

## **Pioneers of Islam in Bengal:**

### *The Early Muslim Saints of Bengal and their Contributions*

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan\*

The general perception is that Islam first entered the subcontinent in the beginning of the eighth century under the leadership of Muhammad ibn al-Qasim al-Thaqafi (in 711CE). However, this perception is only correctly in so far as the emergence of political Islam in the subcontinent is concerned. By contrast, as a faith and culture, Islam came in contact with the coastal regions of the subcontinent much earlier. As it happens, according to some historians, the Arabs had been travelling to Ceylon, Sumatra, Java, Malabar, Maldives and the other coastal regions of India from the very early days of Islam. According to Allama Sayyid Sulaiman Nadwi, the renowned subcontinental Islamic scholar, historian and author of *Ard ul-Qur'an* (A Geographical History of the Qur'an), and Jurji Zaydan, the distinguished Syrian Christian historian and the celebrated author of *Tarikh al-Tamaddan al-Islami* (The History of Islamic Civilization), the Arabs had been navigating to distant lands even during the pre-Islamic times. However, following the advent of Islam in Arabia in the early part of the seventh century and the subsequent spread of the new faith in and around the Arabian Peninsula, the early Muslims became more adventurous and daring in their pursuit of trade and commerce to distant lands by sea. With the rapid expansion of the Islamic dominion under the able leadership of Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634 to 644CE), this process was intensified and expanded further during the time of his successor, Caliph Uthman ibn Affan, who reigned from 644 to 656CE.

If Sayyid Sulaiman Nadwi and Jurji Zaydan, among others, are right then it is not true that the Muslim expedition to India took place only by land. This was, in fact, preceded by naval expeditions to Debul during the time of Caliph Uthman, argued Sulaiman Nadwi in his *The Arab Navigation*. He suggests that the first Muslim contact with the coastal regions of India took place much earlier than we think and that Muhammad ibn al-Qasim's successful conquest of the Indian province of Sind

and its neighbouring territories in 711CE was preceded by Muslim naval expeditions to Debul during the mid-seventh century.

As far as Bengal is concerned, it is not widely known that Islam had reached that part of the world long before Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad ibn Bakhtiyar Khalji's excursion into Bengal in the beginning of the thirteenth century. Excavations carried out during the 1930s led to the discovery of two coins issued by the early Abbasid Caliphs in Paharpur in Rajshahi and Mainamati in Comilla. The coin discovered in Paharpur is dated 172 AH (788CE) and was issued during the time of Harun al-Rashid, the famous Abbasid Caliph who reigned from 170-208AH (786-809CE), while the other coin found in Mainamati was issued during the time of Caliph Abu Abdullah al-Muntasir Billah who ruled from 247-248 AH (861-862CE). The discovery of these coins clearly shows that the Muslim traders and businessmen have been visiting different parts of Bengal during the second and third century of Hijrah (eighth and ninth century CE), if not earlier.

These early Muslim travellers came to Bengal via the Persian Gulf and Taiz, a port of Baluchistan and Thath, the port of Sind. From there they moved to Gujarat, Calicut and Madras before reaching the Bay of Bengal where Sylhet (known to them as Shilahat) became their main centre of activities long before the time of Shah Jalal, the patron saint of Sylhet. The same happened in Chittagong which was known to the early Muslim traders and businessmen as Sadjam. The arrival of these Muslim traders to the coastal regions of the subcontinent in general and Bengal in particular subsequently paved the way for the Sufis and other Muslim missionaries to move into different parts of Bengal in order to disseminate the message of Islam in that region.

### **Shah Jalal of Sylhet**

One of those early Muslim missionaries to Bengal was Shaykh al-Mashaykh Makhdum Shaykh Jalal al-Din al-Mujarrad ibn Muhammad, better known as Hazrat Shah Jalal. Despite being a high profile Muslim preacher and reformer, his family

background and early life is shrouded in mystery. It is not surprising therefore that his biographers disagree concerning some of the most important details about his ancestry and early activities. So much so that the exact date of birth and death of Shah Jalal is not known although some have claimed that he was born in 1271, while others (such as Ibn Battutah) have stated that he died in 1347. However, these dates are no more than suggestions and as such they should not be considered to be definitive.

