NUS

National University
of Singapore

Middle East Institute

Insights 007

Sufis & Sufism:
A closer look at the journey
of Sufis to Bangladesh

Imtiaz Ahmed

July 2010

© Middle East Institute, Singapore

For electronic copies of this report, please visit **www.mei.nus. edu.sg.**

About the Middle East Institute

The Middle East Institute (MEI), Singapore is an autonomous research institute within the National University of Singapore (NUS).

It conducts research and organises conferences, seminars and talks in pursuit of its mission to promote a deeper understanding in Singapore of the Middle East.

The Institute publishes commentaries and analytical pieces on contemporary or developing issues in the Middle East under its "**Middle East Institute Perspectives**" and insightful background papers on broader issues under its "**Middle East Institute Insights**" series.

To access the Institute's publications or for more information about the Institute, please visit **www.mei.nus.edu.sg**.

For more information on the National University of Singapore (NUS), please visit **www.nus.edu.sg**.

About the Author

Imtiaz Ahmed is a Professor of International Relations at the University of Dhaka. Professor Ahmed was educated at University of Dhaka, Carlton University, Ottawa, and Australian National University, Canberra. He has served as the Chairperson of the Department of International Relations, University of Dhaka (2000–2003) and is currently Visiting Professor at the Sagesse University, Beirut. He is the recipient of various awards and honours. Notable among them are SSRC Award on International Conflict Zones, Social Science Research Council New York (2002); Honorary Citizenship, The State of Maryland, USA (1993). He is the author/co-author of several books and monographs. More than ninety scholarly articles have been published in various books and journals. His most recent publications are *Historicizing 1971 Genocide: State versus Person* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2009) and an edited volume on *Terrorism in 21ˢᵗ Century: Perspectives from Bangladesh* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 2009). His forthcoming book is an edited volume titled: *The Plight of the Stateless Rohingyas: Responses of the State, Society & the International Community* (Dhaka: University Press Limited, i.p.). Website: http://imtiazalter.netfirms.com

Contents

Sufis & Sufism:
A closer look at the journey
of Sufis to Bangladesh

Abstract

*"A bird I am: this body was my cage
But I have flown, leaving it as a token"*

*Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad Aṭ-ṭūsī Al-ghazālī
11th Century Sufi from Khorasan (Persia)*

As written by Al-ghazālī, in the true nature of a Sufi is an inherent awareness of freedom beyond his/her human form. A distinction, therefore, must be made between a Sufi and Sufism, the latter being a grouping of *turuq* (paths, plural of *tariqa*) made only in the 19th century. By very definition, a Sufi and Sufism are in conflict. Reconciliation must be made between the 'freedom' that the Sufis cherish most and the different *turuq* we find in Sufism. Do the *turuq* not bring the Sufis into the fold of ideological strictures and limit the scope of free-thinking? But then, when did the *turuq* start entertaining orthodox discourses and elaborate rituals? Tracing Sufis from Middle Eastern cities such as Khorasan (Persia), Baghdad, Bukhara and Kuniya (Turkey), the paper intends to respond to such queries by having a closer look at Bangladesh where Sufis and Sufism have made a lasting impact on the life and living of the people.

Introduction

Orientalist scholars, following the first census in 1872 and the discovery of a large Muslim population in Bengal (16.3 million out of a total recorded population of 36.7 million), quickly came to the conclusion that the Muslim population resulted from a conversion of lower caste Hindus. This gives the impression that 'Islam was forcibly imposed by the Muslim rulers upon the low-class local population.'[1] Interestingly, orientalist H.H. Risley made, albeit selective, use of anthropological methods, such as the 'measurement of nasal heights of the various classes of people,' to come to such a conclusion.[2] Shortcomings of such a position were not difficult to point out. Indeed, if it were 'forcible imposition' why would it not include, as some critics pointed out, higher caste Hindus whose enmity against the Muslims was more pronounced and therefore more vulnerable to forceful conversion? And secondly, why was the conversion of such a large number of lower caste Hindus, if that was the case, limited to Bengal alone? Other regions of India were no less caste-ridden, with the lower caste suppressed and dominated there as well. Answers, therefore, have to be sought elsewhere.

---

[1] Rubbee, Khundkar Fuzli. *The Origins of the Musalmans of Bengal*, Calcutta, 1895. Cited from Muhammad Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslims of Bengal, Volume 1B, Survey of Administration, Society and Culture* (Riyadh: Imam Muhammad Ibn Sa'ud Islamic University, 1985), p. 756.

[2] Cited in Ibid., p. 755.

Massive migration could be one, no less compelling, reason, and this is precisely Fuzli Rubbee's contention that "from the year 1203 when Muslim rule was first established in Bengal down to the year 1765 when the British acquired the *diwani*, for a period of 562 years, the Muslim sway uninterruptedly prevailed in this country."[3] But the question still remains, what made the locals accept generously, and almost without noticeable violence, members practicing a foreign-bred religion?

The answer probably lies in the tradition of *public reasoning* in Bengal. In fact, a cue can be taken from Rabindranath Tagore who summed it up in one his very popular songs: "*We are all Kings in the kingdom of our King./Were it not so, how could we hope in our heart to meet him!*" This refers to the presence of a precise public reasoning in Bengal that has allowed tolerance and proto-democratic norms to thrive culturally, with state politics and governance remaining largely insulated from this, as some would argue, on account of colonial imposition of things.[4] The merit of this argument lies in the fact that throughout its age-old civilizational quest, Bengal had invited all kinds of social and religious discourses, including Brahmanism,

---

[3] Ibid., pp. 755–756.

[4] Nandy, Ashis. *Exiled at Home*, Omnibus 1 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Chatterjee, Partha. *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994); Dirks, Nicholas B. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002).

