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Syncretistic Religiosity in the Mausoleums of Bangladesh: Exploring the Possibility of a Blended Religious Identity

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SYNCRETISTIC RELIGIOSITY IN THE MAUSOLEUMS OF BANGLADESH: EXPLORING THE POSSIBILITY OF A BLENDED RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

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By

Sadia Afrin

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ABSTRACT

Firstly, this thesis investigates the syncretistic religious nature of Bangladeshi mausoleums, along with the historical background of the Sufi mausoleums and the flourishment of this syncretistic religiosity. The study explores the contribution of Sufis to the spread of Islam in Bengal. It discusses how the liberal attitude of mausoleum enshrined Sufis toward their followers of diverse faiths patronized syncretism. The study here hypothesizes that the religious practices of Bangladeshi mausoleums are syncretistic; they are neither exclusively Muslim nor Hindu but present a blended identity. It demonstrates how religious syncretism is an undeniable phenomenon in the mausoleums of Bangladesh and how this syncretistic phenomenon works for religious exchange in mausoleums, where people of different faiths come with similar perceptions and aspirations. In order to prove the hypothesis, ethnographic fieldwork has been conducted in three renowned mausoleums of Bangladesh: Fakir Lalon Shah Mausoleum in Kushtia, Shah Ali Baba Mausoleum in Mirpur, and Khan Jahan Ali Mausoleum in Bagerhat. Along with the field study, direct interviews have been conducted in the three aforementioned mausoleums. The field study and interlocuter accounts go with close conformity of the hypothesis. The study further explores how these mausoleums offer a ground for inter-religious harmony along with syncretistic religiosity. The purpose of this study is to appreciate the syncretistic religiosity of mausoleums and the contribution of this syncretistic religiosity in building inter-religious harmony.

KEYWORDS: Syncretism, Mausoleum, Sufism, Bengal, Islam, Inter-faith harmony, Syncretistic religiosity

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INTRODUCTION

Syncretism, not an overtly recognized term, implies the amalgamation of different religions, faiths, and cultures. Religious syncretism essentially means the amalgamation of different religions and their components, which happens when people of two or more religions come into firsthand contact. People may be part of this syncretism without even having any knowledge of it. South Asia, apart from being the birthplace of many religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, has adopted foreign religions like Islam and Christianity due to invasions and colonization. As part of South Asia, Bengal region has proved to be culturally accommodating and religiously diverse. For centuries, it has provided a fertile ground for religious diversity and offered a meeting space for indigenous and foreign religions. This meeting of religions occurred both in public and private spheres; in the private sphere, it resulted in personal exchange, and in the public sphere, in a shared culture, occasionally religious syncretism. The South Asian country Bangladesh comprises more than half of this Bengal region and shares this syncretistic attitude equally.[1] One example of such syncretistic public spheres is the mausoleums of Bangladesh; here, the mausoleum denotes a shrine that houses the bodily remains of a Sufi or Sufis.

The mausoleums of Bangladesh present a syncretistic religious identity that is neither exclusively Muslim nor Hindu; they reflect features of both religions and give a blended religious and cultural identity. The continuous firsthand contact among the Sufi followers of diverse faith made the Sufi mausoleums syncretistic. The field of religious syncretism requires

[1] The historical Bengal region has been divided into modern day Bangladesh and West Bengal province of India. The total area of Bengal has been 232752 km^2; Bangladesh 147570 km^2 and West Bengal 88752 km^2.

more exploration. As Raymond Firth has argued, "The sociologists and social anthropologists have thrown much light on the variety of religious forms through their studies of belief systems, rituals, symbols and meaning all over the world, but they have not paid adequate attention to the phenomenon of syncretism, though we find a few exceptions."[2] The notion of religious syncretism in mausoleums has been touched on by scholars like Asim Roy, who noted the visibility of religious syncretism in the mausoleums of Bengal.[3] Nevertheless, there are spheres of mausoleum syncretism yet to be explored, like the origin and development of this syncretistic religious identity. This paper at hand has tried to navigate the unexplored origin and development of syncretistic religiosity. The origin history of syncretism in mausoleums goes hand in hand with the history of mausoleums themselves and the Sufis associated with them.

The medieval and early modern history of Bengal reflects the influence of Sufis in forming and developing the social life of Bengali people.[4] The concept of religious exclusivity is a later addition to this culture.[5] For centuries, the religious and cultural life of the Bengali people presented a blended identity; as Islam spread there through Sufis who were not strictly orthodox or legalist, they permitted considerable flexibility, and the Hindus and Buddhists consciously or unconsciously adapted to some new practices that were introduced with Islam. The Muslim rule in Bengal began at the dawn of the thirteenth century, shortly after the consolidation of Muslim

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[2] Raymond Firth, *Religion: A Humanistic Interpretation*, (London: Rutledge, 1970), 87.

[3] Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press,1983), 206-213.

[4] Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier1204-1760* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1993), VI.

[5] Religious exclusivity here means the understanding of what is exclusively Muslim practice and what is Hindu.

power in the subcontinent by the Ghurid empire. The lower caste Hindus and Buddhists, plagued with the Brahmin Sena dynasty caste-based persecution, were attracted to the simple life and egalitarian ideology of the Sufis, which led to massive conversions to Islam. The argument that Islam gained ground in Bengal due to the accommodative nature nurtured by the Sufis presupposes the accommodation of the local traditions into Islam. Furthermore, the cultural environment that worked as the basis for the survival of a new religion on foreign soil paved the way for conversion.