According to Maulvi Nasir al-Din Haidar, the author of *Suhail-i-Yaman*, Shah Jalal's father was a Sufi from Yemen (located in the Arabian Peninsula). Having lost his parents very early in life, young Shah Jalal was raised and educated by Sayyid Ahmad Kabir Suhrawardi, who was his maternal uncle and a prominent Muslim scholar and practitioner of Sufism. After Shah Jalal had completed his formal education, he was reportedly given a handful of earth by his uncle who urged him to travel to India and settle in a place where the colour of the earth matched that given to him. This sacred place, according to the author of *Suhail-i-Yaman*, was none other than Sylhet in East Bengal (located in present-day Bangladesh).

Since Haidar's biography of Shah Jalal was composed around 1860 using two other eighteenth century Persian sources, it is not surprising that over time it became a standard source of information about the life and activities of Shah Jalal.

Subsequently, this book inspired other writers to compose their own accounts of the life and activities of Shah Jalal. Unfortunately, however, most of these writers merely rehashed Haidar's views and arguments without subjecting them to critical analysis and scrutiny. Since the latter's biography of Shah Jalal consists of both authentic historical data as well as unconfirmed information about supernatural events, miracles and legends, the majority of the subsequent biographers of Shah Jalal failed to separate the wheat from the chaff; and as such they, wittingly or unwittingly, popularised the facts along with the myth and legend.

## **Khan Jahan Ali of Bagerhat**

Like Shah Jalal of Sylhet (located in the north-eastern Bengal), and Jalal al-Din Tabrizi of Deotala, Khan Jahan became the pioneer of Islam in south-western Bengal. *Khan-i-Azam* ('the Great Khan') Khan Jahan, better known as Hazrat Khan Jahan Ali, was of Turkish extraction but very little is known about his early life, education and background. Since he hailed from a noble Turkish family, he may have had some training in Turkish, Arabic and aspects of Islamic sciences during his early years before pursuing a career under the Tughluqids. The Tughluqids came to power in Delhi under the leadership of Ghiyath al-Din Tughluq Shah I and his son Abul Mujahid Muhammad Shah II in 1320. They restored Sultanate rule by ousting Nasir al-Din Khusraw Khan Barwari, who had assumed power after Qutb al-Din Mubarak Shah, the last of the Khalji Sultans of Delhi. Both Ghiyath al-Din Tughluq Shah and his son did well to restore the Delhi Sultanate after a period of considerable socio-political upheaval and also helped re-establish Muslim control over Deccan. But it was not until the reign of Kamal al-Din Firuz Shah III, the third Tughluqid ruler, that the Sultanate rule of Bengal was restored.

Khan Jahan may have been born during the rule of Ghiyath al-Din Mahmud, the fourth Tughluqid Sultan, and went onto serve the rulers of this dynasty with some distinction since he became a notable member of this ruling family. The rule of this dynasty was brought to an abrupt end towards the final years of the fourteenth century in the wake of Timurid invasion and destruction of Delhi. It may have been Amir Timur's sacking of Delhi which persuaded Khan Jahan to move to Bengal in 1398. However, according to another account, thanks to his dedicated serve to the Tughluqids, the Sultan of Delhi offered Khan Jahan a plot of land in the Sundarban area, located in present day Bangladesh. This offer was subsequently confirmed by the then Sultan of Bengal and this prompted Khan Jahan to take necessary steps to establish himself in this difficult and challenging part of Bengal.

Located today in the south western district of Khulna, Khan Jahan's fief (*jagir*) was virtually an inhabitable plot of land, being as it were an integral part of the Sundarban, the largest mangrove forest in the world. Surrounded by dense forest, with wild animals and beasts roaming around at will, Khan Jahan must have moved into this fertile jungle somewhat reluctantly. After clearing up this locality, he established several settlements in and around the area today known as Bagerhat. This took place

during the early part of the fifteenth century. Thanks to his devotion and dedication to the task at hand, Khan Jahan soon cleared up a large area and in so doing he formally established his rule there. An adherent of Islamic spirituality, Khan Jahan was a prominent practitioner and exponent of Sufism. Although it is not clear whether he was a *chishtiyyah*, *suhrawardiyyah*, *naqshbandiyyah* or *qadiriyyah* Sufi (or an adherent of a combination of two or three of these Sufi Orders), soon after establishing himself in Bagerhat he became instrumental in the conversion of the local Hindus, Buddhists and animists to the fold of Islam.

