

Muslim Preachers of Medieval Bengal

Their Role in Promoting Communal Harmony and Social Equilibrium

By Professor Emeritus Dr A K M Yaqub Ali

Introductory Remarks

No revealed religion approves *rahbaniyyah* or complete segregation from human habitation living in secluded places like the monastery, abbey and such other abodes to spend the life in entirety for devotional rituals to Allah (God), the Creator of the Universe. In such type of prolonged seclusion the devotee must abide by celibacy and refrain him or herself from all biological needs, social practices and interactions. This is really against the demand of human nature. In Christianity the practice of *rahbaniyyah* grew and developed in various forms and dimensions.

In non-revealed religions like the Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Hinduism could be noticed such type of sacrificial devotion and celibacial practice through the ages from the time of yore. This type of life-pattern of human species could be expressed in term of monasticism. Mysticism in its inner conception is but an expression of monastic way of life in different forms. Islam as the last revealed religion being the complete code of human life unequivocally denounces monasticism. It is echoed in the Holy Qur'an, "But monasticism they invented - We ordained it not for them - only seeking Allah's pleasure, and they observed it not with right observance so We give those of them who believe their reward, but many of them are evil-livers."¹ In the same way Prophet Muhammad (sm) emphatically declares that *La rahbaniyyata fil Islam* i.e. no monasticism in Islam.² It is, therefore, clear from the above citation of the verse of the Holy Qur'an and the commandment of the Prophet that monasticism in no form could be cherished in Islam. To get Allah's love and to realise the objectives of His creation man must love His Prophet (sm) and follow the path ordained by him. It is enjoined in the Holy Qur'an "Say, (oh Muhammad, to mankind): If you love

Allah, follow me; Allah will love you and forgive you your sins. Allah is Forgiving, Merciful."³ The same idea could be derived from the utterance of the Prophet when he warned his *ummah* " you will never go astray till you stick to the Book of Allah i.e. al-Quran and the *Sunnah* (the way of life) of His Prophet."⁴ Hence monastic way of life has been ruled out from the straight path (*al-Sirat al-Mustaqim*) of Islam.

Mysticism in the sense of *rahbaniyyah* or asceticism is not identical with sufism originated and development in Islam. It is not historically tenable to connect the nomenclature of *sufi* to the *ahl al-suffah* (the inmates of the portico) of the Prophet's mosque at Madinah in its nascent period as claimed by some exponents of the sufism. Rather there is every reason to believe that the term *sufi* is derived either from the Arabic root *suf* or from *safiun*. In the former case it means wool and in the latter case it means purity. Both the terminologies fit well with the lifestyle of the *sufis*. That is because the early *sufis* used to wear woollen garments and coarse cloths to create a separate identity and, at the same time, they maintained the purity of *niyyat* or intention in all their rituals and religious observances. Whatever explanation may be given to the term *sufi*, the *sufis* of various orders in later times claimed their spiritual preceptor to be Hazrat Abu Bakr (R.), the first caliph of Islam or to Hazrat Ali (R.), the fourth caliph of Islam. The special type of the subject dealing with theoretical and practical aspects of spirituality in all their forms is called *Tasawwuf* while the preceptor of the discipline is called *Mutasawwif*.⁵ In connection to this discipline two other terms *wali* (plural *awliya*) and *shaikh* (plural *mashaikh*) deserve mentioning. The term *wali* conveys the meaning of friend or person having close intimacy. In sufistic concept when a *salik* crossing several *maqams* or stages of *dhikr* and stations of prescribed meditation reaches the highest point of coming very near to Almighty Lord he can be bestowed upon the decree of *wilayat*, and he is assumed to be *wali*. In the three verses of the Holy Qur'an the qualities of *awliya* along with the rewards are delineated in this way, "Lo! Verily the friends of Allah are (those) on whom fear (cometh) not, nor do they grieve. Those who believe and keep their duty to Allah, theirs are good tidings in the life of the world and the hereafter - There is no changing in the words of Allah - that is the supreme triumph."⁶ The *ulama* or the theologians, in the interpretation of the verses, opine that the *awliya* in question may be applicable to any individual Muslim who by his ardent devotion can establish friendship with Him although the *sufis* like to confine the application of the term to themselves. It suffices to mention *Tadhkiratul Awliya* of Farid ud-Din Attar (1150-1229/1230) in hagiological literature of the time.⁷ The term *shaikh-mashaikh* though primarily applied for man senior in age but

justifiably it is for those who have combined in themselves the knowledge of *Shariat* and *Marifat* with full practice and devotion. Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jilani (1078-1166), Shaikh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi, Imam Ghazali and Shaikh Shihab al-Suhrawardi are cases in point.