Buddhism, Vashnavism, Hinduism, Tantricism, Sufism and Islam. Bengal allowed even the English to make a permanent presence long before the rest of India did (1757 and 1857, respectively). Amartya Sen, too, alludes to this when he perceptively points out, although using a larger territorial domain called India, that "the tradition of public reasoning is closely related to the roots of democracy across the globe."[5] In fact, when it comes to Bengal, the Sufi saints could easily impress upon the people with their message of love and brotherhood. The Sufi saints could settle down both near the shore and deep inside the land not because such messages were new but rather because Bengal had cultivated a public reason of tolerance for centuries. No one knows why this is so but the vagaries of the weather could certainly have contributed to it.

A distinction ought to be made, however, between Sufi and Sufism. Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad Aṭ-ṭūsī Al-ghazālī, the great 11th century Sufi from Khorasan in Persia, left the following verses underneath his headrest when he died: "*A bird I am: this body was my cage/But I have flown leaving it as a token.*" Similar to this verse is the song of Fakir Lalon Shah, the 19th century mystic poet of Bengal, although there is no evidence that the latter had read Al-ghazālī during his lifetime: "*Nobody can tell me whence the bird unknown comes to the cage and goes out./I*

---

[5] Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), p. 12.

would feign put round its feet the fetters of my mind could I but capture it." What comes out clearly in both these verses is that a Sufi, like all mortals, is conscious of being a prisoner in the world of forms. Yet, and this is what makes a Sufi different from the rest of the mortals, s/he is also conscious of being free, with a freedom which outweighs his imprisonment.[6] Muhi'd-Din Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), the great Andalusian Sufi, puts this idea of freedom more succinctly: *"Enter me, O Lord, into the deep of the Ocean of Thine Infinite Oneness."*[7] In fact, there were times when the British colonialists amused themselves with the idea that the Indian subjects regarded them as Sufis and the reason could not have been nobler, as Lt. James William Graham, a key Orientalist, pointed out:

> We are, generally speaking, at least in this country, looked upon as a species or one kind of *Sufi*, from our non-observance here of any rites or forms, conceiving a worship of the Deity in mind and adherence to morality sufficient. In fine, the present free-thinker or modern philosopher of Europe would be esteemed as a sort of Sufi in the world, and not the one retired therefrom (Ernst 1997: 14–15).

But if 'freedom' is what the Sufis cherished most, what about the different *turuq* (paths, plural of *tariqa*) that we find in Sufism? Do the *turuq* not bring the Sufis into the fold of ideological strictures and limit the scope of free-thinking?

---

[6] Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1975), p. 14.

[7] Ibid., p. 11.

But then, when did the *turuq* start entertaining orthodox discourses and elaborate rituals? A closer exposition of the birth of the Sufis and the reproduction of the *turuq* would certainly help us reflect on the queries.

The birth of the Sufis

Devotion and love seem to have contributed to the birth of the Sufis. There is a general consensus among scholars that the first Sufis could be found from the time of the Prophet. In fact, the earliest Sufis were a group of people who had accompanied the Prophet during his migration from Mecca to Medina and earned the title *Ahl al-Suffa* or *Ashab-i Suffa* (The People of the Verandah) for living an austere and ascetic life in the vicinity of the Medina mosque and observing incessant prayer and fasting in the like of the Prophet himself.[8] Devotion played a critical role among the Sufis and few could excel Hazrat Ali bin Abi Talib (d. 661 AD) on this, as retold by Gandhi in his commentary on *The Bhagvadgita*:

> Hazrat Ali told his people to draw out the arrow from his body while he was praying, for at that time he would be totally absorbed in devotion to God. One cannot say that such a thing could be done when one was asleep, for one would not be able to fall asleep at all when the body
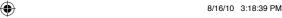
---

[8] Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, Volume One, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt Ltd, 2003), p. 21.

was pierced with an arrow. A person who can be totally absorbed in every task on hand, as Hazrat Ali could be in prayer, who lives in such a state of self-absorption all the twenty-four hours of the day, will attain to immortality.[9]

It may be pointed out that many a believer take Hazrat Ali to be the 'vital link in the spiritual chains connecting Sufis to the Prophet, and eventually to Allah.'[10] Aside from this aspect of devotion, the place of 'love' is also critical in the birth of the Sufis. On this, no other person gained so much prominence as Rabia al Adawiyah of Basra (d. 801 AD), recognized as the first female Sufi, whose prayer highlighted the Sufi approach: "*Oh God, if I worship thee in the fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship thee in the hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine Everlasting beauty*."[11] There is, however, something more central to the Sufi coupling of devotion and love and that is immersing oneself in the task of seeking knowledge and reflecting on the Divine and the mysteries of His creation. Not surprisingly, seeking knowledge and reflecting on both worldly and spiritual matters attained greater importance to the Sufis than the public observance of rites and rituals. Abu Darda 'Uwaymar bin

---

[9] Gandhi, M.K. *The Bhagvadgita* (Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 2007), p. 30.
[10] Dehlvi, Sadia. *Sufism: The Heart of Islam* (New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2009), p. 70.
[11] Ibid., p. 77.

Zaid, one of the earliest Sufis and a member of *Ahl al-Suffa*, stated: "one hour of reflection was better than forty nights of prayer, and that one particle of righteousness, combined with godliness and assured faith, was preferable to unlimited ritual observance."[12]

The earliest Sufis, in fact, were heeding to the message of the very first revelation given to the Prophet (*Surah Iqraa*):

Read!
In the name
Of thy Lord and Cherisher,
Who created —

Created man, out of
A (mere) clot
Of congealed blood:

Read! And thy Lord
Is Most Bountiful, —

He Who taught
(The use of) the Pen, —

Taught man that
Which he knew not.[13]

A clear case is made for reading, writing and striving for 'new knowledge,'[14] and this is precisely what the Sufis

---

[12] Cited from Rizvi, Saiyid Athar Abbas. Volume 1, *op. cit*, p. 22.