His valiant and pioneering effort to transform a largely inhospitable region into permanent human settlement proved such a success that he later gave the name of Khalifatabad to this region. Derived from the Arabic word *khalifah* (meaning ‘representative’ or ‘vicegerent’), this word is used in the Holy Qur’an to refer to human beings as God’s trustworthy representative on the earth (see Holy Qur’an, *Surah Baqarah*, verse 30). The choice of the name Khalifatabad says a lot about Khan Jahan as an individual, Sufi preacher, Islamic reformer and ruler. He appears to have been steeped in Islamic thought, culture and spirituality, and as such he was determined to establish a settlement where the people would live by the principles and practices of Islam, that is to say, they would live as *khalifah Allah fi’l ard* (God’s representatives on the earth). Inspired by the Qur’anic view of man, his role and purpose in this world, Khan Jahan inspired the locals not only to embrace Islam but also to co-operate with him to transform the Bagerhat region into a fully-fledged Islamic dominion (for more details, see Professor Syed Mahmudul Hasan’s excellent biographical account, *Khan Jahan Ali: Patron Saint of the Sundarbans*, Dhaka, 2004).

## **Other Notable Early Pioneers of Islam in Bengal**

In his remarkable study, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal* (1963), late Professor Muhammad Abdur Rahim, a distinguished historian of Bengal, wrote “During the period of Muslim rule, Bengal was a land of *sufis*, who played a very significant role

in the development of the Muslim community in the province. Their achievements, either in the spread of Islam or in the expansion and consolidation of Muslim rule or in the education and enlightenment as well as in the elevation of the mind and morals of the Bengali peoples in general and the Muslims in particular, had been more substantial than those of the Muslim generals, conquerors and rulers. By their religious fervour, missionary zeal, exemplary character and humanitarian activities, they greatly influenced the mind of the masses and attracted them to the faith of Islam. To the physical conquest of the Muslim generals, they added the moral one by strength and stability to the Muslim rule in the land of a non-Muslim population. The *khanqahs* of the *sufis*, which were established in every nook and corner of Bengal, were great centres of spiritual, humanitarian and intellectual activities and these greatly contributed to the development of the Muslims and the elevation of the Bengali society in various ways.” (p72)

Some early preachers and saints who propagated the message of Islam in Bengal included Baba Adam Shahid, Shah Muhammad Sultan Rumi, Shah Sultan Mahisawar, Makhdum Shah Dawlah Shahid, Makhdum Shah Mahmud Ghaznavi, Shaykh Farid al-Din, Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi, Sharf al-Din Abu Tawwamah and Sharf al-Din Yahya al-Maneri. Here I will briefly highlight the life and contributions of each of these great personalities for the benefit of those who are not familiar with the early history of Islam in Bengal.

## **Baba Adam Shahid**

According to tradition, this early Sufi preacher and disseminator of Islam came to Bengal from Makkah in order to propagate his faith in the subcontinent. Accompanied by several thousand followers (according to one account, he had seven thousand disciples), he settled in Vikrampur in Munshiganj, not far from Dhaka. Little is known about the saint and his activities other than the fact that he fought the local Hindu ruler, King Ballalasesna, in order to establish his presence in Bengal. However, the historians disagree whether he had actually fought the Hindu ruler and the likelihood of him having arrived in Bengal with such a large following. Nevertheless, there is a

grave at Rampal which is said to be that of Baba Adam Shahid, located close to the mosque built by Malik Kafur in 1483. However, the historians say that this grave is much older than the mosque and therefore it may have been that of Baba Adam Shahid.

### **Shah Muhammad Sultan Rumi**

This great personality is considered to be one of the earliest preachers of Islam in Bengal. According to a document dated back to 1671, he came to Bengal in the pre-Muslim period and settled in Madanpur in 1053. Here he became renowned for his asceticism and spirituality, inspiring the local ruler to embrace Islam. Impressed with Shah Rumi, the ruler then offered him a large plot of land as a gift; this area became known as Madanpur. After the death of Shah Rumi, he was laid to rest in his local village which is today located in the district of Mymensingh, Bangladesh.

