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## Approaches to the Study of Conversion to Islam in India

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The expansion of Islam east of the Middle East has been, apart from a few notable exceptions, a relatively understudied subject. This is especially remarkable when one recalls that, by far, the world's greatest number of Muslims reside east of Karachi. The reasons for this neglect of scholarship, however, are not far to find. First is the identification of the Arab Middle East with the historical heartland of Islam, which makes it the natural object of study of classicists whose scholastic concerns often focus on the formation of cultural traditions. Second, despite its universalist claims and its undeniable status as a world religion, Islam is related to Arab ethnicity, language, and culture in complex ways that have always somehow made the study of Arab Islam a more legitimate or proper field on the Islamist's agenda than "Eastern" or sub-Saharan Islam. And third, for at least a century, severe methodological problems have prevented scholars from explaining the formation, through conversion, of the majority of the world's Muslim population living beyond the Middle East. There have appeared few convincing answers to such basic questions as: What is conversion per se? Can conversion to Islam be fit within a larger conceptual category, or must it be consid-

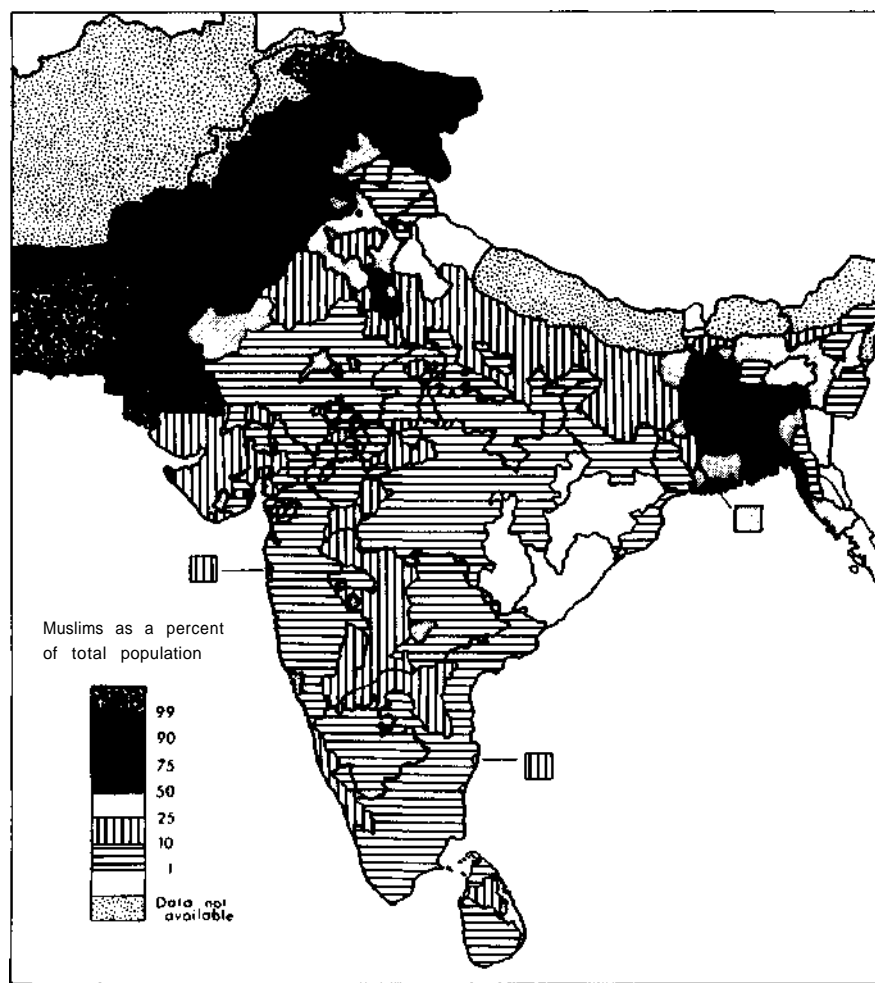
ered unique? By what indices can it be measured? What forces favor or hinder its progress?

Nonetheless, scholars of various persuasions have recently taken a lively interest in the study of Muslim conversion movements. It is the aim of this paper to explore some of the approaches to this topic as it concerns one important area of the Islamic world—South Asia—with a view to isolating some of the problems encountered in previous studies and to suggesting a more comprehensive hypothesis explaining the phenomenon.