[13] *The Holy Quran*, *op. cit*, pp. 1761–1762.

[14] Ibid., fn. 6206 and 6207.

pursued zealously in whichever vocation they were engaged. It may be mentioned that out of the 6347 verses of the Holy Quran, and this Yoginder Sikand highlights well, 'the obligation to offer prayers is mentioned in about 200, while the verses exhorting the believers to ponder on the mysteries of nature, to reflect on God's creation and to use their reason are more than three times that number.'[15] Quite expectedly the Prophet advised his followers to 'Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave and search for it even if you are to go to China.'[16] The Prophet also said, 'He who leaveth home in search of knowledge, walketh in the path of God' and, 'The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr.'[17] Searching for knowledge and spreading the message of love and brotherhood all over the world became a life-long vocation for many Sufi and Muslim scholars. In fact, long before Francis Bacon (1597) made a name for himself with his oft-quoted statement on knowledge, it was Ferdowsi (935–1020), the Persian poet from Khorasan, who flagged a couplet in his epical work *Shāhnāmeh*: "He who has knowledge possesses power/Knowledge gives an old heart a new flower." The poet seems to have summed up the human quest and the essence of Islamic civilization. The Indian subcontinent, including Bengal, could not remain immune from this very long.

---

[15] Sikand, Yoginder. *Bastions of the Believers: Madrasas and Islamic Education in India* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005), p. 3.

[16] Ibid., p. 4.

[17] http://www.thinkexist.com

The arrival and the ordering of the Sufis in Bangladesh

The first Sufis who had arrived in modern-day Bangladesh, whether Shah Sultan Kamaruddin Rumy from Baghdad (1053 A.D.) or Maulana Asharfuddin Tawwamah[18] from Bukhara (1282 A.D.) who settled in Netrokona and Narayanganj respectively, were able to impress upon the locals with their freshness of thought and message of universal love. This blended well with the public reasoning of tolerance and proto-democratic norms about which we had mentioned earlier, and within a century or two attracted scores of Sufis to Bengal, who in turn made a lasting impact on the population in and around the region. Interestingly, the first Sufis in Bengal did not uphold any orthodoxy or precise ideological strictures within their respective *turuq*. In fact, such orthodoxy resulted following the relative decline of the Mamluks and the formation of factionalized states within the Muslim world, the period better known in history as the Mamluk Sultanate

---

[18] Some scholars erroneously refer to him as Shaikh Sharfuddin Abu Tawwamah (see, *Banglapedia*, Volume 9, p. 238). This seems to have resulted from identifying Maulana Ashrafuddin Tawwama with Sheikh Sharafuddin Maneri. The latter however is a famous Sufi of the Firdausi *silsilah* and the son of Shaikh Yahya Maneri, who actually accompanied Maulana Ashrafuddin Tawwama to Sonargaon when young. See, Shaikh Abdul Latif, *The Muslim Mystic Movement in Bengal, 1301–1550* (Aligarh Muslim University: Centre of Advanced Study in History, 1993), pp. 14–15.

(1250–1517).[19] It may be mentioned that one of the oldest of all surviving Sufi *turuq*, the Qadiriyya *tariqa*, called after Hazrat Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani (1077–1166), had followers in the like of Ibn Arabi, who faced no problem from the *tariqa* in promoting the controversial idea of *wahdat al-wujud* (the Oneness of Being). Rather, the Qadiriyyas adopted and became staunch supporters of the expression, although it must be quickly noted that Ibn Arabi himself never employed the expression.[20] Indeed, post-thirteenth/fourteenth century Sufis who had arrived in Bengal from as far as Khorasan, Bukhara or Baghdad brought the orthodoxy of their respective *turuq* along with them and participated enthusiastically whenever called for in the formation of the state.

There are numerous *turuq* in the Islamic domain, including South Asia. In present-day Bangladesh there are four prominent *turuq* with several offshoots and combinations. Among the prominent ones include the Chishtiyya, the Qadiriyya, the Suharwardiyya and the Naqshbandiyya. There is also the presence of Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi *tariqa* or for that matter a combination of Qadiriyya-Chishtiyya *turuq* in the name of Maijbhandari *tariqa* in Bangladesh. Save the Naqshbandiyyas, however, all claim a lineage or *silsilah*

---

[19] Some of the richest records of Sufi institutional development are available in Mamluk endowment documents. See, Renard, John. *The A to Z of Sufism* (Toronto: The Scarecrow Press, 2009), p. 152.

[20] Nasr, Seyyed Hossein and Leaman, Oliver, eds., *History of Islamic Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 504. See also, Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, Volume 2, *op. cit*, p. 54.

leading back to the Prophet through Hazrat Ali. Only the Naqshbandiyyas claim a lineage going back to Hazrat Abu Bakr, the first Caliph. It may be mentioned here that the Sunni-Shi'ah differences that we see today did not exist in the first three centuries of Islam, not even during the Ottoman times (1299–1922) when the Sunni Turkish Sultans and the general Sunni population were found paying homage to Shi'ah Imams as well. The breakdown in the relationship, in fact, is more a twentieth-century event. What is important in the understanding of the *turuq*, however, is the very construction of the lineage. The more the *silsilah* began to emphasize its links with the 'past', the more it froze the choice of its guide or *murshid* and the 'path' it must tread in the future. This got combined with the ideological strictures now found in almost all the *turuq*, but this is more a result of modernity and a deliberate attempt on the part of the Orientalists to distinguish the discourse of the Sufis from Islam. *Sufism*, it must be noted, is a European invention. As Carl Ernst pointed out:

> Like *Islam*, the term *Sufism* was introduced to European languages by Orientalists, but the two terms were believed to be essentially different. Premodern Muslim societies knew no such distinction…. [The] term *Sufi-ism* was invented at the end of the eighteenth century, as an appropriation of those portions of 'Oriental' culture that Europeans found attractive (like, Sufis 'composing odes to the joys of wine-drinking,' 'fond of music and dance,' or 'as freethinkers')…. It is this kind of thinking that has created the bifurcation between Islam and Sufism in Orientalist literature. Islam is assumed to have the essential characteristic of harsh legalism, and Sufism is considered to be indifferent to

matters of religious law; thus it becomes easy to posit an external origin for Sufism in India or elsewhere.[21]

Discourse of this kind proved fatal not so much to the Europeans as to the Muslims. In fact, Muslim fundament-alists as well as secular Muslim modernists naively, if not shamelessly, agreed with the Orientalist distinction between Sufism and Islam, although they highlighted different reasons for it. While the former viewed Sufism as 'a perversion of Islam,' the latter took it as 'medieval superstition.'[22] Both positions ironically ended up viewing Sufism as *un-Islamic* and therefore requiring socio-political abandoning. Faced with this opposition, it did not take long for the post-eighteenth century Sufis to reconstruct their views on 'free thinking,' 'morality,' and the like and bring their respective *turuq* into the fold of ideological strictures.

From an age-old Sufi tradition of exploring the 'Infinite Oneness' and making use of knowledge, emphasis got shifted to the observance of rituals, including those related to the 'initiation' of a Sufi. Each *tariqa* came to guard its authenticity and in the process invited greater attention to well-crafted rituals. Multiple qualities like *Tariqat* (Pathway to Allah), *Haqiqat* (Truth), *Marifat* (Knowledge, intuitive as well as spiritual), and *Shariat* (Islamic Law), each again

---

[21] Ernst, Carl W. *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1997), pp. xv and 9. See also, Chittick, William C. *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), p. 2.

[22] Ernst, Carl W. *op. cit*, p. xvii.

with multiple forms and stages,[23] became frozen and a successful *murid*, the 'committed one,' had to attain them uncritically without contestations. The ordering of the Sufis into 'ism', while inviting orthodoxy and conservatism into their respective *turuq*, did put a stop to the age-old Sufi tradition of entertaining emancipatory discourses and imaginative practices. This requires a closer look.

The formation of the state and the consolidation of Sufism

A comprehensive mapping of the Sufi shrines in Bangladesh was last done in 1937, during the colonial period by Muhammad Enamul Haq.[24] Over the years, however, our knowledge of the Sufi shrines and also what the 'ism' in Sufism stood for became clearer, particularly with respect to the *turuq* and the latter's relationship with the state and the masses. Moreover, a fresh mapping was done in 2009 by a team of researchers under my supervision, although it was limited to only fifty shrines out of an endless number of shrines in the country. As indicated earlier, those Sufis who had arrived before the thirteenth century made quite an impression upon the locals but little is known about their *turuq*. Again, there are Sufis who claimed their initiation not in one but in several *turuq*. This issue

---

[23] See, http://www.zikr.co.uk

[24] Haq, Muhammad Enamul. *A History of Sufi-ism in Bengal* (Dacca: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975).

of categorizing the Sufis into *turuq* can be looked into from three standpoints. Firstly, little is known about the earlier or pre-thirteenth century Sufis largely for want of documentation. Although it could also be because the Sufis in those times never felt pressured to highlight their *turuq* for want of competition amongst rival discourses. An illustrative example in this regard would be that of Hazrat Shah Sultan Kamaruddin Rumy.

Scholars claim that Rumy came to Bengal in 1053 A.D. and settled in Madanpur, Netrokona. In fact, when he came to this part of Bengal there were no Muslims other than his disciples who accompanied him. However, local residents, including the local king, Madan Kooch, seeing his 'miraculous power,' got attracted and embraced Islam. No information, however, is found about his *tariqa*, although it is held that Rumy was a disciple of Hazrat Syed Mohiuddin Surkhul Ambia Suratni, who in turn, as it is claimed, had a familial connection with Hazrat Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani (b. 1077).[25] Although Rumy would be senior to Hazrat Jilani and had arrived in Bengal long before Jilani was born, there is no reason to believe that he belonged to the Qadiriyya *tariqa* or was influenced by the latter. Rather, as we had earlier claimed, the ideological strictures informing the *turuq* were less apparent in earlier times and lacked the inter-*tariqa*

---

[25] Fakir, Md. Sajjadur Rahman. ed., *Bonge Prothom Islam Prochar-kari Mission Prodhan Hazrat Shah Sultan Qamaruddin Rumy (Ra): Jibon-alekhya O Shomo-Shamoyik Prekhkha-pot*, (Madanpur, Netrokona: Shah Sultan (Ra) Mazar Committee, 3 March 2009, Second edition).

rivalry that became the hallmark of Sufi discourse in post-fourteenth century South Asia, including Bangladesh.

Secondly, *turuq* go through transformations in relation to the disciples. It is true that currently the *turuq* in Bangladesh mostly find their roots in the Sufis of the Mamluk period, but it is quite certain that each of these *turuq* would claim discipleship of earlier Sufis, taking the entire 'path' of religiosity either to Hazrat Ali or Hazrat Abu Bakr (as it is the case with the Naqshbandiyyas) and finally to the Prophet. Arguably, a question can be raised as to why the labeling of such *turuq* froze with the Sufis of thirteenth or fourteenth century. The answer probably lies in the formation of the state and the transformation of the *turuq* into precise ideological strictures, indeed, with the state playing an active role in either promoting or denouncing the Sufis and their respective *turuq* and vice versa. There will be more on this issue later.