Asim Roy, a pioneering figure in the field of syncretistic traditions of Bengal, described it as a specific religious ideology.[6] He explained this Islamization process as a "social and cultural process operating in Bengal, where Islam was not a primary but a secondary culture, that is, exogenous and not endogenous to the particular region, and also where Islam is not a single or the only great tradition since it entered a land which was not culturally virgin, and confronted the long-established endogenous Hindu great tradition."[7] As the Sufis moved around the Bengal lands, some were sent with a commission to spread Islam from their respective Tariqas (an account of the commissioned Sufis and Tariqas is presented in the next chapter) in territories beyond the reach of Muslim rulers or elites. It is customary for Sufis to be buried in the same place they die, so the land of Bengal became associated with the remains of thousands of foreign and local Sufis. The burial grounds of the Sufis were turned into mausoleums with the veneration of the devotees, and these devotees belonged to diverse religions, typically Muslims and

[6] Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press,1983), 7.

[7] Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press,1983), 4

Hindus.[8] As living teachers, Sufis attracted locals, who lived and moved with them. After their deaths, their mausoleums became the spaces where their followers resided, and pilgrims visited. The people who resided and visited the mausoleums brought their own religious and cultural traits along with them, often synthesizing such traits. Consequently, the mausoleums of Bengal become religiously syncretistic and culturally diverse. The mausoleum culture of Bengal presented numerous examples of shared beliefs and ritualistic practices from both Hindu and Muslim quarters. To this day, mostly in Bangladesh than West Bengal, the mausoleums continue to influence the views of a sizable population; they turn to those mausoleums in their weal and woe and participate in mausoleum observances. The term sizable has been used here because the actual number of this mausoleum devotee people cannot be known precisely; the number of people who believe in the divinity of Sufis and mausoleums has been decreasing since the eighteenth-century Islamic reformist movements (the next chapter presents an account of the eighteenth-century Islamic reformist movements).

Nevertheless, the mausoleum devotees are not negligible. Bangladesh, being an overpopulated country, the decrease in population has never been an issue; even after, the decreased devoted population is enormous. Moreover, people in their lifetime turn toward the mausoleums; some continue to do so, and some turn away. The life of mausoleum devotees takes certain turns on the question of faith; like their belief in the divinity of *pirs* and the mausoleum clash with the strict monotheistic concept of Islam; Hindu devotees sometimes face criticism

[8] From the thirteenth century onward, the majority of the Bengali population has been Hindus and Muslims; Christianity did not appear in the scenario for centuries, and as it appears from the historical records, the Buddhist community in Bengal never constituted a majority population. Bengali Buddhists who flourished during the Pala dynasty were subdued by the Sena rulers, and some Muslim rulers persecuted Buddhists in many places of the subcontinent apart from Bengal (the destruction of the Nalanda University monastery), the extinction of the female monastic order in South Asia and its eastward flourishment talks about the reduced Buddhist population.

from the orthodox quarter in the question of devotion to a Muslim *pir's* tomb or mausoleum. Nonetheless, their devotion to the *pirs* and mausoleums outweighs the rigidity of their respective faiths. Those devoted people visit mausoleums in sickness and plight, hoping their wishes will come true. On the birth and death anniversary of the enshrined Sufi, they arrange and participate in observances, make donations, and feed mausoleum fauna. To an extent, their day-to-day life moves around mausoleums and mausoleum blessings like *tabeez* (charmed amulets) and *pora pani* (blessed water).[9] The charmed amulets are worn, and the blessed waters are drunk or mixed with bathing water, hoping to relieve sickness or trouble or the desire for a good marriage, healthy children, employment, or good grades.

Unlike other parts of the world, Sufis in South Asia are not exclusively Muslim. There are numerous examples of Hindu Sufis in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. A detailed explanation of Hindu Sufis is presented in the second chapter under the subject of syncretistic components. As stated earlier, the Sufis who came to Bengal had Muslim and Hindu followers, many of whom were Sufi aspirants. Some converted locals became local Muslim Sufis; however, there are several examples of Sufis who, even after receiving Sufi training and pledging allegiance to Sufi ideology, remained Hindu throughout their lives. Like Muslim Sufis, they attracted both Muslim and Hindu followers. Unlike Muslim Sufis, they did not preach Islam; they were more like *Sants* (or Hindu saints). But unlike most *Sants*, Sufism inspired their life, and the Hindu Sufis were buried and enshrined in mausoleums after death. The primary difference between a Sant and a Hindu Sufi is that a Hindu Sufi is known by his acquired knowledge of Islam and *Marifat*; for example, Manomohan Datta, a Hindu Sufi of

[9] Blessed water is the drinking or using water over which prayers have been recited.

Brahmanbaria, Bangladesh, is recorded to have adept knowledge of the Quran and Sunnah.[10] The mausoleums of Hindu Sufis are syncretistic in the same way as those of Muslim Sufis; like Muslim Sufi mausoleums, they include diverse religious populations and observances. The second chapter contains a discussion on Hindu Sufis and how their mausoleums are syncretistic.