*Theories of Conversion to Islam in India*

Most explanations of conversions to Islam in India can be reduced to three basic, and in my view inadequate, theories. The oldest of these is the "religion of the sword" theory. As a theme in the Western historiography of Islam it has a long and weary history that dates from the time of the Crusades; and for Indian Islam, too, it has always had its advocites. Yet as Peter Hardy has recently observed, those who argue that Indian Muslims were forcibly converted generally failed to define either "force" or "conversion,"<sup>1</sup> leaving us to presume that a society can and will change its religious identity simply because it has a sword at its neck. Precisely how this mechanism worked either in theoretical or practical terms, however, is seldom spelled out. Moreover, proponents of this theory seem to have confused conversion to Islam with the extension of Turko-Iranian rule in North India between 1200 and 1765, a confusion probably originating in a too literal translation of primary Persian accounts narrating the "Islamic" conquest of India.<sup>2</sup>

But the most serious problem with this theory is its incongruence with the geography of Muslim conversions in South Asia. A glance at the geographical distribution of Muslims in the subcontinent (see map on p. 108) reveals an *inverse* relationship between the degree of Muslim political penetration and the degree of conversion to Islam. If conversion to Islam had ever been a function of military or political force (however these might have been expressed) one would expect that those areas of heaviest conversion would correspond to those areas of South Asia exposed most intensely and over the longest period to rule by Muslim dynasties. Yet the opposite is the case: those regions of the most dramatic conversion of the population, such as Eastern Bengal or Western Punjab, lay on the fringes of Indo-Muslim rule, whereas the



*Geographical distribution of South Asian Muslim population. [Adapted from J. Schwartzberg, ed. A Historical Atlas of South Asia (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 04].*

heartland of that rule, the upper Gangetic Plain, saw a much lower incidence of conversion.<sup>3</sup>

A second theory commonly advanced to explain the conversions of Indians to Islam is the "political patronage" theory, or the view that Indians of the medieval period converted in order to receive some nonreligious favors from the ruling class—relief from taxes, promotion in the bureaucracy, and so forth. In the early fourteenth century, for example, Ibn Battuta reported that Indians presented themselves

as new converts to the Khalaji sultans who in turn rewarded them with robes of honor according to their rank.<sup>4</sup> But individual conversion for political gain frequently lacked conviction, as witnessed by the more spectacular cases of apostasy: Khusrav Khan, a fourteenth-century usurper of the Delhi Sultanate; or Harihar and Bukka, the cofounders of the Vijayanagar Empire. Then, too, nineteenth-century census reports speak of land-holding families of medieval Upper India declaring themselves Muslims either to escape imprisonment for nonpayment of revenue, or to preserve ancestral lands in the family name.<sup>5</sup> More important examples of the "political patronage" phenomenon were the cases of groups coming into the employment of Muslim rulers and in this way gradually acculturating themselves to Indian Islam. The Kayasthas and Khatri of the Gangetic Plain, the Parasnis of Maharashtra, and the Amils of Sind all cultivated Muslim culture by virtue of their filling the government's great need for clerks and administrative servants at all levels, which Aziz Ahmad compared with the later "westernization" process.<sup>6</sup> Finally, the acculturation of captured soldiers or slaves, severed as these men were from their families, formed another dimension of this process.

Adequate though the patronage thesis may be in accounting for the relatively light incidence of Islamization in the political heartland, it cannot explain the massive conversions to Islam that took place along the political fringe—especially in the Punjab and Bengal. For political patronage, like the influence of the sword, decreases rather than increases as one moves away from the Delhi heartland toward the periphery.

What is needed is some theory that would explain the phenomenon of mass conversion to Islam on India's periphery and not just in the heartland, and among India's millions of peasant cultivators and not just among urban elites. To this end a third theory is frequently invoked, one which has for long been the most popular explanation of the phenomenon—the "religion of social liberation" theory. Elaborated by British ethnographers, Pakistani nationals, and Indian Muslims among many others, the substance of the theory is that the Hindu caste system is a rigidly discriminatory form of social organization and that the lowest and most degraded castes, recognizing in Islam an ideology of social equality, converted to it en masse in order to escape Brahmanical oppression.

This theory, too, has serious problems. The first is that it commits the fallacy of reading the values of the present into the peoples or

events of the past. Are we to assume that before their contact with Muslims the untouchables of India possessed, as though they were familiar with the writings of Rousseau or Jefferson, some innate notion of the fundamental equality of all men denied them by an oppressive Brahmanical tyranny? To the contrary, it seems that Hindu society of medieval India was more influenced by what Louis Dumont calls the principle of *homo hierarchicus*, or of institutionalized inequality, than by the principle of *homo equalis*.<sup>7</sup> Beyond that, a careful reading of Persian primary sources suggests that in their presentation of Islam to Indians, Muslim intellectuals did not stress the Islamic ideal of social equality as opposed to Hindu caste, but rather Islamic monotheism as opposed to Hindu polytheism.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, even if it were true that Islam had been presented as an ideology of social equality, there is abundant evidence that former Hindu communities failed upon conversion to improve their status in the social hierarchy and that, to the contrary, they simply carried over into Muslim society the same practice of birth-ascribed rank that they had had in Hindu society.<sup>9</sup>