### **Shah Sultan Mahisawar**

This remarkable early preacher of Islam in Bengal was, in fact, a prince who had hailed from Balkh. After renouncing worldly pomp and power in favour of asceticism and Islamic spirituality, he became a follower of Shaykh Tawfiq al-Dimashqi who encouraged him to proceed to the subcontinent in order to propagate Islam there. He sailed to Bengal on a boat shaped like a fish, hence he becoming known as 'Mahisawar' or 'fish-rider'. On his arrival in Hariramnagar, he was opposed by the local Hindu ruler and in the ensuing battle the Muslim saint and his followers defeated their opponents. Shah Mahisawar's kindness, generosity and sense of justice and fair-play soon won the hearts and minds of the local population who gradually embraced Islam.

### **Shah Dawlah Shahid**

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According to tradition, this great Muslim personality was a descendant of Mu'adh ibn Jabal, a prominent companion of the Prophet (peace be on him), although the historians have not been able to verify this claim. Originally from Yemen, he came to Bengal in order to preach Islam and settled near Shahzadpur in Pabna district. On his arrival, the Shaykh became the main focus of attention in the local area and, feeling uneasy by the increasing popularity of the Muslim saint, the local Hindu ruler launched an attack on the saint and his followers. In the ensuing battle, Shah Dawlah and many of his followers were killed. He was buried by his nephew near a mosque in Shahzadpur and, as expected, his shrine continues to attract visitors to this day. According to one account, Shah Dawlah was a student of Shaykh Shams al-Din Tabrizi, the spiritual mentor of Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi, the world famous Muslim poet and spiritual figure. Whether this is true or not, after his death, Shah Dawlah's family members and followers continued to preach the message of Islam in and around Shahzadpur, which according to some scholars was named after this great Muslim preacher.

### **Makhdum Shah Mahmud Ghaznavi**

This eminent personality hailed from Ghazna (located in modern Afghanistan) and he lived during the early part of the thirteenth century. He arrived in Mangalkot in the district of Burdwan (today located in the Indian State of West Bengal) in order to preach Islam to the locals. However, King Vikram Kesari, the local Hindu ruler opposed the Shaykh and his followers and, accordingly, the Shaykh wrote to the Muslim ruler of Delhi seeking military assistance. Once the Muslim army arrived, the Shaykh and his followers joined forces and together they drove out the tyrannical Hindu ruler from Mangalkot, leaving the Shaykh and his followers in charge of this area where they continued to preach Islam.

### **Shaykh Farid al-Din**

According to tradition, Bayazid Bistami (also known as Abu Yazid al-Bistami), the renowned Persian scholar and saint had visited Bengal and died there. There is a

famous shrine in Nasirabad, a village in Chittagong, which is said to be that of Shaykh Bistami. However, there is no credible evidence to suggest that the Shaykh had visited Bengal and therefore the claim that he was buried in Chittagong is no more than a legend.

In the same way, it is argued by some people that Shaykh Farid al-Din Mas'ud Ganj-i-Shakar (better known as Baba Farid), the renowned Chishtiyah Sufi scholar, had also visited Bengal during his extensive tour of India in order to preach Islam there.

Accordingly, there is a fountain located close to a hill in Chittagong which is known as Chashm Shaykh Farid. Although there is credible evidence to suggest that Shaykh Farid had visited northern Bengal, being as he was present at Deotala during the death of Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi, however, there is no evidence to prove whether he had visited Chittagong. According to late Professor Muhammad Abdur Rahim, he may have visited both Faridpur and Chittagong, but this is no more than speculation on the part of Professor M A Rahim as there is no evidence to prove this.

### **Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi**

In his *Social and Cultural History of Bengal* (1963), Professor M A Rahim wrote, "Shaikh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi was the most celebrated of the early saints in Bengal. It was his missionary zeal and great spiritualism that accounted for the spread of Islam and the development of the Muslim community in North Bengal in the early days of the Muslim rule in this province. Indeed by his piety, ideal character and humanitarian service, Shaikh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi left such profound impression on the minds of the people and morals of the society that his memory has for ever been enshrined in the hearts of the millions of the Bengali people." (p85)

