

FOCUS ON BENGAL'S TRADITIONAL MUSLIM SOCIETY

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The traditional Muslim society of Bengal represented a composite culture in which various foreign Muslim traditions and local influences were fused. In a recent study, Dr. Abdul Karim has shown that during the Sultanate period (i.e. from the thirteenth to the sixteenth century C.E.), the Muslim society of Bengal was “divided into two broad classes - the higher class and the lower class.” The higher or upper class was mostly composed of foreign immigrants, *Khaljis*, *Ilbari Turks*, *Tughlaqs*, *Afghans* and *Sayyids*, who came to Bengal as conquerors. In the wake of their conquest many Arabs, Persians, Africans and North Indian Muslims joined them as peaceful settlers, traders and missionaries. Besides, many Central Asian families up-rooted by the Mongol eruption “moved out of their homeland and settled in Bengal”. Although these different groups of Muslims came to Bengal under the “banner of Islam,” they brought with them their several particular way of life which they continued to practice.

The assumption of the political leadership of Bengal by the Mughals in the middle of the sixteenth century, did not change the earlier social setup, but introduced still newer elements, specially the *Shi'ite* influence imported by them from Persia. The extent of the *Shi'ite* influence in Bengal under the Mughals can be gauged from the fact that though the Muslim population of Bengal were almost all *Sunnis*, the *Shi'ites* are reported to have held supremacy over Bengal down to the eighteenth century, as the Nawabs and top ranking officials were drawn mostly from the *Shi'ite* sect.

The upper strata of the Muslim society of Bengal did not form an isolated group, but an extension of the North Indian Muslim society. Even the *Sufis* who were responsible for the mass proselytisation of the local people, came to Bengal from Central Asia or elsewhere through North India.

The lower strata of the Muslim society of Bengal, on the other hand, consisted mostly of local converts. In their conversion, the *Sufis* (i.e., Muslim mystics) played such an important role that Islam in Indo-Pak-Bangladesh sub-continent has come to be regarded as “largely the gift of the *Sufis*”. The *Sufis*, who emphasised more on the love of Allah than on the observance of the Law (*Shari'ah*), were naturally more tolerant than the orthodox '*Ulama*' or the theologians, and were ready to compromise to some

extent with local customs. Archaeological evidence shows that the tomb of some of the earliest *Sufis* were erected on older mounds, which were apparently older local shrines or places of pilgrimage. For instance, the shrine (*Dargah*) of Shah Sultan Mahisawar at Mahasthan in the district of Bogra stands on the top of a *Shaiva* temple. The *Dargah* of Bayazid Bistami, near Chittagong town, stand on the top of an older mound, and the *Khanqah* (i.e., monastery) of Shah Jalal of Sylhet is likewise placed on an ancient mound. The fact that these older shrines were let to continue or revived under a new garb, is a proof, not only of the accomodative attitude of the *Sufis* and their followers, but also, of their manipulation of the local sentiment in favour of Islam.

Another conspicuous instance of the survival of pre-Islamic custom is found in the utmost veneration shown to the stone-representation of the footprint of the Prophet (i.e, *Qadam Rasul*), especially in Eastern India. The earliest example of *Qadam Rasul* is found in the *Qadam Rusul* Building, erected by Sultan Nasir al-Din Nusrat Shah at Gaur to preserve the stone-representation of the foot-print of the Prophet, said to have been brought by Makhdum Jahaniyah Jahangasht from Arabia. In Chittagong, there is a *Qadam Rasul* mosque, where such a foot print is preserved and another building is found at Habiganj (near Narayanganj) , which preserved a similar foot print.

Nevertheless, the early *Sufis* appears to have been orthodox Muslims, and in spite of their greater attention to mysticism or *Tasawwuf*, they managed to observe the religious duties prescribed by the *Shari'ah* (i.e. Islamic Law). But in course of time, there grew up a heterodox type of mysticism and distinction began to be made between two types of mystics, one *Ba shar'a* (i.e. those whose practice conformed with *Shari'ah*, that is to say, "orthoprax") and the other *Be shar'a* (i.e., those whose practice did not conform with *Shari'ah* or "heteroprax"). The former type of mystic were also called *Salik* and the latter *Majzub*.