But the most damaging problem with the "liberation theory," as with the two others discussed above, appears when we return to the map (p. 108) and observe the geographical distribution of the South Asian Muslim population. Before the dislocations consequent upon the Partition of 1947, the areas with the highest percentage of Muslims were Eastern Bengal, Western Punjab, Northwest Frontier, and Baluchistan. Now from both historical evidence and anthropological studies we know that the bulk of the population in Baluchistan and the Northwest Frontier were not converted communities at all, but descendants of the immigrants from the Iranian Plateau. This leaves East Bengal and West Punjab as the two areas of the subcontinent possessing the highest incidence of Muslim conversion among the local population. What is striking about those areas, however, is that they lay not only far from the center of Muslim political power, as noted, but that their indigenous populations had not, at the time of their contact with Islam, been integrated into the Hindu social system. In Bengal, Muslim converts were drawn mainly from Rajbansi, Pod, Chandal, Koch, or other indigenous groups which had had but the lightest contact with the Hindu religious or caste structure, and in the Punjab the same was true for the various Jat clans that came to form the bulk of the Muslim community. Since the greatest incidence of Muslim conversions occurred among groups that were not fully

Hindu in the first place, for the vast majority of South Asian Muslims the question of "liberation" from the "oppressive" Hindu social order was simply not an issue.

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*Toward a New Theory of Conversion: Accretion and Reform*

Much more in keeping with the geography and chronology of Muslim conversions in India would be, I would suggest, an understanding of mass conversion as a process whereby preliterate peoples on the ecological and political frontier of an expanding agrarian society became absorbed into the religious ideology of that society. Proceeding from the theoretical work of Nehemia Levtzion, and before him of A. D. Nock,<sup>10</sup> I would further divide this process into two subprocesses, that of accretion and that of reform. Whereas the simplest model of a conversion movement would be one beginning with accretion and ending with reform, we should not see this process as any necessary or irreversible march from the first to the second. A closer examination of individual cases of Muslim conversion movements in India reveals more complex patterns—some, for example, oscillating back and forth between accretion and reform, others stuck on accretion indefinitely, remaining unaffected even by the powerful reform currents of the nineteenth century.

What precisely characterizes these processes? In a cognitive sense, the accretion aspect of conversion sees a people either adding new deities or superhuman agencies to their existing cosmological stock, or identifying new deities or agencies with existing entities in their cosmology. Accordingly, the supernatural agencies Allah, khizr [the Qur'aanic *Khidr*], or the swarms *offinns*, for example, may either be grafted onto an already dense cosmological universe, or identified, by name, with existing agencies. But in either case the original cosmology is essentially retained. In the reform dimension of the process, on the other hand, Islamic supernatural agencies are not only distinguished from the preexisting cosmological structure, but the latter is firmly repudiated. This is accompanied with greater attention given to the all-encompassing power of one Islamic agency in particular, the Supreme god Allah, who assumes the function and powers of all other agencies in the former pantheon. In a history of religions framework, this corresponds to what Max Weber has called the process of religious rationalization, that is, the absorption of many lesser beings by one universal, supreme god.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of social organization, the accretion aspect of conversion entails no Muslim communal exclusiveness or even distinctiveness. Persons will identify themselves as Muslim inasmuch as they worship Allah, for example, or refrain from eating pork—two attributes which in this aspect of the conversion process might be loosely understood as the defining features of Islam. But this by no means prevents them from participating in village propitiation of a local goddess to ward off smallpox or in joining village devotions to an *avatar* of Krishna. Social integration is sustained by other than ritual means, too. A recent study of the Meo community of Rajasthan, a community which for many centuries has adhered somewhat loosely to Islam without responding to reformist pressures, shows that while their practices relating to personal life cycles are Islamic (e.g., practicing circumcision, burying their dead), their institutions respecting relations with their Hindu neighbors are non-Islamic (e.g., marriages are clan exogamous and not cross-cousin; inheritance follows local, not Muslim practice).<sup>12</sup> In strictly social terms, in other words, they are still a relatively indistinct community.

In the reform dimension of the conversion process, however, the community perceives itself as socially distinct and consciously acts upon that perception. Accordingly, the group not only resists participation in non-Muslim rituals, but will, for example, adopt Islamic inheritance customs for daughters as well as for sons, a practice which decisively separates the Muslim community from its neighbors. Or, even more decisively, it might adopt cross-cousin marriage patterns, regarded by many Hindus as simply incestuous. Such practices become more prevalent to the same extent that the Muslim community becomes conscious of its adherence to a single model for social and ritual action, a model whose source of authority stands wholly outside of one's ancestral locality.