Finally, there are Sufi shrines in Bangladesh which would claim, as indicated earlier, discipleship of several *turuq*. A case in point is that of Hazrat Shah Sufi Sayed Mohammad Dayem (d. 1799) of Azimpur in Dhaka. Hazrat Dayem was a descendent of Hazrat Shah Bakhtiar Mahi Sawar. The latter was one of the famous twelve *Awlias* (disciples) who came from Baghdad to preach Islam in Bengal in the thirteenth century. At first Hazrat Dayem went to Hazrat Shah Amanat of Chittagong to receive spiritual guidance, but as the story goes, Hazrat Shah Amanat got annoyed with him after an incident and stripped him off his spiritual power. This forced Dayem to leave the place and while

frustrated, to travel as far as Patna to become a disciple of Hazrat Shah Syed Munaem Khasru, from whom he ultimately regained his spiritual ability. Shah Munaem then instructed him to go back to Dhaka, which he did, to settle in Azimpur. It is held that Dayem stayed with Munaem for about 12 years and achieved knowledge in several *turuq*, including Qadiriyya, Muneimia, Chishtiyya, Abu Ulaia and Madriyya,[26] confirming the presence of older *turuq* and arrival of newer *turuq*, often the older blending into the new and being renamed after the most contemporary Sufi. Multiple-discipleship is still claimed by the devotees of Hazrat Dayem, but post-eighteenth century Bengal has less of the kind of Hazrat Dayem.

What about mysticism? Or rather, how do *turuq* reproduce or reconcile with mysticism, including mythic tales, with all the rituals and rigidities that have lately come to inform and shape them? There exists, for instance, the legend of Hazrat Bayezid Bostami (d. 874), in whose name there is a tomb in Nasirabad (Chittagong). The legend states that he had come to Bengal from Bostam (Iran), although there is no historical evidence of any Muslim saint setting foot on the Indian soil before the tenth century A.D., let alone of Bostami coming to Bengal.[27] Scholars now believe that

---

[26] Alam, Hazrat Shah Sufi M.N. *World Heritage & Records of Sufism: History of the Spiritual & Religious Heritage & Records of Dayera Sharif, Azimpur Dhaka, Bangladesh* (NY: Millennium Tradelink, 2010).

[27] Haq, Muhammad Enamul. *op. cit*, pp. 238–239.

the *mazar* attributed to Hazrat Bostami in Chittagong is actually a *jawab*, an imitation.[28] There is also the case of Hazrat Shah Bakhtiar Mahi Sawar who left Baghdad in the thirteenth century riding on a fish and arrived at Chittagong and descended on a sandy bank of the river, which was located to the South-East of present Karnafully Bridge, about six miles from Chittagong town. Because he came riding on the back of a fish, he is called 'Mahi Sawar' or 'the rider on the fish'.[29] Devotees, even today, believe that descendants of that fish are still present in that river and many visit the place to see the fish and revere the supernatural power of the saint. What allowed such stories or myths to emerge? More importantly, what makes the devotees believe them?

A cue can be taken from Parmenides, the father of Western philosophy, who, in his poem, narrated how he was led to the other world by the Daughters of the Sun and how he met the goddess and received lessons from her on 'everything of importance.'[30] In fact, when it comes to the question as to how this journey was possible, Seyyed Hossein Nasr provides an answer: 'incubation' — "a spiritual practice well known in Greek religion, one in which a person would rest completely still until his or her soul would be taken to higher levels of reality, and the mysteries of existence would

---

[28] Ibid.

[29] Alam, Hazrat Shah Sufi M.N. *op. cit*, pp. 157–158.

[30] Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *Islamic Philosophy from Its Origin to the Present* (New York: State University of New York, 2006), p. 2.

be revealed."[31] Gautama Buddha's meditation under the tree at Bodh Gaya and his attaining *nirvana* (the state of being free from suffering) comes close to this. Such a practice to reach higher levels of reality also got 'new life' in Islam where it is traced back to Hazrat Ali, who received it from the Prophet and is now integrated into Sufism.[32] This sense of deeper orders of reality is very much central to Sufism, reproducing in the process myths and metaphysical contents in Islam. Stories retelling Bayezid Bostami's surreal visit to Chittagong and Hazrat Bakhtiar's ride on the fish are no exceptions. This, otherwise, shows the structural limitations in 'de-mysticizing' and 'disciplining' Sufism in general and the *turuq* in particular. In fact, the mystic element, despite sounding irrational to modern ears, kept alive the imagination and the free spirit amongst the Sufis.

Education also played a role in propagating knowledge and reproducing emancipatory discourses in Bengal. The *madrasah* at Mograpara in Sonargaon became an important centre of Islamic learning as early as thirteenth century. It is held that Maulana Ashrafuddin Tawwama, after being exiled by Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban (1200–1287), came to Bengal in 1282 A.D. and established the *madrasah* at

---

[31] It may be mentioned that in earlier times philosophy and prophecy, the latter understood as 'a message from higher or deeper orders of reality to a particular human collectivity,' were not viewed antithetical to each other as it is done today. Both blended with one another. See, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *ibid.*, p. 1.

[32] Ibid., p. 2.

Mograpara. There is some dispute as to whether he advocated Hanafi or Hanbali juristic traditions, although there is a general consensus that both *ma'qulat* (rational) and *manqulat* (theological) sciences were taught in the Mograpara *madrasah*. Other notable *madrasahs* established by the earlier Sufis included the Makhdumia-Qadiriyya *madrasah* of Hazrat Shah Makhdum Ruposh (1287–1331) in Rajshahi and the Sarshina *madrasah* of Hazrat Maulana Shah Sufi Nesaruddin Ahmad (1279–1358) in Jhalakhathi. All these *madrasahs* followed a free-floating (that is, composed of both rational and theological sciences) curricula, based mainly on the scholarship and expertise of the concerned Sufi scholar. Things however began to change with the decline of the Mughals and the arrival of the British. In fact, by the time the latter got down into the business of establishing its own brand of *madrasah*, i.e., the *Madrasah-i 'Aliya*, in late eighteenth century, the curricula became practically frozen with an emphasis on *manqulat* at the expense of rational sciences. Interestingly, the British patronized the *dars-i Nizami* system, which had already de-emphasized the study of Sufism in early eighteenth century[33] with an added de-emphasis now of *ma'qulat* or rational sciences.