The term *Salik* literally means a traveller, and in the mystic terminology, a traveller in the pathway of mysticism who conscientiously observes the religious duties prescribed by Islamic law (*Shari'ah*) as well. The *Majzub*, on the other hand, is one who being overcome by his passion of love for Allah, has become unmindful to the worldly etiquette. It is generally believed that the desires of *Majzub* are in reality the desires of Allah expressed through him. In this sense, he is compared with a corpse resigned completely to the will of Allah. About the *Majzub* or *Be shar'a* mystics as they were regarded in the nineteenth century, James Wise says that they followed their own appetites and passions eating and drinking whatever they fancy and leading disreputable and scandalous lives. They wander about naked or nearly naked and live on begging or charity and are universally credited with supernatural powers.⁶³ He describes the *Salik* or *Ba shar'a* mystics as "usually married men of settled habit", who initiate disciples into their Orders. Consequently the *Salik* was by far the most respected in Bengal.

From the earliest time, the prominent *Sufis* who initiated disciples into their Orders were known as *Pirs* or guides. In mystic practices where a *Pir* has to guide his disciple at every step, the "person" of the *Pir* was naturally regarded as more

important than the “science of mysticism” (*ilm-i-tasawwuf*) and “super-human powers were ascribed to the *Sufis*, such as, giving relief to the poor, destitutes and the patients, being present at several places at a time, giving life to the dead, killing anybody at their wish and foretelling the future.” In his analysis of *Pirism*, Dr. Karim observes that “reverence to the *Pir*” or the “concept of super-human power of the *Pir*” is not of Bengali origin. It was imported from Central Asia “through Northern India” by the Muslim immigrants. But in Bengal, it found a fertile soil and was established on a solid foundation. Thus, *Pirism* in Bengal was, in its early stages, was an extension of the North Indian development.

The Buddhist populations of Bengal practised worshipping *Chaityas* or the *Stupas* and adore them with flowers and burning incense. The Hindus believed in *Avatarism* or incarnation of the Deity in human body. The local converts found a suitable parallel in the *Pirs* and even inclined to *accept* them as such. The result was the rise of various local cults around *Pir*, such as, *Kumbhira Pir* and *Madari Pir*. Besides, in the cult of *Satya Pir* of the Muslims and *Satya Narayan* of the Hindus, the Muslims and the Hindus even stood shoulder to shoulder. As a matter of fact, Muslim relics have been found on excavation of *Satya Bhita*, which stands on the famous Buddhist monastery at Paharpur in the district of Rajshahi. It is interesting to note that these local cults were propagated exclusively through Bengali literature, pointing unmistakably to their local origin.

The *Shi'ite* influence is found in its most prominent form in the Karbala legends, which has deeply affected the Muslim Bengali literature; and it is found in its corrupt form in the worship of *Bibi Fatimah*, the daughter of the Prophet. “One *Nil Bahr* built on a Cenotaph in honour of *Bibi Fatimah*, and for many generations a paper *Taziyah* called *Turbat Haidari*, had been deposited in it during the Muharram”. Mir Hashmat Ali, the English translator of *Taqwiyat al-Iman*, says, “the commonalty of the Muslims, especially the women, have more regard for the memory of *Imams*,”(i.e. Hasan and Husayn and their successors), than for that of Muhammad and his *Khalifahs*. The making of the *Taziyas* on the anniversary of the *Imams*, is most common throughout India, so much so that, “the opposition to it is ascribed by the ignorant Muslims to blasphemy”.

The immigrant Muslims had introduced a type of birthday celebration of the Prophet called *Milad Sharif* or *Milad al-Nabi*, and *Fatihah* or the rite connected with the remembrance of the dead relatives, usually followed by a feast, and ‘*Urs*’, i.e. *Fatihah* of the deceased *Pirs*, annually held at the shrines or *Khanqahs* of the *Pirs* and their descendants. The non-Bengali origin of these rites, is evident from the fact that even down to the present day, their services are conducted in Arabic, Persian and Urdu languages. Nevertheless, these rites were given a distinct Islamic orientation by their enunciators, and had become universally popular throughout the Muslim world during the medieval times.