Finally, one can distinguish between accretion and reform in terms of the overall socio-political environment in which each process takes place. For mass conversions, anyway, the earlier phase of the process generally accompanied integration into the outer fringes of one of the expanding Indo-Muslim states which, from the twelfth century on, pushed ever outward from the Delhi Doab heartland in the north-central region of the subcontinent. What is critical here (and I will return to this theme of political/ecological integration at the end of this paper) is that this integration always took place in a *regional*

context (a region in India) whether one speaks of the expansion of Tughluq power into fourteenth-century Punjab, of the Bahmani Kingdom into fifteenth-century Deccan, or of the Mughal Empire into sixteenth-century Bengal. In these circumstances whatever Muslim elements were added onto the existing stock of beliefs and practices, they were not perceived as representing a "world" religion, but only the particular beliefs and practices associated with a local saint, a local *qaddi* (Muslim judge) or the spiritual power of a local shrine. On the other hand, the context of reform was always a worldwide one, inspired by a vision of Islam as a world religion—or rather, *the* world religion, with Mecca as its geo-spiritual hub. Reform movements, or the reform aspect of the conversion process, are typically initiated by someone freshly returned from the purifying experience of a pilgrimage to Mecca, an experience which, among other things, heightens one's awareness of the universal truth of Islam as opposed to the local and very particularized idioms in which it may be expressed.

Yet the questions remain: how can we measure the growth of a conversion movement, and what are the agents stimulating or shaping it? If we understand religion as "an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings,"<sup>13</sup> it can be argued that three sets of symbols, or names, mark such interaction as distinctively Muslim as opposed, for example, to Hindu or Christian. One set of symbols refers to man's identity in relation to the superhuman beings, for example, names of persons such as 'Abd al-Rahman "slave of God."<sup>14</sup> A second set of symbols refers to the identity of superhuman beings in relation to man, that is, man's names for the gods, such as "Allah" instead of "Iswara." A third set of symbols refers to the identity of the sacred place in which the interaction takes place, as in mosques instead of, say, Vaisnavite temples or shrines devoted to the mother goddess.

Although these three sets of symbols will not tell us why a conversion movement took place, they can be used as indices by which we can plot the geographical and chronological expansion of Islam in India, or elsewhere for that matter. For example, the naming pattern of a single Punjabi Jat group, the Sials, suggests that from the thirteenth to the early nineteenth century the Muslim self-identity of this group proceeded at a very slow rate indeed.<sup>15</sup> In the early fifteenth century, 10 percent of recorded Sial males had Muslim names; for the mid-seventeenth century, 56 percent; for the mid-eighteenth century, 75

percent, and for the early nineteenth century, 100 percent. This is, I think, a most revealing index of the gradual process of group identity formation.

Just as socio-religious identity is reflected in changes of personal names, it is also reflected in changes in the names of those super-human agencies with whom people interact. It is this index, moreover, that most dramatically distinguishes the accretion aspect from the reform aspect of the conversion process. Turning from the medieval Punjab to medieval Bengal, consider the names that local Muslim poets used to denote the one, supreme god of the Qur'an. The sixteenth-century poet, Haji Muhammad, referred to him as Allah, Khuda ("God" in Persian), and Gosain ("master of the herds"), adding that he assumes limitless forms. The late sixteenth-century poet Sayyid Sultan referred to him as Isvara, (Supreme god, "lord"), adding that he resided in every entity. Shaykh Mansur (fl. 1703) named him Khuda and Prabhu ("master"), Niranjan (Supreme God, lit. "without emotion"). The eighteenth-century poet AH Riza referred to him as Isvara, Allah Yagat Isvar ("lord of the world"), Niranjan, and Kartar ("creator").<sup>16</sup> In a land where the cult of the mother goddess had great popularity, the sixteenth-century Bengali poet Sayyid Murtaza addressed Fatima as "the mother of the world" (*jagat-janani*).<sup>17</sup> Similarly, Sayyid Sultan identified the Prophet as a manifestation (*avatar*) of God.<sup>18</sup> What these poets were doing, of course, was laying the intellectual foundations for their readers' adhesion to Islam; that is, by matching up the cognitive categories drawn from Islam with those drawn from local traditions, they were making possible the process of identification, which is one of the hallmarks of the accretion aspect of conversion.