Subject Outline

At the end of the *Khilafat-i-Rashida* in 661 C.E. and with the start of the dynastic rules of the Umayyads (661-750 C.E.) and then of the Abbasids (750-1258 C.E.) the fabric of the pristine Islam was to some extent affected due to the socio-political turmoil and due to sectarian conflict of the theologians and intellectuals. To avoid tumultuous situation arising out of various adverse factors contemporaneous to the expanse of time mentioned above a group of non-sectarian, but pious Muslims preferred the path of devotion and seclusion from all kinds of social ugliness. This in course of time helped formulate *sufi* doctrines with the ultimate aim of love for Allah.⁸

The pioneering *sufis* and *mashaikhs* from the end of the second century of Hijrah (719-816 C.E.) like Dhun Nun al-Misri, Hasan al-Basri, Rabia al-Basri, Ibrahim b.Adham al-Balkhi, Junaid al-Baghdadi, Abdul Qadir Jilani, Jalal al-Din Rumi and Abu Hamid al-Ghazali⁹ all belonging to the countries other than the Jaziratul Arab or the Arabian peninsula contributed much to the development of *sufi* doctrine and played a vital role in preaching Islam among the people of near and distant lands of the time.

In continuation of this mode of preaching and enlivening the egalitarian spirit of Islam a good number of *ulama-mashaikh* and *sufis* came to the soil of Bengal by the sea and land route from about the 7th - 8th C.E.¹⁰ and after the Muslim conquest of the land at the early 13th century the activities of the Muslim sages continued unabated under the Muslim rule of medieval times in the various parts of the country. The legacy was followed by the generations to come. Here are few cases of *ulama-mashaikh* and *sufis* who played their role in maintaining communal harmony and social equilibrium in society.

There is no denying the fact that since the conquest of the land 1204 C.E. *masajid*, *madaris* and *khanqat* were established by the rulers as visible institutions of the Muslim society.¹¹ In order to impart necessary religious as well as profession-based education to the people the three categories of institutions seemed to be essential. To train up the people and to create the *ulama* class *madaris* or educational seminaries were built up in various

important units and localities of this land. The *madaris* or academies of learning either run by the endowments of the ruling class or maintained by the individuals required the services of the *ulama*. Needless to say, that the services of the *ulama* or the learned were important for the running of the two important institutions i.e. *masajid* and *khanqat* of the Muslim community.

Though the *sufis* apparently formed a different class, they were not really excluded from the *ulama* class. They were required to have the knowledge of the Islamic subjects. The *khanqahs* served as the seminaries for learning also, and the *sufis* in charge of these institutions were not devoid of the knowledge of the *Shariah*. Fakhr al-Din Zarradi imparted the knowledge of the *Shariah* to Shaykh Akhi Siraj al-Din Uthman before the latter's spiritual training under Shaykh Nizam al-Din Auliya.¹² After the death of his *murshid* or preceptor, Akhi Siraj came to preach in Gaur and Pandua, and had a large number of disciples, the chief among whom was Shaykh Ala al-Haq. Shaykh Nur Qutb al-Alam was a fellow student of Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Azam Shah (1392-1410) and received education from Qazi Hamid al-Din Naguri.¹³ He was a famous sufi of Pandua and he played a vital role against the tyrannical rule of Raja Ganesh to establish people's right. These instances give evidence to the fact that the *sufis* in all fairness received the knowledge of *Shariah* before they underwent spiritual training.

The *ulama* as a class rendered valuable services for the well-being of the Muslim society. As *imam* in the mosque, *muallim* or teacher in the madrasah, *muballigh* or preacher among the mass and *sufi* in the *khanqah* the *alim* did what they could to impart knowledge of the *Shariah* and of daily affairs needed for leading decent life. The people got ample opportunity of coming in closer contact with the *ulama* class and were influenced by them. They initiated *mudhakarah* in the institutions mentioned above and taught the people in the mosques and learners in the *madaris* and *khanqahs* the fundamentals of Islam, the utility of their observances and rewards promised for the votaries in the world hereafter.¹⁴ However, the *ulama* rendered services during the period under study for cementing brotherly bond among the various classes of people and maintaining social equilibrium in society.