Likewise the cults of *Khawaj Khizr*, *Zindah Ghazi*, *Pir Badar*, *Shaykh Sady*, were either introduced or developed, in Bengal by the immigrants, which became very popular among the lower strata of the Muslim society of Bengal. The festival of

Bhera, dedicated to *Khawaj Khizr*, was widely observed by high and low “on the Thursday of the Bengali month *Bhadra*”. The festival, according to James Wise, coincided “with the breaking of the rains” and was celebrated by Hindu boatmen and fishermen as well as by the Muslims. The *Bhera* was “made of paper and ornamented with tinsel,” had a prow “resembling a female face with the crest and breast of a peacock, in imitation of the figure-head on the bow of the pleasure boat.” “The effigy,” Wise further says, “placed on a *Mor Pankhi* (i.e. *Mayur-Pankhi*) raft of plantain stem is set afloat at sunset, and with its flickering light gives a picturesque aspect to the dark and flooded stream.” Nawab Siraj al-Dawlah is reported to have celebrated it at Murshidabad.

We have noted earlier that the upper strata of the Muslim society of Bengal were an extension of the Muslim society of Northern India. They generally followed the pattern of culture prevalent in Delhi and Lucknow. From the time of Bakhtiyar’s conquest of Bengal in the thirteenth century C.E. down to the nineteenth century, the Persian language and the Turko-Mughal court etiquette were the dominant factors in their way of life. Describing the educated class to the Muslims in the nineteenth century, James Wise says that they were of “liberal ideas” and “Sympathised with the sincere worshippers of God” in whatever form it might be found. According to him, the educated Muslims were well-read in Persian and Arabic literature, and were convinced that they were the heir of “latest and best” Religion. He ascribes the main reason of the unsympathetic attitude of the Muslims towards English education to their consideration that, it favoured infidelity and atheism. They absorbed themselves so much in Arabic, Persian and Urdu literature that Bengali literature was considered foreign to them. In their day-to-day activities they were, magnanimous to the poor and needy, tolerant to the followers of other religions and sects, and pious in the practice of their own faith. They attended regularly to the daily prayers, observed the fast of Ramadan, and dispensed charity “freely and unostentatiously”. Thus, the upper class, which consisted of princes, high officials and *Zaminders*, although may not have believed in the local cults and innovations, mentioned above, they tolerated them.

It may be well imagined that the Muslim theologians (*‘Ulama*) must have kept themselves aloof from such un-Islamic innovations as worship of *Satya Pir*, *Manik Pir*, *Kumbhira Pir* etc. but they generally adhered to one or another of the great mystic Orders, viz. *Qadiriyyah*, *Chistiyah*, *Naqshbandiyah* and *Suhrawardiyah*. As a matter of fact, these mystic Orders, specially as reformed in the seventeenth century by Shaykh Ahmad Sarhindi, who was reputed to be the Renovator of faith in the second millennium of Islam (*Mujaddid-i-Alf-i-Thani*), came to be recognised by the Muslims of the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent as orthodox, and were placed on almost an equal footing with the four recognised schools of law.

In the actual practice of mysticism, especially on the popular level, there were hundred and one deviations from the true path. But, in a society where the high and the low, *‘Ulema* as well as the layman belonged to one or another form of mysticism, the deviations could be justified or at least defended by referring them to *Ba shar’a* or *Be shar’a* mystic Orders. Thus, the indiscriminate practice of mysticism by the masses or laymen came under sharp criticism of Haji Shari’at Allah; Mawlana

Karamat Ali made scathing criticism of many corrupt practices that had grown round the real teaching of the *Sufis*.

The Muslim society of Bengal was, thus, a melting-pot for centuries in which various foreign traditions imported by the immigrants as well as local influences were fused. The foreign elements, such as *Fatihah*, *Urs* and *Milad*, were same as the North Indian pattern. But the local influence which consisted of customs, ceremonies and cults were somewhat peculiar to Bengal or Eastern India and with the blending of these various elements a complete socio-religious system had grown up in Bengal in which every custom, usage or ceremony acquired a definite value through long practice. Although many of the customs and ceremonies were from doctrinal point of view deviations from the original teachings of Islam, yet by long association with the original doctrines they came to occupy definite places of their own in the structure of socio-religious values and gradually acquired an Islamic orientation. Various customs and ceremonies connected with wedding, for instance, offered the masses the facilities of recreation and merrymaking. The wedding feast, *Fatihah* and *Urs* provided them with a square meal. The celebration of *Muharram* provided them the occasion for psychological distraction from the common humdrum of life, mixing in the crowd and for intense feeling. Every society is, in its own way, dynamic, and is prone to change. It cannot stand still for ages or centuries on the same grounds. The Muslim society of Bengal had, therefore, naturally changed, adapted itself to the vicissitude of time and had grown in size as well as in depth.

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