A third index of growing Islamization consists in changes in the identity of the sacred place in which religious interaction takes place. Table i is an abbreviated list showing the chronology of mosque construction in Bengal between 1200 and 1800. It is true that the construction of mosques, especially small, private mosques, may reflect only a patron's desire to perform a meritorious act and may not necessarily indicate the expression of popular piety. On the other hand, the appearance of congregational (*jam?*) mosques, intended as they are to accommodate the religious needs of entire populations of towns or villages, does give some idea of the chronology, and also the geography, of the growth of the Muslim community. The table, for example, certainly suggests that although Muslim *rule* in Bengal dates from the

Table I  
Mosque Construction in Bengal, 1200-1800

YEARS	ORDINARY MOSQUES	MOSQUES	TOTAL MOSQUES
1200-1250	1	0	1
1250-1300	2	0	2
1300-1350	1	0	1
1350-1400	1	1	2
1400-1450	4	0	4
1450-1500	46	7	53
1500-1550	21	18	39
1550-1600	11	1	12
1600-1650	3	0	3
1650-1700	4	0	4
1700-1750	4	0	4
1750-1800	2	0	2

Source: From Shamsud-din Ahmed, ed. and trans., *Inscriptions of Bengal* (Kajshahi: Varcndra Research Museum, 1960) vol. 4, pp. 317-338.

thirteenth century, Muslim *society* cannot be said to have emerged there until two centuries later.

If the above data provide some of the indices of conversion, what are its agents? Some writers have focused on the Muslim merchant who, interested in economic profit, thrived best under conditions of internal stability. While evangelism was not his aim, the social contacts resulting from the expansion of commerce and the condition of mutual trust in which commerce thrives, created favorable conditions for social accommodation and, to some extent, acculturation. Generally speaking, this process was, then, more typical along India's coasts—from Gujarat down to Malabar and Coromandel, and up to Bengal—than it was in the Muslim states of the interior.

Along the Konkan and Malabar coasts, accordingly, we find the earliest Muslim mercantile communities, which have thrived over a thousand years. In the early tenth century the Arab traveler Mas'udi noted that an Arab trading community along the Konkan coast, which had been granted autonomy and protection by the local rajah, had intermarried considerably with the local population.<sup>19</sup> The children

of such marriages, brought up formally with the father's religion, yet carrying over many cultural traits of the non-Muslim mother, contributed to an expanding community which was richly described by Ibn Battuta in the early fourteenth century.<sup>20</sup> But by virtue of this community's close commercial contacts with Arabia, reflected in religious terms by its adherence to the Shafi'i legal tradition, the foreign aspect of the community was always present and made social integration with the Hindu community difficult.<sup>21</sup> In the last analysis, then, while it is true that Muslim merchants founded important mercantile enclaves and by intermarriage expanded the Muslim population, they do not appear to have been important in provoking religious change among the local population.

A far more influential agent in the conversion process was the village Qadi or judge, one of the key figures that accompanied the establishment of Muslim regimes as local powers. Although a thorough study of the role of the medieval Indian Ulama (*ulama*) and especially the Qadi, has yet to be written, preliminary evidence points to the central and continuing role that local judges played in establishing a measure of uniformity among the various rural folk who, for various reasons, adhered informally to Islam. Qadis were appointed by central and provincial authorities to apply Islamic law in all towns or villages having a Muslim population. And while Qadis theoretically applied Muslim religious law (*sharia*) only to those criminal and civil cases involving Muslims, they also settled cases involving Muslims and non-Muslims, thereby drawing the latter into the legal and social orbit of Islam. In this way all manner of disparate groups would have had some of their most important affairs decided by men who, in theory at least, represented a single religious and legal tradition. With reference to the late nineteenth century, district gazetteers repeatedly reported that while particular Muslim "castes" were lax, avoided beef, kept Hindu festivals, or worshipped Hindu deities, they at the very least respected the Qadi and used him to officiate at their marriages and funerals.<sup>22</sup> Qadis thus acted not only as representatives of the court among peasants, but also as models of their religion before the semi-Muslim folk of the countryside.

What is more, the Qadis represented above all the *literate* aspect of Islam, as living reminders that Islam in the last analysis is a religion of the Book. Recent anthropological research has drawn attention to the great importance of the literacy of an incoming religion as a variable that explains the appeal of that religion to preliterate societies.<sup>23</sup> The

point is that the Qur'an, as the unchanging Word of God, possessed immense power, and consequently appeal, among preliterate peoples whose previous cults had not been stabilized by the influence of literacy. Thus, in the history of Islam in India, one important reason that Islam sank such deep roots in areas such as East Bengal or West Punjab was that the native populations of those regions were far less integrated into the literate tradition of the Brahmans than were the peoples of upper India. Although upper India had been for centuries the center of Muslim administration, the incidence of conversion to Islam there was as a consequence relatively low.