The *sufis* of medieval Bengal invariably maintained *khanqahs* for imparting training to their disciples so that they could retain the purity of their souls along with their humanitarian services to the people and society. A *khanqah* of the time usually performed three functions viz. 1. teaching the knowledge of the *Shariah* and the *sufi* creed, 2. practical application of the knowledge in individual and collective lives and 3. Langar khana or free-kitchen and shelter

(hospices) to all. In consideration of the functions stated above it is reasonable to assume that the *sufis* did their utmost to maintain the communal harmony and social equilibrium by their words and deeds. The *ulama* class on the other hand though not devoid of sufistic conception kept the flame of both religious and humanities studies alight by establishing the *madaris* or the institutions of primary and advanced learning in the different parts of Bengal. The madrasah of Taqi al-Din al-Arabi at Mahison¹⁵ (identified with Mahisantosh) in present Naogaon district, the madrasah of Maulana Sharaf al-Din Abu Tawwamah at Sonargaon¹⁶ in present Naraonganj district and the madrasah of Hamid Danishmand at Bagha¹⁷ in Rajshahi district of Bangladesh are cases in point. These institutions of learning contained such syllabi of study which could be conducive to promote harmonial relation among various sections of the people. In the great expanse of these three madrasah-complexes could have been accommodated *khanqah* with all its functions as the rectors of the above institutions combined in themselves the deep knowledge of *Shariah* and *Marifah*.

Of the eminent *sufis* of medieval Bengal Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi (13th C.E.), of Pandua, Shah Sultan Mahmud Mahi Sawar (13th C.E.) of Mahasthan, Shah Jalal Kunyabi (14th C.E.) of Sylhet, Shaykh Akhi Siraj al-Din Uthman (14th C.E.) of Gaur-Pandua, Shaykh Ala al-Haq (14th-15th C.E.) of Pandua and his son Nur Qutb al-Alam (14th-15th C.E.) of Pandua were the most illustrious sages of this soil. All of them nourished the *sufi* doctrines in their entirety and maintained the *khanqah* for spiritual training and the hospices for meals and shelter to poor, destitutes and mendicants irrespective of castes and creeds.

Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi born at Tabriz in Persia, a disciple of Shaykh Abu Said Tabrizi and later on of Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi at the direction of his spiritual preceptor reached Delhi on route to Bengal at the early years of the 13th century possibly after 1210 C.E.¹⁸ It may fall in the reign of Ghiyath al-Din Iwaz Khalji. But in the account of *Seka Subhodaya* a later work attributed to Halaydhu Misra, a courtier of Laksmana Sena, the last ruler of the Sena dynasty the sage's arrival in Lakhnawati, the capital was recorded in the *Saka* year 1124 / 1202 C.E.¹⁹ In the account of the book it is stated that his miracles convinced Laksmana Sena and his famous minister Halaydhu Misra of his spiritual attainments. The king ordered the construction of a mosque in his honour and granted him many villages for the maintenance of the mosque and monastery in Pandua.²⁰ Though the book *Sek Subhodaya* is considered to be of unknown authorship, yet its theme on this matter throws a communal harmonic relation among the followers of diverse religious affiliations. This

was possible due to the humanistic attitude of the sage on one hand and the recipient mind of the king on the other.

Pandua and Deotala were the two important centres for the activities of Jalal al-Din Tabrizi. Both traditional and epigraphic records have preserved for us the memory of the Shaykh.²¹ At Hazrat Pandua there still exists a *langar* established by the Shaykh, and a big estate now known as *Bais Hazari* was dedicated to it. The lands of Deotala are included in the Waqf estate.²² Epigraphic evidence shows that Deotala was named Tabrizabad after the name of the sage Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi.²³ The activities of the Shaykh and his disciples were not confined in spiritual training and *mudhakarah*, rather they performed the humanitarian and such other public works that could bring communal harmony making no class distinction and religious motivation. Still now his mausoleum known as *Bari Dargah* in Pandua is respected by all people irrespective of castes and religious affiliations.

In the sequence of place i.e. Pandua, the two most renowned sages - Ala al-Din Ala al-Haq and his son Nur Qutb al-Alam - are given priority to assess their role in this regard. Shaykh Ala al-Haq belonged to a wealthy and aristocratic family of Lakhnawati. To this aristocracy he added his great learning. The *ulama* of the time were no match for him. It is known from *Akhbar al-Akhyar* that he was in charge of the treasury of Sultan Sikandar Shah (1337-1392), and one of his son Azam was a *wazir* at the court of Pandua.²⁴ Naturally, Ala al-Haq enjoyed his wealth and reputation in the society. But he became a changed man when he accepted the discipleship of Akhi Siraj al-Din Uthman, the great *sufi*-sage of the time. He discarded wealth, influence and position and devoted himself to a life of austerity and service.