This great and pioneering preacher of Islam in Bengal was a student of Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, the founder of the *Suhrawardiyyah tariqah*, and Shaykh Abu Sa'id Tabrizi, who was another renowned Muslim spiritual figure of the time. He also met Mu'in al-Din Chishti, the founder of the *Chishtiyah tariqah* in India. After completing his studies and attaining *kamaliyyat* (spirit perfection), he moved to the

subcontinent and became renowned as a disseminator of Islam in northern Bengal. This great scholar is often confused with Shah Jalal, thanks to Ibn Battutah's claim that he had met Shaykh Jalal al-Tabrizi. Actually he had met Shah Jalal in Sylhet in 1346 and not Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi, who was, according to most scholars, at least thirty-five years older than Shah Jalal of Sylhet. In fact, Jalal al-Din Tabrizi died a hundred years before the death of Shah Jalal. This means, Shah Jalal and Jalal al-Din Tabrizi were two different individuals, the former established his centre in Sylhet (located in eastern Bengal) while the latter was based in Deotala (in northern Bengal); as such they could not have been one and the same person.

According to Professor M A Rahim, "There is good reason to believe that the saint Shaikh Jalal Muhammad Tabrizi, whose shrine exists at Deotala, is the celebrated Shaikh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi. He is the only Tabrizi saint who exercised a tremendous influence on the mind and imagination of the people. So it is natural that they gave Deotala the name of Tabrizabad in his honour." (p97)

### **Sharf al-Din Abu Tawwamah**

This great preacher of Islam in Bengal hailed from Bukhara (located in modern Uzbekistan in Central Asia) and was educated in the province of Khurasan where he became renowned for his learning, spiritual attainments and piety. After mastering both the exoteric and esoteric sciences of Islam, he moved to Delhi during the reign of Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Balban where he became renowned for his profound learning and spiritual attainments. As the Shaykh began to capture the local's attention, the Sultan encouraged him to leave Delhi and settle in Sonargaon in East Bengal. Widely considered to be the real pioneer of Islam in this part of East Bengal, the Shaykh established his Islamic centre in Sonargaon and began to propagate the faith throughout that area.

As Sharf al-Din's name and fame spread far and wide, students and scholars alike flocked to his Islamic centre in order to study under his tutelage. One of his most celebrated students included Sharf al-Din Yahya al-Maneri who studied under this

Shaykh for a long period. After a lifetime devoted to learning, teaching and disseminating Islam in the subcontinent, this renowned scholar and spiritual master died in 1300 and was buried in Sonargaon.

### **Sharf al-Din Yahya al-Maneri**

He was the son of Shaykh Yahya of Maner in Bihar and was born in 1262. He was a dedicated seeker of knowledge and wisdom so much so that he became a proficient Islamic scholar when he was only fifteen. Impressed by his learning and piety, Shaykh Sharf al-Din Abu Tawwamah took him to Sonargaon with him where young al-Maneri polished his knowledge of Islamic sciences and spirituality under the tutelage of his master. Impressed by al-Maneri's attainments, subsequently Shaykh Sharf al-Din Abu Tawwamah married his daughter to his distinguished pupil.

According to Professor M A Rahim, "...Sharf al-Din Maneri was a worthy disciple of his renowned teacher and a brilliant product of the Sonargaon religious seminary. Bengal could rightly be proud of him. With his teacher's blessings he returned to Maner in 1293 A.D. and devoted himself to teaching and preaching. His fame as a sufi and scholar spread far and wide and he acquired an unique position in learning and esoteric knowledge in Hindustan. The large number of books he composed, reveal his great knowledge and spiritualism. In appreciating his works, Shaikh Abd al-Haq Dehlavi wrote, 'Shaikh Sharf al-Din Maneri is one of the distinguished saints of India. He is beyond praise. He has highly merited works at his credit. They contain principles of the sufi faith and the secret of truth.'" (p107)

### **References and Further Reading**

*Most of the information contained in this article has been derived from the books and articles cited below. For further study and research on this topic, I refer the readers to these sources.*

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<http://www.bmri.org.uk>

**\* Muhammad Mojlum Khan is a research scholar, literary critic and author of the widely acclaimed book, *The Muslim 100: The Lives, Thoughts and Achievements of the Most Influential Muslims in History* (Leicester, UK: 2008, reprinted 2009, 2010), and *The Muslim Heritage of Bengal* (forthcoming). He is a Fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain, a Member of English PEN and a Founding Director of *Bengal Muslim Research Institute UK*. He is a British national and lives in England.**