Before any further discussion occurs, it is essential to give an overall idea of the terms that will be repeatedly used in this work, like syncretism, mausoleum, and Sufi:

Syncretism

The term "Syncretism" has been derived from the ancient Greek *synkrētismos*[11] which indicated the joining of Greeks in opposition to a common enemy. An anglicized form of this term, syncretism, was adopted by the English in the early seventeenth century to refer to the union of different religious beliefs. In his book *Syncretism and Christian Tradition: Race and Revelation in the Study of Religious Mixture,* Ross Kane defined syncretism as a phenomenon of a religious mixture with various connotations. He writes, "The term has a history of being used as a neutral descriptor, a pejorative marker, and even a celebration of the indigenous agency. Its differing uses indicate the challenges of interpreting religious mixture, challenges which today relate primarily to race and revelation."[12]

[10] Masahiko Togawa "Syncretism Revisited: Hindus and Muslims over a Saintly Cult in Bengal," *Numen* 55(2008), 27-43, 33.

[11] "Syncretism," *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2011, https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/syncretism. (March 14,2023)

[12] Ross Kane, *Syncretism and Christian Tradition: Race and Revelation in the Study of Religious Mixture*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), iii.

The principle of religious syncretism presupposes that when two cultures meet and interact, they are bound to exchange some of their religious ideas. In most cases, the dominant religion prevails in the exchange. Nevertheless, in some cases, there appears to be a middle way or synthesis of two or more religions. That is where the idea of religious syncretism appears. Syncretism is sometimes confused with conversion. While syncretism represents a blended religious identity that retains the components of both religions, conversion means discarding one religious' identity for another, leaving the spiritual components of one's original adherence behind to accept others.

Masahiko Togawa, in his article "Syncretism Revisited: Hindus and Muslims over a Saintly Cult in Bengal," explained how difficult it is to provide a widely understood definition of syncretism, as in the case of religion it borrows elements from a wide range of traditional cultures. Togawa writes,

> However, it is difficult for religious scholars and anthropologists to define syncretism in a way that can be widely understood without being simultaneously open to criticism for vagueness regarding the nature and background of the syncretistic phenomenon (e.g., Leopold and Jensen 2004:2-12). In reality, as practiced, religion is an outcome of syncretism because it borrows several elements from a broad range of traditional cultures (Van Der Leeuw 1933, 688-98). Thus, the common understanding of "syncretism" has given rise to a tendency first to imagine conventional and essential religious forms, then explain actual religious phenomena as modified or collapsed versions of these.[13]

Togawa offered several examples to make his point and contended that a syncretistic religion is a modified or collapsed version of an orthodox religion. Togawa explained that

[13] Masahiko Togawa, "Syncretism Revisited: Hindus and Muslims over a Saintly Cult in Bengal," *Numen* 55(2008), 27-43, 29.

syncretistic religion has "pejorative connotations"[14] that implies religious practices as unorthodox or a deviation from the original form of religion. An intriguing fact about religious syncretism is that it never parallels conventional religions, as some degree of change or deviation is a prerequisite for syncretism. At the same time, some patronize this deviation, and others ostracize it. A third group does not patronize this syncretistic deviation but sees no harm in this synthesized and blended identity. Therefore, religious syncretism is both a subtle and compound phenomenon; it can only be traced when compared to the original form of a conventional religion.[15]

Sufi

According to the definition of A.J. Arberry, "Sufi is the man whom God has chosen for Himself, rendering him a sincere affection (Safa), and setting him free from the carnal soul and not allowing him anymore to labor to undue fatigue under any pretext."[16]

The term Sufi comes from the Arabic word *tasawwuf*, which means the purification of the immortal soul through spiritual mediation. Sufism primarily deals with Islam's mystical and spiritual aspects; the goal is to establish a direct relationship with Allah through the purification of the soul. Meditation is the *tariqa* or way to achieve this goal. Some commonly used Bengali words for Sufi are *pir*, *dervish, fakir*, and *baba*.

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[14] Masahiko Togawa, "Syncretism Revisited: Hindus and Muslims over a Saintly Cult in Bengal," *Numen* 55(2008), 27-43, 29.

[15] By original form, I mean the shape a conventional religion had during its formation. For example, Islam in the seventh century Arab, at the dawn of its formation.

[16] A. J. Arberry, *The Doctrine of the Sufi* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf. 1966), 10.

Pir is the Persian term and most popular Bengali term for Sufi, a person respected for his age and experience of mysticism. In the subcontinent, *pir* incorporates human beings who have superpowers. The *pirs* appeared to the native Hindus as resembling anthropomorphized gods. Another term, *dervish*, is also of Persian origin, which means a Sufi aspirant, a person who has taken the vow of renunciation and austerity and is known for their act of whirling in the love of God. *Fakir* has its root in Arabic *Faqr*, which means poverty; in the literal sense, *fakir* means a religious ascetic who rejects every possession and lives their life on alms. *Baba* is a Bengali term for a father figure, sometimes used for a wise older man; it is only used in the vernacular language. All these terms, either way, mean a holy man, or to be more precise, a Sufi. Those terms will be used in the coming chapters.

Mausoleum

In general, a mausoleum is a building constructed as a monument enclosing the burial chamber of a deceased person or persons. A Sufi mausoleum is a burial chamber of a deceased Sufi or Sufis, where people come in awe and reverence of the Sufi. Although there are numerous mausoleums in Bangladesh, the term mausoleum is not used in Bengali; some common terms are used to depict a mausoleum, like *mazar, dargah,* and *khanqah.* The most commonly used term is *mazar*; it originates from the Arabic term *ziyara*, which means visitation. Mazar is a place where people gather with the hope of visiting a Sufi shrine. A *mazar* in Bangladesh necessarily includes a colossal building or buildings and a precinct covering a prayer hall, a water source, and some items of veneration relating to the enshrined Sufi or Sufis.

