

Sufi, Islamic Settlement and Cultural Synthesis in Bengal

Kalyani Dutta

M.Phil. & Research Scholar, Department of History, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India

Abstract

The oral traditions and literatures of Bengal narrate several events to show how Islam had flourished in Bengal delta. The most famous Muslim Sufi Saint of Bengal was Shah Jalal Mujarrad (d.1346) of Sylhet. According to 'Suhail-i-Yaman' a biography of Shah Jalal Mujarrad compiled in the mid nineteenth century (which was based on manuscripts dating to the seventeenth century and now it is lost) and oral traditions refer Islamisation in Bengal took place with the help of Shah Jalal Mujarrad. This fact of Islamisation in Bengal delta is also corroborated from the account of Ibn Battuta (a Moroccan traveler), who traveled to Sylhet to meet the renowned Sufi saint Shah Jalal in 1345. During the process of land development Muslim Pirs entered into uncultivated regions directly, organized the local population for clearing the jungles and later established themselves as local men of influences.

Keywords: sufi, satya pir, folk literature, oral tradition, amulet, expansion

Introduction

The Muslim folk literatures exclusively focused on the veneration of Muslim saints known as Sufi and *Pir*. The Bengali Muslim folk made *Pir* as local non-Muslim divinity in society. The presence of Sufis and *Pirs* on large scale was very important for doctrine and tolerance for Islam. They were those holy men who aimed at establishing direct communication between God and man through personal experience of mystery, which lies within the Islam. Hence, the disciples wanted Sufis and *Pir's* association to become close to the God. As a result the large number of non-Muslim people influenced by their doctrines. We find several examples of *Pirs* and Saints who settled in various parts of Bengal. They were worshipped by both Hindu and Muslim masses and a large number of shrines were dedicated to them. They performed various activities such as spreading Islamic culture among the local people through Hindu-Muslim cultural synthesis and making habitation in barren lands etc.

Folk Tradition and Islamic Expansion in Bengal

According to Richard M. Eaton, in Bengal Sufi took part in expanding the Islamic frontier through agricultural (land reclamation), religious and political activities. Islam expanded in Bengal during and after the peak of Mughal power. This religious expansion was not linked to any military campaign and liberation of any lower castes. As a result of land reclamation forests turned into wet rice fields in Bengal delta. The Sufi also advised the State officials to show leniency in collecting land revenue from the peasants.

The folk traditions and literatures of Bengal dating from the 16th century refer about Sufis or *Pirs* (Muslim holy men). These holy men are remembered for their significant works in land reclamation, spreading Islamic culture among local masses and establishing mosques. In real sense the people of the delta regions of Bengal started transforming forests lands to rice cultivation lands much before the advent of Muslims. However, various folk traditions and literatures associate these

Sufis and *Pirs* with the reclamation of forest lands in Bengal delta at least from 16th century onwards. "The Muslim holy men after coming to Bengal delta mobilized the local communities to cut the forests and settled the lands. The forest lands transformed into rice producing wet lands. Gradually people started venerating these holy men who were usually Muslim"^[4]. Thus "the local inhabitants were transformed from shifting (*jhum*) cultivators to settled wet-rice farmers. An Islamic identity gradually grew among non-Hindu forest-dwellers as they adopted an agrarian life. The growth of Islam in Bengal, in short, was closely tied to wet-rice agriculture."^[5] Fishermen and other sections of people also integrated in this process in due course of time. The growth of a Muslim peasant society was culturally related to larger ecological and demographic forces in Bengal.

Sufi Khanqahs had a strong influence in rural Bengal at the grass root level. The all classes of people attracted to the *Khanqah* were often supported by endowment. The *khanqah* had many public facilities within it such as kitchen and free hospitals. Thus it also played an important role in the formation of new Muslim villages in many sparsely populated areas.

Cultural Synthesis

Miraculous powers play a very significant role in Hindu-Muslim cultural synthesis. Sufis and *Pirs* were believed to possess miraculous powers which they used for curing several diseases and for normal welfare of the people. The medieval hagiographic literatures and *Malfuzat* literatures (collections of discourses of Sufi Saints compiled by their disciples) described different kind of miraculous powers of Sufi, dervishes etc. These were walking on water, invoking natural hazards such as rain, droughts, earthquake, fire etc. The miraculous powers of Sufis or *Pirs* make them an object of worship which helps in cultural synthesis. It attracts a large mass of people that ultimately results in formation of a cult. The worship of *Satya Pir* is the superficial motivation in *Satya*

Pir cult. All the tales related to *Satya Pir* cult reflects the *Pir's* miraculous powers, which authenticate him as a legitimate object of worship.

Satya Pir is a holy mythic figure who is worshipped by Bengali speaking both Hindu and Muslim people of South Asia regions. It is believed that he has two features of Lord Krishna and Sufi saint. "In *Satya Pir* we find the combinations of both Hindu Yogi or *Sannyasi* and Muslim *Pir* or *Fakir* Cultures" [1]. He wears Brahmin's sacred thread, the Sufi beard and wooden sandals, the chain belt and dagger of the Gazi or warrior (defender of God). The synthesizing and transforming process of *Pir* to *Satya Pir* shows the process of Sanskritization. This process is more relevant to Hindu society than to the Muslim society. There are certain factors which helped in cult development. The *Satya Pir* cult emerges as a brahmanical device to absorb the increasingly popular *Pir* cult. It shows a religious synthesis. The importance of the syncretistic tradition of Islam in Eastern India was unrecognized and unappreciated due to lack of knowledge and much less systematic study. Hence we have to find its facts and reconstruct history again to show its implications in minimizing social conflicts, tensions and maintaining social harmony. A thorough and systematic study on syncretistic tradition was done by Asim Roy in his book '*The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*'.

The amulets have a significant position and role in Sufi culture. It was considered as a depository of all the miraculous occult powers of the saint. Thus it was used to protect from the effect of evil eye and black magic, a medium or a way to cure several diseases etc. People used amulets and believed that it would bring success and happiness in their life and so on. It was an important source of income for many people who made *tawig* or amulets. "From the fourteenth Century onwards preparation of amulets (*ta'widh*), each a kind of individual memorial became the main occupation of the dervishes and attendant of tomb. It contained a small piece of stone from the saint's tomb a chip from the canopy over the *mazar* or a shred from the *chaddar* used as its cover and finally simply a piece of paper with a prayer or a verse from the Quran written on it" [2].

Sufi *dargah* was very important for establishment of a new Muslim habitation. People venerate Muslim saints as well as his tombs. People go to Sufi *mazar* with various desires and offer flowers, prayers to the spirit of the *Pir* buried at a particular *dargah* in the belief that it would bring them some fortune. Infertile women visit *dargah* for fertility and child birth. "One could expect that barren women of various castes would have been attracted to the *dargahs* because of the latter's association with fertility" [3]. They offer *chaddar* after fulfillment of their wishes. We also see at the side of the buried remains some evidences of other materials of Sufi life like his dress, turban, sandal, beads, hair, weapons etc. are preserved. After a certain period of time all these acquire the status of relics which have a significant influence on the spiritual spheres of all human beings. There are numerous cultic memorials in which hair or footprints of the prophet or his family members were preserved.

Conclusion

According to Richard M. Eaton it was the folk literature of certain local Sufis and *Pirs* which made a bridge between Sufis and common people. Many short poems, songs, folktales, *baramasas* etc. were written on local languages. The interaction between *Pir* and local masses resulted in a cultural synthesis in the areas of arts, music, literature and religion etc. The Sufis and *Pirs* played an important role in promoting friendly relations among all religions and in the religious - cultural history of the country.

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