

BENGALI SAN

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Bengali San was introduced in the year Śaka era 515 and Christian era 593-594 AD i.e. for *Bengali San* we have to add 593-94 years to calculate the corresponding year in Christian era. The *Bengali San* was used in medieval records only. The *San* is of Persian origin and has not been widely used in Bengali literature even in medieval period. Other eras like *Fasli San* (introduced by Akbar in 1563 AD), *Balāli San* (1199 AD), *Parganati San* (1202 AD) were also known.

Key Words : *Abul Fazl, Bengali San, Fasli San, Hizri, Illahi San.*

The initial year of the *Bengali San* or Era corresponds to the years 593-94 of the Christian era and 515 of the Śaka era. The year starts with the commencement of the solar Vaiśākha. The day following the transit of the sun from one zodiacal sign to another is regarded as the first day of each solar month. The era is prevalent in the states of West Bengal and Assam and in the country of Bangladesh. Its use in the early medieval period is not, however, vouchsafed by the documents which have come down to us. In fact, the earliest of the dated records from the erstwhile province of Bengal is the Dhanaidaha Copper Plate bearing a statement of time, i.e., the year 113. Several other documents from the northern and eastern sectors of Bangladesh contain dates ranging between 120 and 224. All the above mentioned are evidently ascribable to an era which has been identified with the Gupta Saṃvat^{1,2} starting from AD 319-20. With the exception of the Tippera Copper Plate of the year 44, referable to the Gupta Era³, all the dated records, found from West Bengal and Bangladesh and assigned to the period between c. AD 550 and 1195, refer to the regnal years of the respective kings. Despite the fact that the *Vikrama* and *Śaka Saṃvats* have sometimes been used in inscriptions of the *Pālas* discovered from eastern U.P. and Bihar, they are conspicuous by their absence from the official and private records, belonging to the reigns of the same rulers, found in West Bengal and Bangladesh. The earliest document from this region bearing date in the *Śaka era* is the Rākṣaskhālī Copper Plate Inscription referring to Ḍommanapāla. It is dated in the year 1118 (= A.D. 1196). The eastern fringes of Bangladesh, however, have yielded several epigraphs which are dated in the *Śaka era*. They belong to the thirteenth century AD and refer to the Deva rulers of Harikela of the early medieval period. Thus, we have no record of the ancient and early medieval periods from West Bengal and Bangladesh, not to speak of Assam and Tripura, which bears evidence of the use of an era counted from AD 593-94.

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A few dedicatory temple inscriptions from West Bengal of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries contain dates given in numerals which are invariably preceded by the word *san(a)* and followed by that of *sāl(a)*. That they are ascribable to the Bengali era appears certain from the accompanying years in the Śaka era in some cases. Both the terms *san(a)* and *sāl(a)* are of Persian origin, meaning year. In the inscription of medieval Bengal they have been used in the sense of era and that of year. Thus the expression *san(a)* 1083 *sāl(a)* would mean 'the year 1083 of the era'. The continuous use of the terms *san(a)* and *sāl(a)* in association with the dates given in numerals and the fact that use of the Bengali *San* does not figure regularly in extant records before the commencement of the seventeenth century fairly substantiate the theory of the origin of the alleged era from the *Fasli San* introduced by Akbar the Great by solarising the *Hizri* year 971 corresponding to AD 1563. The difference between the two is 592 years which approximates the difference to be reckoned between the initial year of the *Bengali san* and that of the Christian era. It may be added that the *Fasli San* and its modifications were current almost all over northern India which had been counted from years varying between 590 and 592 of the Christian era.

Abul Fazl writes : "His Majesty had long desired to introduce a new computation of years and months throughout the fair regions of Hindustan in order that perplexity might give place to easiness. He was likewise averse to the use of *Hizri*." Instead of referring to the *Fasli San* Abul Fazl only points out that though the *Illahi San* was promulgated in the twentyninth year of the reign of Akbar, it was counted from the twentyfifth day of his accession to the throne. The statement seems to be confirmed by the Vadipura-Pārśvanātha temple inscription at Anhilvad. It refers to three dates, viz., Vikrama Saṃvat 1651 and 1652 and year 41 of the Allai (*Illahi*) era. Some of the dated silver coins prove that Akbar introduced the solar months of ancient Persia substituting for the lunar ones connected with the *Hizri*.