Another term is *dargah*, less popular than *mazar*, a term of Persian origin that means threshold. A Sufi *dargah* is an open threshold where the followers of a Sufi are welcome with

open hands. In Bangladesh, a *dargah* sometimes refers to a smaller version of a *mazar*; where a *mazar* contains stately buildings, a *dargah* may contain only four walls and a roof over the tomb. The third term used is *khanqah;* a *khanqah* is a building explicitly devised for gathering the followers and training the disciples of a Sufi master or tariqa. More specifically, a *khanqah* is where the Sufis resided with their followers as living beings; after their death, some stuck with the name *khanqah*. Chapter One of this work contains a detailed description of *khanqah*.

In Bangladesh, there are numerous mausoleums and hospices (Sufi *khanqahs*); each regional area has its famous mausoleums. For the Sylhet area, it is the mausoleums of Shah Jalal and Shah Paran; for Narayanganj, the mausoleums of Haji Baba Saleh; for Kushtia, the mausoleum of Fakir Lalon Shah; for Brahmanbaria, the mausoleum of Manomohan Datta; for Mirpur the mausoleum of Shah Ali Baba; for Chittagong, the mausoleum of Bayazid Bostami; and for Bagerhat, the mausoleum of Khan Jahan Ali.

The Sufi abode sheltered followers of different faiths and practices; hence, the mausoleums built after their death nurtured a blended cultural identity, resulting in a syncretistic religious ideology. When people of different faiths visit mausoleums and participate in mausoleum observances, they may feel the resemblance of the rituals in their respective religions. However, at the same time, they can also feel they are not the same. An exploration of the mausoleum observances indicates a syncretistic identity; the tomb and burial culture belong to Islamic tradition, wherein the singing and dancing traditions get inspiration from *kirtan* in the Hindu tradition.[17] While the practice of *dhikr* (continuous recitation of God's name) comes again from Islam, the practice of *shirni*[18] distribution receives inspiration from the distribution of

[17] Songs dedicated to the veneration of Krishna.

[18] The food distributed in mausoleums; the second chapter offers a detailed explanation.

prasad[19] in Hindu temples. Upon further discussion, it appears that, on the one hand, the practice of prostration to a Sufi or a tomb performed in mausoleums is strictly forbidden in Islam; on the other hand, the practice of prostration to saints is performed in Hinduism. The practices followed in mausoleums are assimilated, neither fully Islamic nor Hindu. The assimilative nature of the mausoleum practices gives them a syncretistic outlook. The simultaneous or chronological observance of different religious rituals in the same mausoleum precinct, like *dhikr* and *qawwali* songs, performed simultaneously in the mausoleums, bears an outstanding specimen of religious syncretism.

The main objective of this study is to point out the inherent religious syncretism in the mausoleums of Bangladesh. It tries to show how the influence of Sufis and the firsthand Hindu-Muslim contact and contribution to the Sufi mausoleums made them religiously syncretistic. For an extensive period, Bangladesh has had a reputation for liberal religious attitude. The claim is based on the less rigidity among Bengali Muslims than in Arab or Middle East and the less fundamentalist attitude in Bengali Hindus than in India. The Islam of Arabs and the Middle East became Bengalized Islam here.[20] Furthermore, in the Muslim majority population, the fundamentalist Hindu approach couldn't flourish. The hypothesis is that Bengalized Islam finds one of its many expressions in the mausoleums of Bangladesh. The study here claims that the religious practices of Bangladeshi mausoleums are syncretistic; they are neither exclusively Muslim nor Hindu but present a blended identity. Moreover, the attendees of these mausoleums

[19] A religious offering in Hinduism. Food or water is first offered to a Hindu deity and then distributed among the devotees. It is believed the deity has made the offered food holy by partaking in it.

[20] Shafi Md Mostofa, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Pyramid Root Cause Model*, (Springer Nature, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 40.

belong to diverse faiths. In order to prove the hypothesis, ethnographic fieldwork has been conducted in three Bangladeshi mausoleums, namely Fakir Lalon Shah Mausoleum, Shah Ali Baba Mausoleum, and Khan Jahan Ali Mausoleum, and interviews have been conducted with the help of a research associate. For this purpose, the author has acquired approval from the Missouri State University Institutional Review Board (see Appendix).