But not all Sufis propagated emancipatory discourses or even Islam through education. Hazrat Shah Makhdum Ruposh, for instance, defeated and killed the *tantric* Raja before settling down and preaching Islam in the Rajshahi

---

[33] Sanyal, Usha. *Ahmad Riza Khan Barelwi: In the Path of the Prophet* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), p. 26.

region. There is a general belief among the locals that Hazrat Makhdum's action saved the people from the oppression of the Raja. Not so different is the story of Hazrat Shah Jalal (d. 1347), who is credited for defeating the hapless Raja Gour Gobinda and conquering Sylhet in 1303. After settling down in Sylhet, Hazrat Shah Jalal sent 360 of his companions, those who had accompanied him all the way from Kuniya (Turkey) or, as some contend, Yemen, to various parts of Bengal to spread the message of Islam. Another notable 'warrior Sufi' would be Hazrat Khan Jahan Ali (d. 1459), who is credited for bringing Jessore and Khulna under Muslim rule in the middle of the fifteenth century. He succeeded in attracting the locals more through his developmental works than through his 'warrier' accomplishments, including clearing up the dense forest in the Sunderban area and excavating a large number of *dighis* (ponds) in the region. At what point they came to be revered as Sufis is difficult to say. There is some merit in what Swami Vivekananda once said in a speech in California (USA) in 1900, about South Asia: "If you go there to teach them something, before you die you will be worshipped. Always trying to worship somebody."[34] It could also be that the 'warrior Sufis', after having consolidated their position territorially, turned religious and attracted the local population with developmental works and emancipatory

---

[34] Vivekananda, Swami. "Buddhistic India," in R.C. Majumdar, ed., *Swami Vivekananda Centenary Memorial Volume* (Calcutta: Swami Vivekananda Centenary, 1963), p. xxxv.

discourses of Islam. Whatever may have been the case, it only indicates that the Sufis, particularly those arriving in post-thirteenth/fourteenth century, played a formidable role in the consolidation and development of the (Muslim) state.

The increased relationship between the Sufis and the state, while benefitting the latter, proved fatal to the emancipatory quest of the former. Not only did such relationship reproduce ideological strictures within the Sufi fold, it also formalized the *turuq* to the point of inviting inter-*tariqa* contestations and rivalry. (Bengal or Bangladesh getting trapped into four or five major *turuq* is largely the result of this.) Three issues could be identified in this context. The first is state patronage of the Sufis. The rulers (predominantly Muslims but also some Hindus) visited the Sufis not only to acquire divine blessings but also to shower the Sufis with gifts and donations. When it came to religious settlement and *madrasah* education, it was in the form of *maadat-e-maash* (allowances in the form of land grants) and *lakheraj* (tax-free land). A significant example of this would be with respect to the Chishtiyya order which was founded by Hazrat Muin al-Din Chishti (1141–1230) in the thirteenth century. The Chishtiyya *tariqa* however flourished during the reign of the great Mughal Emperor Akbar (d. 1605) who visited Hazrat Chishti's grave in Ajmer regularly, turning it into an important pilgrimage centre during his time.[35] It is quite natural that Akbar's pilgrimage to Ajmer would attract many a follower, create

---

[35] Westerlund, David and Svanberg, Ingvar. ed., *Islam Outside the Arab World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 15.

a network around the Chishtiyya *tariqa* and consolidate the latter. In fact, Emperor Akbar donated Hazrat Shamsuddin Bukhari, also a Chishtiyya who arrived from Bukhara and settled in Kishoreganj district, tax-free land to help spread Islam.[36] Hazrat Shah Cherag Alam of Barisal also received 360 *bighas* of land as *maadat-e-maash* from the Sultan of Delhi for the purpose of utilizing it for public welfare.[37] Indeed, similar had been the case with many Sufis during the 562 years of Muslim rule in Bengal (1203–1765).

The state patronage of the Sufis, while consolidating the ideological position of the patroned *tariqa*, created rupture in the society, with the Sufis often joining the patron in the latter's quest to attain and consolidate power. Maulana Ashrafuddin Tawwama, cited earlier about being exiled by Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban, is said to have received 5 *mans* of gold from Sultan Muizuddin (d. 1281) to establish the *madrasah* at Mograpara in Sonargaon. Critics point out that Sultan Balban, after defeating Sultan Muizuddin, hanged one hundred *faqirs* with their revered Sufi because they had instigated the rebellion of the latter and alleged that this revered Sufi was none other than Maulana Tawwama.[38] Also interesting is the case of Shah Ismail Ghazi who was

---

[36] Karim, Md. Abdul. *Mymensingh Zelai Islam* [Islam in Mymensingh District] (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 2002).

[37] Banna, Azizul Haque. *Barishale Islam* [Islam in Barisal] (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1994).