The agent of conversion that has, however, received the most attention is the Sufi. There is an enormous literature on this theme, commencing with Thomas Arnold's fervent portrayal of Sufis as Islamic "missionaries" among non-Muslims.<sup>24</sup> A close reading of the primary sources, however, would not support this portrayal. In their own writings and in the contemporary biographical accounts of them, Sufis do not appear to have been concerned with conversion. In fact, the sort of self-conscious, highly organized effort along the lines of a Christian missionary society, implicit in Arnold's writing, is at variance with the social roles actually played by medieval Indian Sufis.<sup>25</sup>

If a living Sufi had only minimal influence in the religious life of non-Muslim Indians, a deceased Sufi, especially one blessed with sainthood by the local population, could literally work miracles. This was because the charisma or *baraka* of a spiritually saturated Sufi saint became, with time, transferred to his tomb. And since brick and mortar shrines have much greater longevity than flesh and bone Sufis, self-sustaining centers of religious power were able in this way to grow and span many centuries. Moreover, a saint's *baraka* also adheres to those of his family descendants who inherit spiritual authority associated with the shrine, which also extends the longevity of *baraka*. For example, both the grandson and the shrine of Baba Farid in Pakpattan, Punjab, became so thoroughly identified with Baba Farid the saint, who died in 1265, that when Ibn Battuta visited Pakpattan in 1334 he actually wrote of meeting Baba Farid himself. In fact, the living person whom the famous world traveler met was the grandson who had inherited the spiritual and temporal leadership of the shrine complex.<sup>26</sup> An even more dramatic example of a saint's *baraka* growing after his death is seen in the faith common people had in the Chishti Sufi, Sayyid Muhammad Husayni Gisudaraz Bandanawaz, who died in 1422. Writing in 1609, the historian Firishta could observe that "the

people of the Deccan have such respect for the saint that a Deccany, on being asked whom he considered the greatest personage, the Prophet Mahomed or the Syud [Sayyid Muhammad], replied, with some surprise at the question, that although the Prophet was undoubtedly a great man, yet Syud Mahomed Geesoo-duraz was a far superior order of being."<sup>27</sup>

It was faith like this that explains the tremendous growth of hundreds of shrines all over the Subcontinent, each providing a localized focus of votive worship. These shrines differed a good deal from each other, some specializing in terms of the community to whom they administered, and others in terms of the ailment or complaint the devotees would bring to them.<sup>28</sup> But they all shared in common a mediating capacity between the devotee and Allah, thereby not only softening the theological chasm between man and God, but also presenting God in a locally accessible idiom.

If it is true that the Qadi and the saint's tomb were the most important agents in the Islamization process, we are still confronted with the vexing problem of the geography of conversion. I have argued that the theories of the "religion of the sword," "political patronage," and "religion of social liberation" all fail to account for the exceptionally high incidence of conversion on the political peripheries of medieval India and the relatively low incidence of the heartland. Yet if the agents I have identified as most crucial to the conversion process—the Qadi and the Sufi shrine—were scattered throughout the Subcontinent, how can their agency help explain the geography of the issue? As noted, one variable in explaining this is the degree of integration of a region into a literate tradition—in this case Brahmanical Hinduism—prior to its contact with Islam. Also important are those elements of the social and ecological situation within a region that enabled Qadis or Sufis to have greater effect in patterning religious change on the frontiers than in the heartland. As a rule, India's most extensive conversion occurred not in the great agricultural plains but in the pastoral plains or forested regions—areas, in other words, where religious patterns had not yet been stabilized by literacy as represented and sustained by Brahmins. For it was not Hindus who most readily converted to Islam, but nonagrarian forest or pastoral peoples whose contact with Brahmanism and caste stratification had been either casual or nonexistent. The process of the absorption of these peoples into Islam was, in fact, similar to the integration of aboriginal peoples into the Hindu caste and ritual structure that had

taken place earlier in Indian history. As D. D. Kosambi wrote with reference to that earlier movement, "The major historical change in ancient India was not between dynasties but in the advance of agrarian village settlements over tribal lands, metamorphosing tribesmen into peasant cultivators, or guild craftsmen."<sup>29</sup>