The study will demonstrate how religious syncretism is an undeniable phenomenon in the mausoleums of Bangladesh and how this syncretistic phenomenon works for religious exchange in mausoleums, where people of different faiths come with similar perceptions and aspirations. The study will also demonstrate how these mausoleums offer a ground for inter-religious harmony along with syncretistic religiosity. In a world of religious intolerance, unrest, and growing religious extremism, this study focuses on a sphere where religious difference does not matter, where diverse religious practices preside without conflict. One purpose of this study is to appreciate the syncretistic religiosity of mausoleums and the contribution of this syncretistic religiosity in building inter-religious harmony.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The South Asian country of Bangladesh has a territory of one hundred and forty-seven thousand, five hundred and seventy square kilometers. Bangladesh shares land borders with two countries—India to the west, north, and east, and Myanmar to the southeast. It also has one sea border to the south in the form of a coastline along the Bay of Bengal. Bangladesh has a dense population of one hundred and seventy million with diverse religious identities: Muslim 91%, Hindu 8.44%, Buddhist 0.4%, Christian 0.1%, and tribal people 0.1%.[21] The unequal distribution of religious populations is a regular phenomenon in most countries. But with a 90% Muslim population, a country not being an Islamic State is somehow a unique case, especially from the perspective of a South Asian country. It is unique because Bangladesh is one of the three South Asian countries born out of the schism based on religion, and it broke the shackles of religion-based partisans of the subcontinent. It demonstrated that religion itself is not enough to bind two totally different states, where people are culturally and essentially different, and difference in religion is not an adequate reason to separate people with the same culture. The population ratio and background are relevant here because the study argues for religious syncretism in Bangladesh's public sphere (in mausoleums), where more than 90% of the population belongs to one particular faith, Islam.

Bangladesh is South Asia's youngest but the first constitutionally declared secular state. The first constitution of Bangladesh (1972 Constitution) declared it a secular state where people

[21] Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, "Population and Housing Census 2022, Bangladesh," https://bbs.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bbs.portal.gov.bd/page/b343a8b4, (accessed October 15, 2023).

of every religion would have the same rights.[22] Lailufar Yasmin, a professor of International Relations, has commented on this history of secularism, "As the West Pakistani elites attempted to impose Urdu as the only national language, and later Islam as the common binding factor between the two geographically disconnected wings, with thousands miles of Indian territory stretching in between, the people of East Pakistan embraced secularism as an urban-introduced religious concept."[23] From the country's origin and beyond, the religious life of the Bangladeshi people presented a liberal attitude, with a diverse religious population and even more diversified rituals.

The context of religious syncretism presupposes the amalgamation of multiple religions and religious components. Historically, Bangladeshi people share their religious festivals with people from other religions. Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian people visit Muslim homes on the Eid festival; and Muslims, Buddhists, and Christians visit Puja Pavilions in the Hindu Durga puja. Muslims and Hindus are invited to both Christmas and Budh Purnima. There is a saying in Bengali, *"Dharma jar jar utsav sobar*," which means "the religions are for the religious people, but religious festivals are for all." Typically, Bangladeshi people of one religion participate in religious festivals of other religions, and they accept the people of other religions in their religious festivals with open arms. There are some cultural observances where different religious quarters equally participate. This fact indicates the religious exchange and peaceful coexistence Bengali people once had and still have to some extent; and thus, the contemporary rise in religious intolerance is new for many people.

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[22] Lailufar Yasmin, "Struggle for the Soul of Bangladesh," *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, (Commentary) December 5, 2014.

[23] Lailufar Yasmin, "Struggle for the Soul of Bangladesh," *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*, (Commentary) December 5, 2014.

History of Bengal

The geographical setting that constitutes today's Bangladesh was not a single territorial entity; it was divided into several discrete overlapping territories, namely Gauda, Radha, Samatata, Pundra, Varendra, Harikela, and Vanga. Historians like R C Majumder and Niharranjan Ray conform to the views of archeological research and maintain that Bengal may have been inhabited from the Paleolithic era and that the original inhabitants of Bengal were non-Aryan indigenous tribes who were presumably cultivators. Before the Muslim rule, Bengal was first united through conquest by Mauryan emperor Chandragupta Maurya during the early fourth century, then by Buddhist Pala Dynasty ruler Gopala in the mid-eighth century, and by Brahmin Sena dynasty ruler Vijayasena in the first half of the twelfth century.[24]

While Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji, a Turkish invader and military general of Muhammad Ghuri[25] conquered Bengal from Sena ruler Laxmansena in 1204 CE, Sultan Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah, founder of the Ilyas Shahi dynasty, was the first Muslim ruler who united most parts of Bengal (except the Southern part) after his conquest of Sonargaon in 1353 CE. Sultan Shams al-Din Ilyas Shah named his conquered territory Bangalah, later named Subah Bangala by the Mughals and then Bengal by the British. During the Partisan of the subcontinent, Bengal was divided into East Bengal (Muslim majority part) and West Bengal (Hindu majority part). The name East Bengal was changed to East Pakistan in 1956 by the first constitution of Pakistan. Finally in 1971, Bangladesh was born from a violent conflict and a nine-month guerrilla war between Pakistan's eastern and western wings.

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[24] Ramesh C. Majumder, *History of Ancient Bengal*, (Calcutta, India: G Bharadwaj and Co., 1971), 36, 100, 242.

[25] The Turkish invaders first consolidated Muslim power in the Indian Subcontinent.

Spread of Islam in the Bengal Frontier

Although the story of Bakhtiyar Khalji conquering Bengal with eighteen horse riders is disputed, he apparently entered Bengal's capital Lakhnawti without much resistance.[26] One significant reason is the oppression of Brahmin Sena rulers over lower-caste Hindus and Buddhists. According to some historians, the Muslim invasion was their chance for deliverance. There are theories regarding the spread of Islam in the Bengal frontier. One is the forced conversion theory; Islam was forced onto the people of Bengal with swords. The theory of forced conversion is unconvincing because the only incident of limited-scale non-Muslim persecution is found under the rule of Jalaluddin (1413-1430), the first indigenous Bengali Muslim to assume political power. Another theory says Hindus of the pre-modern era converted to curry some non-religious favors from the ruling class, like relief from non-Muslim taxes (Jizya, Pilgrim tax) and promotion in bureaucracy.