[38] http://groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.china/browse_thread/thread/1de82f98180de419/0cdc8e7c93ded1a9#0cdc8e7c93ded1a9

beheaded in 1474 A.D. Born in Mecca Shah Ismail came to
Bengal during the reign of Sultan Barbak Shah (1459–1474).
The latter, impressed by Shah Ismail's 'honest and pious
intention,' made him the commander of the expeditionary
force against the King Kamesvara of Kamrupa.[39] But once
Kamesvara was defeated, and Shah Ismail rose to prominence,
conspiracies began to be hatched against him. A portent one
was hatched by Bhandasi Ray, the (Hindu) governor of Sultan
Barbak Shah in Ghoraghat, who convinced the Sultan that
Shah Ismail had concluded a secret treaty with the last King
of Kamrupa and was jointly planning to attack him. Barbak
Shah, believing Bhandasi Ray, immediately executed Shah
Ismail and chopped the body into four pieces and buried
them in four different places. In each of these places a
shrine was built, although the one located at Kantaduar in
Rangpur is the most famous and is visited by Shah Ismail's
numerous followers even today.[40]

State's patronage of the Sufis, particularly in the form
of *maadat-e-maash* and *lakheraj*, led to the accumulation of
property and funds which transformed the socio-economic
position of pre- and post-thirteenth century Sufis. The
consolidation of the state also saw the consolidation of the
Sufi fold into well-composed, exclusive *turuq* reproducing
precise ideological strictures or dogmas. More importantly,
the choice of successor (*sajjada nishin*), in marked contrast
to earlier times, now 'bore worldly responsibilities for the

---

[39] Haq, Muhammad Enamul. *op. cit*, p. 181.
[40] Ibid., pp. 181–182.

maintenance of properties and management of funds' and turned largely hereditary, ensuring thereby the continuity of Sufi master's spiritual and worldly network over time.[41] The British colonial power made the matter worse when it withdrew all forms of *maadat-e-maash* and *lakheraj* and introduced private property. The *sajjada nishin* had no other option but to guard the 'family fortune' in both spiritual and worldly matters, inviting in the process an exclusive form of Sufi path or *tariqa*, having it transformed into an 'ism' and call it *Sufism*!

Post-colonial Bangladesh, whether as the 'eastern wing' of the Islamic Republic (1947–1971) or as 'Muslim majoritarian' Peoples Republic (since 1971), continued to reproduce Sufism bereft of emancipatory discourses and imaginative practices. Not surprisingly, it continued to appreciate the Orientalist distinction between Sufism and Islam, limiting the former to rituals and ideological strictures of the *turuq*. The curriculum of state-funded *Madrasah-i 'Aliya* is a fine case in this context. During the Pakistan period of Bangladesh (and in Pakistan even now) no attempt was taken to reform the *madrasah* curriculum. By then, as mentioned earlier, it emphasized the *manqulat* (theological) sciences at the expense of rational sciences ironically under the patronization of the British. In Bangladesh, however, a reform of the *Madrasah-i 'Aliya* was carried out in 1986, which saw the replacement of the *dars-i Nizami* system, albeit partially, and now includes non-Muslim writers like Rabindranath

---

[41] Sanyal, Usha. *op. cit*, p. 93.

Tagore, Michael Madhushudan, William Shakespeare, John Donne, and even Winston Churchill. But still no Rumi, no Hafez, no Khayyam or Ghazali or Ibn Khaldun, no Ibn Arabi, not even Al-Farabi, Ibn Sina or a host of other great Sufi scholars. Decline or lack of scholarship could be one reason for the omission. At the same time, one cannot help suspecting the collusion of the state with organic intellectuals, including Islamic legalists, i.e., the *ulema*, in downplaying if not distorting the emancipatory discourses and imaginative practices of the Sufis and allowing *Sufism* to remain, almost by design, as an esoteric discourse.

Although limited to rituals and qualitatively different from the discourses and practices of earlier Sufis, post-colonial *Sufism* in Bangladesh has come to face yet another great challenge. This is with respect to the rise of petro-dollars and the hegemonic aspirations of the Hanbali juristic tradition or, as some would say, 'anti-Sufi' Wahhabi creed, particularly at a time when a formidable Bangladeshi diaspora has come to reside in the heartland of the latter and maintain daily interactions with family members and friends back home. As a result, for an increasing number of people in Bangladesh the authenticity of Islam is no longer found in the midst of the Sufis and the much tolerant Hanafi juristic tradition. Rather, it shifted and is now found amidst the relatively rigid juristic tradition of the Arab world. This fueled both intra-Muslim and intra-Sunni conflicts with the Muslims themselves becoming the major target of violence. The recent attack on the Sufi shrines, including a grenade attack on the former British High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Anwar Hossain,

on 21 May 2004, when the latter was visiting the shrine of Hazrat Shah Jalal in Sylhet, indicates the intolerance of such forces, presumably those subscribing to Wahhabism.

Despite the sliding of the emancipatory discourse of the Sufis into ritual-prone *Sufism*, the Sufis, particularly the great ones, continue to impress upon the minds of the people, making millions of them visit their shrines and seek blessing on matters ranging from the most mundane to the most sublime. In this context, it may be pointed out that all the major political parties, save the fundamentalist Jaamat-i Islam and pro-Communist platforms, begin their election campaign from the shrine of Hazrat Shah Jalal. Most recently, the International Airport at Dhaka was renamed after him as well. Many critics believe that having the airport renamed after a revered Sufi was a political ploy intended to win over the support of the general masses in the ruling party's perennial battle with the main opposition party.[42] Right or wrong, the fact remains that the revered Sufis continue to remain a potent force in the life and living of the people. Although it must be admitted that *Sufism* has lost its relevance in the reproduction of 'new knowledge' and creative ventures. Hope, however, lies in recovering the Sufi discourses and engaging the latter afresh in the task of reproducing tolerance

---

[42] The earlier name of the airport was Zia International Airport, named after Ziaur Rahman, the founding president of the main opposition party — Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The latter had the airport named soon after Zia's assassination in 1981 when the party was in power.

and goodwill amongst people of various cultures, languages, races, castes and religions.