It is of the utmost significance, then, that those areas of the most massive conversion to Islam, such as East Bengal or West Punjab, were fringe areas both from the point of view of the socio-ecological frontier of Hindu agrarian society, and also from the point of view of the political frontier of the Muslim state. The consistent aim of the latter—and here reference is mainly to the Delhi Sultanate (twelfth to sixteenth centuries) and its successor the Mughal Empire (sixteenth to eighteenth centuries)—was to push its ecological and political frontiers ever outward from the Delhi Doab heartland into Punjab, Kashmir, Gujarat, Deccan, or Bengal. In areas where local Hindu rajahs had already established an agrarian infrastructure by which to extract the surplus wealth of the land, the problem was a political one. Here, the state endeavored to capture the agrarian structure for its own ends by occupying urban centers, establishing garrisons, and perhaps demoting the rajah to a tribute-paying underling (*zamindar*). As the peasantry in such areas was usually already absorbed into the Hindu social and religious order, conversion to Islam was not normally forthcoming, at least on a mass basis. But as the state expanded its power into regions whose agrarian infrastructure was not well-developed—into unirrigated plains or uncleared forest regions—the expansion of the state was ecological and religious as well as political. Here, the religious ideology of the state, Islam, became adopted bit by bit as one aspect of a larger transformation among preliterate inhabitants of lands newly made arable. In a word, indigenous non-Hindu non-agriculturalists were, between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries, gradually transformed into Muslim agriculturalists. To the extent that this was the case, Islam, in India at least, may properly be termed more a religion of the plough than a religion of the sword, as formerly conceived.

Data drawn from both the Punjab and Bengal would sustain this argument. As for the former area, what one finds is, from the thirteenth century, the appearance of huge Sufi shrines, such as those of Farid al-Din Shakargunj in Pakpattan or Baha al-Haqq Zakaria in Multan, becoming the objects of popular devotion by non-Hindu Jat pastoralists as they migrated northward from Sind. By the sixteenth

century the Mughal government realized the political potential of these shrines and used them as intermediaries by which to control the turbulent Jat groups. Moreover, it was about this time that these same groups began settling down in the Punjab and taking to agriculture, a development much in line with the Mughal interest in maximizing the revenue-generating capacity of the land. Technologically, this development was made possible by the extension of the Persian wheel into the arid plains of the Punjab in the medieval period. Throughout this period the Jat groups retained their devotional focus on the shrines, gradually becoming ever more closely integrated with their ritual structure. For these groups, then, adhesion to Islam effectively meant adhesion to one of these shrines.<sup>30</sup>

In Bengal an essentially opposite process had the same effect: instead of the people migrating to the land, the arable land migrated to the people. For many centuries the Ganges River had emptied into the Bay of Bengal down the western side of the province so that that area became both the (Hindu) spiritual and agricultural heartland of the region, with the aboriginals in the forests of East Bengal remaining somewhat beyond the pale and only lightly exposed to Brahmanical Hinduism. In the sixteenth century, however, the river silted up its old channels and pushed eastward, opening up huge areas of East Bengal for rice cultivation. River shifts also made possible land reclamation along the lower and eastern delta next to the sea. As these riverine shifts occurred roughly simultaneously with the Mughal conquest of Bengal, many of the colonists moving into the east were Muslim from North India. Significantly, a good many of the saints of East Bengal who had accompanied this colonization are associated with the pioneering of agriculture, and especially with land reclamation in the active delta. In the process, indigenous Bengali peoples who had formerly practiced hunting, fishing, or a crude form of forest agriculture, became gradually transformed into rice farmers. So firmly was rice cultivation identified with Islam, that today, in the value system of peasants inhabiting rural Bangladesh, God is believed to have allowed Adam to exercise his mastery over the earth by farming it; being a good Muslim is closely associated with being a good farmer.<sup>31</sup>

If this was the underlying mechanism of the accretion process, it is clear that the result was far from "total" conversion to Islam. For centuries Punjabis and Bengalis alike had clung to former religious habits and retained long-established social groupings. Basing his observations on nineteenth-century district gazetteers, Mohammed Mujeeb

wrote that Punjabi Muslims "were spiritually dependent on miracles and magic to a degree incompatible with genuine belief in any omnipotent God,"<sup>32</sup> while the 1901 census of India reported Bengali Muslims joining in the Durga Puja, worshipping Sitala and Rakshya Kali when disease was present, and making use of Hindu astrologers and almanacs in their everyday life.<sup>33</sup> For peoples of both provinces, as also in other regions of India, Islam was regarded as one technique among many for tapping a "power" which, with the performance of the proper rites known to some local expert, could alleviate one's problems or promote one's mundane concerns.

But this nominal commitment to Islam, made possible by a political and ecological integration into a regional Indo-Muslim state, was followed in many areas of India by a reform made possible by a second order of integration, an integration with the Muslim world. This integration was neither political nor ecological in nature, of course, but affective, as more and more putative Muslims of India became aware of the normative unity of Islam. While members of the ulama and some groups of Sufis had urged his unitary reformist vision at all times of the Indo-Muslim history, sporadic reformist movements appeared in various parts of India or among various communities with visible frequency only from the seventeenth century.<sup>34</sup> It was during the nineteenth century, when vastly improved world transportation systems brought masses of Indians in direct touch with Mecca, that such movements became most widespread of all. These reform movements generally witnessed a Qur'anic literalism that assumed an increasing sense of urgency as more and more Indian Muslims became aware of the gap between the commands of the Book and the actual practices passing for Islam in their native villages. It was at this point that persons began taking the meaning of their names—for example, 'Abdallah, "slave of God"—more seriously, if not literally. Finally, insistence on a jealous God to the exclusion of all other superhuman agencies was paralleled by movements for social exclusiveness.