The early fourteenth-century account of explorer Ibn Battuta, *the Rehla,* says how the Indians presented themselves in Khalji courts as new converts, and the Khalji Sultans awarded them with robes of honors following their ranks.[27] This could be a viable argument, but the extent would be minimal, as only a handful of people worked as bureaucrats. Force exerted by the central administration could not possibly be a reason for mass conversion. Being so far away from the center, any central force would have found it challenging to reach Bengal, and historical records do not show any record of forced conversion. Due to the oppression of Sena rulers, countless lower-class Hindus and Buddhists willingly converted to Islam; and thus, force was

[26] V. D. Mahajan, *History of India: From Beginning to 1526 A.D.* (New Delhi: S Chand & Company ltd, 1999), 72.

[27] Ibn Battuta*, The Rehla of Ibn Battuta*, Tr. by Mahdi Hussain, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 46.

unnecessary. Then comes the theory of Islam spreading through the direct endeavors of Muslim rulers; the reliability of this theory has been questioned.

Given that Bengal was far from the capital, it was hard for the Turk, Afghan, or even Mughal rulers to have uninterrupted control over the provincial rulers. Even the historical account provided by R. C. Majumder reflects that for a considerable time, the provincial rulers of Bengal functioned independently, namely the Afghan Maliks, the Ilyas Shahi Sultans, and the Nawabs of Bengal. However, concrete evidence is scarce for any central Islamic propagation activity in the Bengal frontier. Lastly, there is the theory that Islam spread in the Bengal frontier through the Sufis. The most prominent exponents of this theory are Richard Eaton, Anisuzzaman, Muhammad Enamul Haque, Abdul Karim, and Sarwar Alam. All of them are noteworthy figures in the socio-cultural history of Bangladesh. The theory presupposes that the majority of Bengali people who embraced Islam did so from the influence of the Sufis.

Richard Eaton connected the idea of mass conversion with the ruler's policy of expanding arable land and the involvement of Sufis in that expansion, which made Islamic and agrarian growth synonymous. The Sufi engagement in local endeavors like forest clearing and land reclamation received recognition and appreciation from the native villagers; the villagers turned to those holy men for their authority and charisma. Eaton argues, "To a greater degree than elsewhere in India, Islam in Bengal absorbed so much local culture and became so profoundly identified with Bengal's long-term process of agrarian expansion, that in its formative years the cultivating classes never regarded it as 'foreign'- even though some Muslim and Hindu literati and foreign observers did."[28] In the early days of Islam in Bengal, the Sufis

[28] Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, (Berkley: University of California Press, 1993), 310.

maintained an intermediatory role between the political elites and the masses; to be more specific, they worked as the means through which Muslim bureaucrats could sense the Brahminical oppression in the ailing nerves of the Hindu and Buddhist masses. Eaton seems to lean toward the Muslim rulers profiting from the benefits of the Sufis' work in Bengal, and there is some logic behind his argument.

Sufism in Bengal

As explained earlier, the term Sufi originates from the Arabic term *tasawwuf*, which means the purification of the immortal soul through the spiritual mediation of the Sufi master. Sufism primarily deals with Islam's mystical and spiritual aspects; the goal is to establish a direct relationship with Allah through the purification of the soul, and meditation is the *tariqa* or way to achieve this goal. The path of Sufism begins when a seeker takes oath, at the hand of his *murshid* (the spiritual guide), of allegiance and repent for his sins and becomes a *murid* (the committed one). *Pir* is "a person respected for his age and experience of mysticism" and hence the "spiritual guide, master' of a Sufi fraternity."[29] As the Sufis who came to Indian Subcontinent were primarily Persian, the term pir is the most used one. In the subcontinent, the idea of *pir* incorporates human beings who have superpowers. "The Pirs appeared to them as the Tantrik gurus or the teachers of the Shakta order. It is no wonder that the converts found Pirism in Islam somewhat parallel to their own traditions and superstitions."[30] The native Hindus had the concept of Avatars, earthly beings with the powers of gods; however, this

[29] Dominique Sourdel and Janine Sourdel-Thomine. *A Glossary of Islam*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 133.

[30] Abdul Karim, *Social History of Muslim in Bengal (Down to A.D. 1538),* 2nd ed, (Chittagong, Bangladesh: Baitus Sharaf Islamic Research Institute, 1985), 215.

anthropomorphized concept of gods made it easier for them to believe in Sufis, who they believed possessed super-human power. It was easier for them to believe rather than the strictly monotheistic God of Islam and follow the Sufis than following the Sharia Law. That, in turn, worked behind the exclusively South Asian idea of Hindu Sufis, which will be discussed later under syncretistic components.

