mela is very popular in North Bengal and attracts lakhs of devotees during the month of Shrabon. There are various Buddhist monasteries such as Salugara monastery in Siliguri, Ewam India Buddhist monastery, Ghoom monastery in Darjeeling, Dali monastery. Bangarh is the main Jain archaeological site. Jagjivampur is the Jain archaeological site.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, we can say that North Bengal consists of various communities such as Rajbansi, Rabha, Lepcha, Bhutia, Munda, Santhal, Nepali, Toto, Jugi, Khen, Pan, Kheria, Oraon, Malpaharis, and other tribal groups. The history of Religion in North Bengal depends on their own geographical background. Its location near Nepal, Bhutan, Assam, Bangladesh. Here we discuss the origin and expansion of various religious sects such as Brahmanism, Vaishnavism, Saivism, Buddhism, Jainism, Islam, Christianity. It also explores the historical geography and socio-economic and religious development. It examines the religious art and architecture in North Bengal such as Hindu temples Jatileswar temple, Jalpesh temple, Mahakal temple. Here we discuss such Buddhist monasteries such as Salugara monastery, Ewam India Buddhist monastery, Ghoom, Dali. Bangarh is the Jain archaeological site. Bangarh is situated in South Dinajpur. Jagjivampur is the site of Jain.

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