The reform dimension of the conversion process, in India at least, carried with it at least two other important implications, one political, one cultural. The first of these was the demand for a separate Muslim state upon the departure of the British in 1947. In one sense, of course, this was but a logical extension of the reform aspect of the conversion process, which stressed social exclusiveness. The Pakistan movement thus represented a modern reenactment of the Prophet's departure from Mecca and his establishment of a distinct community



at Medina; it was a "re-creation" of Medina. The other implication of the reform process was its self-conscious adoption of Arab culture. Here one confronts a central paradox of the reform process. The emphasis upon Islamic unity and universalism as a theoretical model was simultaneously accompanied by an emphasis upon Arab culture and language as a practical model, so that while reform movements sought to lift the focus of religious activity above the Indian regional context, they frequently landed it once again in the Arab cultural context. Accordingly, in the early nineteenth century, Bengalis were urged to eat grasshoppers on the grounds that Arabs ate locusts.<sup>35</sup> And in the 1890s a brilliant Bengali writer, Ameer Ali, championed the Islamic reform movement in Bengal by writing such books as *The Spirit of Islam*, glorifying Arab culture and history. From a religious viewpoint, these political and cultural developments may be seen as efforts to perfect a process of conversion having roots deep in the history of the Subcontinent.

To conclude, I must emphasize that this essay by no means attempts to explore all the various processes by which peoples of the subcontinent became drawn into the Muslim community. Clearly this is a complex phenomenon involving a number of distinguishable processes, some of which did not concern conversion at all. There was, for example, the immigration of many thousands of Turks, Afghans, and Iranians into the Subcontinent from the thirteenth century onward, and the slow growth of Muslim communities as a result of intermarriages between Muslim men and non-Muslim women. Even when discussing conversion itself, this essay has passed over the discussion of the conversion of Hindu elites (Brahmans or Kayasthas) in places like Allahabad, Kashmir, or Lucknow. Similarly, a comprehensive study of the conversion of Indians to Islam would have to mention examples of rationally planned, organized conversion efforts such as those of the Shi'i *da'wa*, which successfully integrated trading and agricultural castes of Sind and Gujarat into the Muslim community.<sup>36</sup>

Rather, the thrust of this essay has been to draw attention to a dimension of the conversion question not heretofore generally addressed: mass Islamization of the geographical periphery of the Indo-Muslim state and the relationship of ecological change to religious change. I maintain that for India, at least, mass conversion to Islam

was a very gradual process involving two discernible aspects, accretion and reform. In a way, these aspects of conversion movements are comparable with Clifford Geertz's "model of and "model for" dimensions of religious behavior.<sup>37</sup> That is, for those Indians who adhered to Islam, the symbols, rituals, and practices of local religion served as "models of or descriptions of the social order and its religious life. Thus a Punjabi Sufi might legitimize an ancient, pre-Muslim practice simply by calling it Islamic, and that would be that.<sup>TM</sup> In its reform aspect, however, Islam was viewed as a unified set of absolute norms, beliefs, and practices to which one must bend oneself and one's fellows if one is to be saved. Here, as Geertz observed, Islam functioned as a "model for" behavior, and was significant not because it described the social order, but because it shaped it.<sup>39</sup>

In the more vulgar language of social science, religious behavior in the accretion aspect of conversion is a dependent variable since it is a function of socio-political change. It was the migration of Jats into the Punjab and the extension of Delhi's authority there which, along with the introduction of the Persian wheel, attached Jat groups to Sufi shrines and transformed them into agriculturalists. Similarly it was the migration of the Ganges River eastward that caused the ecological transformation of East Bengal, making the aboriginal peoples of the area receptive to a "religion of the plough." In both cases new centers of political and religious authority (local shrines) acquired influence because of changed socio-economic circumstances, and Islamic ritual and belief systems acquired an unconscious foothold in the countryside without necessarily displacing earlier systems.

To stop here would merely reaffirm the Durkheimian position that religion is a reflection of the social order; yet this does not go far enough. For in the reform process it is Islam that is the independent variable inasmuch as it can, and did, cause change in the social and political realms. The political geography of South Asia in the second half of the twentieth century would quite obviously not be what it is if conversion in its reform aspect did not have this capacity to shape the social order. By viewing the double role of Islam as a dependent and independent variable, then, we can see the conversion process as a constantly evolving, dynamic interaction between religion and society.