Some accounts say that Sufis started to come to Bengal around the mid-eleventh century, even before the political conquest of Afghani Muslims. This idea has been questioned due to a lack of evidence and the names of the Sufis. A widely accepted thesis is that Sufis began to come to Bengal at the dawn of the thirteenth century. Initially, they were mainly commissioned Sufis of four *tariqas*: Chishtiyah, Suhrawardiyah, Qadiriyah, and Naqshbandi'yah, who exerted immense influence over the locals of Bengal. *Tariqa* means Sufi orders; Abul Fazl in *Ain-i-Akbari* noted the existence of Sufis of fourteen tariqas during the time of the Mughal emperor Akbar.[31]

Explorer accounts, such as *The Rehla* of Ibn Battuta,[32] prove that commissioned Sufis visited and settled in Bengal even before the Turkish invasion. A commissioned Sufi is a Sufi who is trained by a Sufi master and is sent to a place with the designation of spreading Islam by the Sufi master. Muhammad Enamul Haq has written about the commissioned Sufis of Bengal and how they were commissioned. About Siraj-ud-Din Akhi, Haq wrote, "When Akhi finished his education, Nizam-ud-Din Awliya conferred on him the Khirqah-i-Khilafat or the cloak of

[31] Sadia Afrin, "The Contribution of Bhaktivada and Sufism in Unfolding the Liberal Outlook of Medieval Subcontinent People," *The Journal of Historical Civilization of Arts,* (2021), 27-38, 34. (in Bengali)

[32] A renowned Moroccan Muslim explorer of the medieval era who explored North Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, China, and the Iberian Peninsula. He is mostly famous for his explorer account, *The Rehla*, for its contribution to medieval history.

spiritual succession and commissioned him to go to Bengal for the propagation of Islam."[33] Sufi *tariqas* basically had their own ways of functioning; Sufis were commissioned all over the subcontinent and received kings and emperors as their patrons. Mughal emperor Jalal-ud-Din Muhammad Akbar even named his first child after the great Chistia Sufi, Selim Chisty. Supposedly, Akbar was childless for a long time; through visiting the dargah of Sufi Selim Chisty, Akbar was blessed with a son and thereby named after the Sufi.[34]

Muhammad Enamul Haq, in his book, *A History of Sufism*, names four Sufis who came and settled in Bengal before the Turkish invasion; namely, Shah Sultan Balkhi in Bogra (one of the first Sufis who came to Bengal), Shah Sultan Rumi in Netrakona, Baba Adam Shahid in Munshiganj, and Shaykh Jalaluddin Tabrizi in Maldah of West Bengal. They came to Bengal before the thirteenth century and all died there.[35] Thousands of stone inscriptions scattered around Bengal vouch that they were followed by numerous others intending to spread Islam in the territory. In *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, M. A. Rahim presented a letter by Mir Sayyid Ashraf Jahangir Simnani (d.1380), a Suhrawardiyah Sufi, to Sultan Ibrahim Sharqi of Jaunpur that explains Suhrawardiyah Sufi activities in Bengal. The original letter is in the Persian language, and the translation reads as follows:

> God be praised, what a good land is that of Bengal, where numerous saints and ascetics came from many directions and made it their habitation and home. For example, at

[33] Muhammad Enamul Haq, *A History of Sufism in Bengal* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975), 168.

[34] S A A Rizvi**,** *The Wonder That Was India: A Survey of the History and Culture of the Indian Sub-continent from the Coming of the Muslims to the British Conquest, 1200-1700*, Vol-2, (India: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1987), 108.

[35] Muhammad Enamul Haq, *A History of Sufism in Bengal* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975), 109–13.

> Devgaon, seventy leading disciples of the Shaikh of Shaikhs, Hadhrat Shaikh Shihab uddin Suhrawardi, are taking their eternal rest. Several saints of the Suhrawardiyah order are buried in Mahisun, and this is the case with the saints of the Jalalia order in Deotala. In Narkoti, some of the best companions of Shaikh Ahmad Damishqi are found. Hadhrat Shaikh Sharfuddin Tawwamah, one of the twelve of the Qadir Khani order, whose chief pupil was Hadhrat Shaikh Sharafuddin Maneri, is lying buried at Sonargaon. And then there was Hadhrat Bad Alam and Badr Alam Zahidi. In short, in the country of Bengal, what to speak of the cities, there is no town and no village where holy saints did not come and settle down. Many of the saints of the Suhrawardiyah order are dead and gone, but those still alive are also in fairly large numbers.[36]

This is only one part of the truth; only Suhrawardiyya *tariqa* Sufis, the original number, can be left to the imagination. The Sufis wandered around wearing humble clothes (most likely *Suf* or wool), signing songs of divine love, and preaching human love around people worn out by Brahminic oppression. The egalitarian ideology of Islam manifested in the unostentatious life of the Sufis that attracted the indigenous masses who bore the scars from centuries of communal tension and oppression. Whether or not they knew the orthodox teaching of Islam, they embraced it; however, they could not wholly leave their old faith behind. The Sufis, liberal to other faiths, accepted the people with the baggage of their previous faith. The Sufis built *khanqahs* on the outskirts of cities and welcomed people of all castes and creeds, who were not forced to convert; if they willingly did so, they were welcomed. As mentioned earlier, a *khanqah* is a building explicitly devised for gathering followers and training disciples of a Sufi master or *tariqa*. Typically, it is a place for both spiritual practice and religious education. The *khanqahs* in the medieval subcontinent varied in size and grandeur, and the great ones were constructed by the

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[36] M.A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, Vol.1: 1201- 1576 (Karachi, Pakistan: Historical Society, 1963), 77.

patron Sultans. Sufi *khanqahs* sometimes served as hospitals, common kitchens (*langar*), and lodging for travelers.