Conclusion

The distinction between *Sufi* and *Sufism* clarifies the role of the state in reformulating discourses by both choice and compulsions. In this voluntary-involuntary role of the state, scholars are vital when it comes to transforming the discourse, say, of the Sufis into an 'ism' where the Orientalists and later the *ulemas*, as organic intellectuals of the state, played a formidable role. This incidentally has not only reorganized the Sufis and made them susceptible to mundane favours but also impacted upon the socio-political role of Islam. In an environment of this kind, the political use of religion, including Sufism, becomes more of a norm than an exception. 'Harsh legalism' is definitely an outcome of this. In contradistinction to the latter, many contemporary *murids* and living Sufis take refuge in mythic tales and wait for miracles to make a difference to their life and living. State intervention otherwise compels many to seek refuge in esotericism and limit ironically the power of the state.

A closer look at Bangladesh also provided an opportunity to trace the journey of early Sufis, whether from Baghdad, Bostam, Bukhara, Kuniya or Yemen, into Bengal and see how they were able to adjust themselves and make the unfamiliar land their home. This was an issue of having tolerance and an accommodating mindset not only in Bengal but also in the place where the journey originated. If this was the case in earlier times then it becomes easy

to understand how tolerance or intolerance in one region can breed the same in another, and the potency of either is now much greater given that globalization and technology have made the world smaller than ever. Put differently, the recent attack on the Sufi shrines in Bangladesh is as much a product of intolerance at home as it is a product of rigid dogmas abroad, particularly in the so-called Wahhabi belt of the Arab world where petro-dollars and ill-educated migrant workers proved a deadly combination in so far as religion and Sufism were concerned. Reenergizing the culture of tolerance in Bangladesh otherwise depends on reenergizing the culture of tolerance in the Middle East. One cannot be done without the other.

There are certain structural issues with the *tariqa* which has a propensity of inviting conservatism while it attempts to guard its ideological terrain. And this is true with respect to the post-thirteenth century *turuq* everywhere. Take the case of the Khalwatiyya *tariqa* in Egypt, for instance, about which critics maintain that since the initiation into the *tariqa* of the Egyptian sheik of Al-Azhar, Muhammad b. Salim al-Hifni, in eighteenth century 'affiliation with the Khalwatiyya became a major factor, if not a necessary condition, for entering the high echelons of Al-Azhar hierarchy.'[43] This 'quasi-corporate identity' of the Khalwatiyya in so far as its

---

[43] Chih, Rachida. "What is a Sufi Order? Revisiting the concept through a case study of the Khalwatiyya in contemporary Egypt," in Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell, eds., *Sufism and the 'Modern' in Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 23.

relationship with Al-Azhar is concerned exists even today. Similar is the case with the *turuq* in South Asia, particularly where *tariqa*-initiated *madrasahs* are concerned. The Ahl-e Sunnat *madrasahs* of the Qadiriyya Barelwis, which rose from 93 in 1971 to 1,216 in 1994, have come to reproduce a network that culminated in the formation of a political party in the name of Jamiyyat al-'Ulama-e Pakistan.[44] Although the latter champions the cause of Sufism and is critical of the anti-Sufi Deobandis, there is strict adherence to the *shari'a* and the five 'pillars of Islam on the part of its members. In this respect, it remains indistinguishable from other reformist Sufis, whether Naqshbandiyya or Chishtiyya.[45]

Nothing short of the very first divine word revealed to the Prophet — *Iqraa!* (Read!) — could salvage humans, including Sufis and Sufism, from their current predicaments. It is this revelation that cultivated a passion for reading, writing and striving for 'new knowledge' and contributed to the plethora of emancipatory discourses and imaginative practices but went on to be envied by many, including the state. Now that the compulsion of the latter has changed and its priorities reoriented, there is greater scope for free-thinking in the spirit of the age-old Sufis to thrive. This requires an effort of global proportion, indeed, with scholars from all corners of the world contributing to it.

---

[44] Sanyal, Usha. *op. cit*, pp. 129–130.

[45] Ibid., pp. 124–125.

MEI Publications

- ***Iraq Past, Present and Future: Arabic Speaking Iraqis between the tribes, the Sunnah and the Shi'ah***
  Amatzia Baram
  June 2010

- ***Challenging Power to the West: Iran's Rising as a Regional Power***
  Hooman Peimani
  June 2010

- ***How Far Can Democracy Go? The Case of Lebanon 2005***
  Hussain Abdul-Hussain
  May 2010

- ***Singapore's Hadrami Community in Today's Economy***
  Ben Simpfendorfer
  March 2010

- ***The Intellectual Roots of Egypt's Regional Role***
  Mohamed Soffar
  March 2010

- ***Iran: Domestic Politics and Foreign Policy in a Wider Regional Context***
  Prof Anoushiravan Ehteshami
  December 2009

- ***Arab World Economies — Weathering the Storm***
  Dr Salem Ben Nasser Al Ismaily
  December 2009

- ***China's Interests in the Gulf — Beyond Economic Relations?***
  Dr Zhang Mei
  November 2009

- ***Refining the Saudi "Will to Power"***
  Dr Joseph A. Kéchichian
  June 2009

- ***The Friendship With Israel: India Squares The Circle***
  Dr P R Kumaraswamy
  June 2009

- ***The United States and Political Islam: The Dialectic of Hegemony and Resistance***
  Dr Mohammed Ayoob
  June 2009

- ***The GCC Economies and the Crash: Short-term Weaknesses, Long-term Strengths***
  Dr Steffen Hertog
  April 2009

- ***Social Change in the United Arab Emirates: Challenges of Migration and "Emiratisation"***
  Dr Habibul Haque Khondker
  February 2009

- ***The Dynamics of Middle Eastern Political Language***
  Dr Matthew Gray
  February 2009

- ***Islamisation Trends in Middle East and Beyond***
  HE Amb Hussein Haridy
  February 2009

To request a hard copy of a publication listed above, kindly email contact.mei@nus.edu.sg

To access an electronic copy, please visit www.mei.nus.edu.sg/publications.html