The phenomena that the difference between the years in the *Fasli San* and the corresponding years in the Christian era is never more than 592 and that in case of the *Bengali San* we have to add 593-94 years in order to calculate the corresponding year in the Christian era may bring forth the argument in favour of the *Illahi San* as the possible origin of the era under consideration. In any case, the antiquity of the Bengali era cannot be pushed back beyond 1563 AD. That the Bengali era was believed to have had been connected with a 'non-Hindu' ruler seems to be evident from the colophon of a manuscript of the *Uttarabhāga* of the *Nāradiya Purāṇa*, translated by Dvija Nārāyaṇa and now preserved in the Cooch Behar State Library. The date of the manuscript that has been recorded as Śaka 1723, in the year 1208 of the *Yavana* king is generally identified with Akbar. There is also a tradition current in some parts of West Bengal and Bangladesh that it was Ala-ud-din Hussain Shah (AD 1493-1519) of Gauḍa who had been responsible for the solarisation of the lunar *Hizri*.

Several records, however, have come down to us which speak for the existence of the *Bengali San* long before the promulgation of either the *Allai* era or the *Fasli San*. The Bihar (Darbhanga) Grant of Śivasimha bears as many as four dates, i.e., *La Saṃ* 293, *Śaka* 1321, *Samvat* 1455 and *San(a)* 807. An inscription on the left side of the Simhavāhinī temple at Ghatal (Midnapore District, West Bengal) refers to the year 897 while the epigraph on the right side of the same shrine bears the date 1410 of the *Śaka era*. The evidence of the Gorkui (Dinajpur District, Bangladesh) inscription may be considered in this connection. It is dated *Śaka* 920. Since on palaeographical grounds the inscription cannot be ascribed to a period earlier than the beginning of the Sixteenth century, the year 920 appears to be referable to the *Bengali San*, the term *Śaka* being often used in the records of medieval Bengal in the sense of an era rather than that of the *Śaka era*. A manuscript of the *Ādi-parva* of the *Mahābhārata* of Kāśīrāmadāsa, preserved in the Vangiya Sahitya Parishat, Calcutta, bears the date *san(a)* 985.

The authenticity of the aforementioned records has been called in question. The grant of Śivasimha has been regarded as a copy of the original charter which had been damaged. The person or persons responsible for the transcript probably interpolated the year 807 which did not figure in the original document. A similar incident might have occurred in case of the temple inscription at Ghatal where the corresponding year of the *Bengali era* had been engraved at a comparatively later period. The ascription of the year 920 of the Gorkui inscription is subject to controversy. Kāśīrāma did not complete the *Ādi-parva* before *Śaka* 1517, whereas the date, mentioned in the manuscript noted above, is equivalent to the year 1500 of the *Śaka era*. The tradition with regard to Ala-ud-din Hussain Shah appears to be of an indeterminate character. There is, thus, nothing positive to indicate the prevalence of the *Bengali San* before the introduction of the *Fasli* or the promulgation of the *Illahi era*.

Nevertheless, it is certain that local eras used in the territories now included in West Bengal and Bangladesh long before the introduction of the *Bengali San*. Abul Fazl writes, "In the country of *Baṅg* dates are calculated from the beginning of the reign of Lachhman Sen. From that period till now there have been 463 years." Abul Fazl also states that the year 463 of the *Lachhman Sen era* is equivalent to 1506 of the *Sālivāhana era*, i.e. the *Śaka era*, and 1641 of the *Vikramāditya era*. This computation would put forth the date 1119 AD from which the *Lachhman Sen era* was counted. Most of the inscriptions and manuscripts bearing dates connected with the *La Saṃ* (abbreviation of *Lakṣmaṇasena Samvat*) have come to light from Bihar, particularly north Bihar. They do not suggest any uniformity with regard to the year of the *Christian era* from which the *La Saṃ* was computed. The prevalence of this era in the territories of West Bengal and Bangladesh is proved by dated manuscripts found from the erstwhile Dinajpore District and those preserved in the Dacca Museum. A number of inscribed clay tablets from lower reaches of Gangetic West Bengal bear

dates reckoned from the *La Saṃ*. Buchanan wrote in 1810 that the *La Saṃ* 705-06 was current at that time in the Dinajpore District.

Two more eras were prevalent in the eastern sector of Bangladesh. They are the *Balāli* and the *Parganāti San* which commenced from AD 1199 and 1202 respectively. In a few documents, however, the *Parganāti San* has been reckoned from AD 1199. It is interesting to note that the first year of the *Balāli San* would be the year 593 of the *Hizri*, solarisation of which may account for the difference computed between the years of the *Bengali San* and those of the *Christian era*.

Adaptations of the *Bengali San* in modified forms are noticeable in the medieval records of the rulers of Tripura and those of the Malla kings of Viṣṇupur of West Bengal. The *Tripuri era* was counted from AD 590 while the *Malla era* was computed from the year 694 of the *Christian era*.

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