After the death of his preceptor (Shaykh Akhi Siraj) Shaykh Ala al-Haq proved to be his successful disciple. He kept at Pandua a *khanqah* and a *langar* which became the resort of the devotees, the seekers of Divine knowledge and the destitute. He could attract the people with his ideal and humanitarian activities.²⁵ His liberal spending of money for the *langar* and his influence on the religious elements and the destitute aroused the jealousy of the reigning sultan and banished him to Sonargaon where also he kept running his *sufistic* works with the same zeal.²⁶ It is to be noted here that his *langar* and hospices were open to all without any restriction, and his service to humanity at large suffices to bear witness on his magnanimous character. Possibly after the death of Sikandar Shah he came back to Pandua and died

there in 1398. He was laid to rest in a place which goes by the name of *Chhuta dargah* in Pandua.

Bearing the legacy of his father Nur Qutb al-Alam steeped in the spiritual training. He seems to have received his primary education from his father at home. He was a class-mate of Ghiyath al-Azam Shah at his boyhood and both of them received *ilm ash – Shariah* from Qazi Hamid al-Din Naguri. Then he chose the path of *sufism* leaving the worldly life. His father put on him various kinds of tests to see that he would be able to bear his mantle in *sufi* discipline. It is said that at the instruction of his father he engaged himself to serve the derwishes, mendicants and *faqirs* in the *khanqah* of his father. He used to cleanse their cloths and supply them hot water when they required it. He carried faggots to the *langar* of his father and drew water from the well for the women of the neighbour-hood for about eight years at the instruction of his father.²⁷ This is the way of annihilation of *nafs ammarah* or evil propensity, and he succeeded in it. However, after his father's death he shouldered the responsibility of running the *khanqah* and the *langar* as before. By his untiring efforts, the *sufi* order got a strong footing in Pandua. People came to Pandua from all over Hindustan to receive spiritual training under this sage. He maintained a college, hospital and a *langar*.²⁸ It is known that Ala al-Din Husayn Shah (1493-1519) made land grants to this college and hospital.²⁹ From all these facts it is reasonable to say that Nur Qutb al-Alam directed his endeavours for the well-being of humanity at large. After his death in 1410-1415 he was buried at *Chhuta dargah* near his father's grave in Pandua.

In the silsila of the sufistic creed one of the early sufis who came to Bengal is Shah Sultan Mahmud Mahi Sawar. Legend has that he was a prince of Balkh. He developed apathy towards the worldly pomp and grandeur. He left the throne and preferred ascetism to the worldly power. He became a disciple of Shaykh Tawfiq of Damascus who is reported to have ordained him to preach Islam in the land of Bengal. However, being directed by his preceptor he preceded to Bengal by the sea route and crossing many hazardous ways he arrived at Mahastan riding on fish-back.³⁰ It was the capital of King Parsuram who is reported to be a tyrant who unnecessarily harassed the people. The sage appeared before Raja Parsuram and requested him to grant only a stretch of land sufficient for his prayer-mat made of skin on which he might say his prayers. The Raja granted his prayer and the sage started his missionary works.³¹ He advised the Raja not to oppress the people, but be kind to them. But the Raja did not restrain himself from his tyrannical activities. On the other hand the people of all shades of life rallied round the sage to rescue

them from the Raja's clutches. Ultimately a battle was fought between the Raja and the sage in which the Raja was completely annihilated. The date of this event is recorded in one source as 439 A.H./ 1047 C.E.³² But this is untenable as circumstantial evidence places it in between the years 1203 and 1204.³³ After his death Mahi Sawar was buried at Mahastan where his tomb still stands. The sage is believed to have the *khanqah* for spiritual training and hospices for the mendicants, poor and destitute. The sage also maintained communal harmony to establish people's right fought against wrong and tyranny. Like all other *sufis* of Bengal Shah Jalal Kunyabi of Sylhet fought against the tyrant Raja Gaur Govinda, eradicated evils and established the rights of the people irrespective of castes and creeds.³⁴ He also maintained *khanqah* and hospices. His tomb stands in Sylhet town which is visited by huge numbers of people every day.

Concluding Remarks

In the light of the above, it is clear that the *ulama-mashaikh* and the *sufi*-sages played an active part in medieval Bengal society. The *ulama- mashikh* by establishing *madaris* in various parts of the country provided education to all and illuminated them to fight against wrong and ugliness. It was not confined within the sophisticated class as it was before in pre-Muslim Bengal. It, therefore, made everybody conscious of his or her rights and duties in the society. As a result the class-distinction was on the wane, and social equilibrium ensured. Secondly, the *sufis* especially by providing the *khanqat* and *langar* or hospices enlivened the egalitarian spirit of Islam, and this accelerated the communal harmony among the people of the country. It recalls memorable speech of the Prophet, "Live and let live others." Finally, the Muslim rulers of medieval Bengal being imbibed with the teachings of the *ulama-mashaikh* and *sufi*-sages gave *madad ma'ash* and provided land grants to the individuals and the institutions as the case might fit. Thus the collective endeavours of the Muslim rulers and the *ulama- mashaikh* and *sufi*-sages created the environs of communal harmony and social amelioration among all people of Bengal.

References

¹ al- Quran, 57: 27 (al- Hadid).

- 2 Nasai
 3 al- Quran, 3: 31 (al- Imran).
 4 Mishkat al- Masabih, ‘Bab al- Itasam bil Kitab wa al- Sunnah’ (Karachi, n. d.),
 p. 31.
 5 Syed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam* (London: Christophers, reprinted 1946),
 p. 460, f. n. 1.
 6 al- Quran, 10: 62-64 (Yunus).
 7 Syeed Ameer Ali, *op. cit.* p. 460.
 8 Alfred Guillaume, *Islam* (Australia: Penguin Books Ltd., 1954) , pp. 144 ff.
 9 Syeed Ameer Ali, *op. cit.* , p. 460- 61.; R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of the*
Arabs (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969) , pp. 389 ff.
 10 T. W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam* (Lahore: Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf,
 Reprint, 1956) , p.295 ; Sayyid Ismail Kashif, “ Alaqat al- Sin (China) bi Diyar al-
 11 Islam, *Magazine of the Faculty of Archaeology*, Cairo University, 1976, p.33.
 Minhaj Siraj, *Tabaqat- i – Nasiri*, vol.1 (Kabul: Historical Society of Afghanistan,
 12 1963), p.427.
 Shaykh Abdul Haq Dehlawi, *Akhbar al- Akhyar*, Urdu tr. Maulana Subhan
 Mahmud (Karachi: Madinah Publishing Company, n. d.), p.191.
 13 Ghulam Husain Selim, *Riyad al-Salatin*, Eng. Tr. Abdus Salam (Calcutta:
 Bibliotheca Indica, Asiatic Society of Bengal), p.111; JBRS, vol. XL11, part 2
 14 1956, p.193.
 A K M Yaqub Ali, *Aspects of the Society and Culture of the Varendra, 1200- 1576*
A.D. (Rajshahi, 1998) , pp. 170 ff. (Henceforth the source will be referred to as
 ASCV)
 15 Shah Shuayb, *Manaqib al- Asfiya* quoted in *Maktubat- i- Sadi*, p.339; A. Rahim,
Social and Cultural History of Bengal, 1201-1576 A.D., vol.1 (Karachi: Pakistan
 Historical Society, 1963), p.18o.
 16 Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslims in Bengal* (Dhaka: Jatiya Sahitya
 pub., 2007), pp.97-100.
 17 A.K.M.Yaqub Ali, *ASCV*, pp.240-41: J.N. Sarker, “A Description of North
 Bengal in 1609”, *Bengal Past and Present (BPP)*, 1928 , p.144.
 18 *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, p. 102.
 19 *Seka Subhodaya*, Introduction, p.xxxv, p. 170, f.n.
 20 *Ibid*, Chaps, 1&XV111.
 21 A.K.M.Yaqub Ali, *ASCV*, p.17.
 22 A.H.Dani, *Bibliography of the Muslim Inscriptions of Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic
 Society of Pakistan, 1957), pp.24-25, No.35.
 23 Abid Ali, *Memoirs of Gaur and Pandua*, pp.170-71; S. Ahmed, *Inscriptions of*
Bengal, vol.1V, pp.80-81.
 24 *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, pp.311&329.
 25 *ASCV*, p.181.
 26 *Akhbar al- Akhyar*, p.311.
 27 *Ibid*, pp. 328-29. 28
 28 *ASCV*, p.18o.
 29 *Tarikh i- Firishta*, vol.11, p.302.

-
- ³⁰ Muhammad Enamul Haq, *A History of Sufism in Bengal* (Dacca. Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975), pp. 206 ff; ASCv, pp. 172 ff.
- ³¹ *A History of Sufism*, p. 207; ASCV, p. 207.
- ³² P.C.Sen, *Bagurar Itihas*, vol.11, p.74, P. C. Sen quotes an anonymous book *Tawarikh Bangala* written by Mirza Arjumand and Munshi Surab Narayan. The book is nowhere traceable. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Bengal: Bogra District*, p.194.
- ³³ ASCV, pp. 173-74.
- ³⁴ For detail study see E.Haq, *History of Sufism*, pp.218 ff.