The number of Hindu visitors and residents of Sufi *khanqahs* explains the later incorporation of Hindu practices in Sufi mausoleums. Even with no visible force, there were tides of mass conversion to Islam; apart from personal choice, some other stimuli facilitated the conversion. The Sufis are credited with building a connection between Hindus and Muslims of the subcontinent, who previously were viewed as foreign invaders and infidel subjects to each other. The Sufis lived with the general population and learned their language, Bangla, wherein the Brahmin Sena rulers suppressed the use of Bangla and forced people to use Sanskrit. This, in turn, helped Muslim bureaucrats to connect more with the masses than the previous Sena rulers could. "Above all, the greatest achievement of the Sufis of Bengal was the growth of cordiality and unity between the Hindus and the Muslims, especially during the early days of Islam in Bengal. From this point of view, the Sufis may fairly be regarded as the connecting link of union between the rulers and the ruled."[37]

In the early days of Islam in Bengal, Sufis served as intermediaries to grow a healthy relationship between the political elites and the general population. Later, when Muslim rule was consolidated in Bengal, the Sufis maintained their distance from the ruling class. There were conflicts of interest; the Sufi ideology of renunciation necessarily conflicted with the interest of Sultans (that is, Muslim rulers of the medieval Bengal Sultanate of the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries) and other political elites. The Sufis lived in *khanqahs* on the outskirts of cities, where people of every faith, class, and creed were welcomed. The *Ulama* (the advisor of Muslim rulers

[37] Sarwar Alam, "Sufism Without Boundaries: Pluralism, Coexistence, and Interfaith Dialogue in Bangladesh," *Comparative Islamic Studies*, (2013), 67-90, 86.

adept in Islamic Sharia Law) dominance over the political centers caused the Sufis to move further away from the Sultans; the *ulamas*, being the patrons of Shari'a Law, did not approve of the inclusive practices of the Sufis.[38] In most cases, the Sufis maintained a distance from the *ulamas* and political elites; they even actively participated in some revolts against them. The prowess of *ulamas* was so prominent that even Mughal Emperor Akbar the Great had to face opposition from the *ulamas* during his ban order on pilgrim tax (1563) and *Jizya*[39](1564) on the Hindus.[40]

The mystics actively participated in the late eighteenth-century revolt of Fakir Manju Shah and the mid-nineteenth century Pagol Panthi Bidroho; both created nuisances in the history of Bengal. These revolts deteriorated the relationship between the mystics and the ruling elites, wherein they formerly shared a harmonious relationship. The Fakir Majnu Shah revolt, commonly known as Fakir-Sanyasi Bidroho, is a combined armed resistance of Fakirs (Muslim Sufis) and Sannyasins (Hindu Yogis) led by Fakir Majnu Shah. The resistance began in 1760 and continued for almost four decades, and it was one of the first revolts against the British East India Company. This revolt made Muslim Fakirs and Hindu Sannyasins of Bengal a closely clustered community that had a long-lasting effect on forming the notion of Hindu Sufis. The Pagol Ponthi Bidroho is the revolt against the British East India Company and *Zamindar*

[38] The Arabic term *Ulama* is the plural form of Alim, which means the body of Muslim scholars who had the chief authority in legalist ways.

[39] Jizya is a tax that non-Muslim residents pay to the state or King in a Muslim state, and this practice was started after Prophet Muhammed (pbuh)'s conquest of Mecca. As Muslims were required to pay Zakat as tax, the Jizya was instated for non-Muslims.

[40] S A A Rizvi, *The Wonder That Was India: A Survey of the History and Culture of the Indian Sub-continent from the Coming of the Muslims to the British Conquest, 1200-1700*, Vol-2, (India: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1987), 107.

(Landlord) system that started around 1824 in the Mymensingh District of present Bangladesh, and the timeline is around ten years. The adherents of this revolt were Muslims, Hindus, and Animistic tribal people. The Sufis of Bengal actively participated and played a significant role in this revolt. Tipu Shah, the leader of the Pagol Panthi Bidroho, was the son of Karim Shah, a follower of Fakir-Saniyasis Bidroho leader Majnu Shah.

Religious Exclusivity and *Bid'at*

There is a longstanding conflict between the legalists and the mystics of Islam. That conflict goes back to the emergence of Sufism. Aminul Islam presented a convincing hypothesis that goes back to the emergence of Sufism, that is, Sufism emerged during the early Islamic expansion era. While some Muslims got swayed by the temptation of power and wealth, some were disgusted by their worldliness and sought the closeness of Allah, and they followed a mystic path, the Sufi path, in the love of Allah.[41] Their Sufi path was not directly derived from the *sharia* but from *marifat. Marifat* is the knowledge of spiritual truth acquired through experience, which cannot be directly found in the Quran or prophetic traditions.[42] The *sharia* and *marifat* are two contrasting Islamic philosophies; while the legalists or mainstream Muslims stress the *sharia* from the Quran and the prophetic *sunnah,* the *marifat* stresses the love of Allah and His *didar* (vision), *fanafillah* (annihilation in Allah), and *bakabillah* (permanence in Allah). While the orthodox Muslims went for *sharia,* the Sufis went for *marifat*; considering their

[41] Aminul Islam, *Muslim Philosophy and Culture*, (Dhaka: Nawroz Kitabistan, 1984), 88. (in Bengali)

[42] Vincent J. Cornell, "Faqih Versus Faqir in Marinid Morocco: Epistemological Dimensions of a Polemic." In *Islamic Mysticism Contested: Thirteen Centuries of Controversies and Polemics,* edited by Frederick De Jong and Bernd Radtke, (1999), 207.

differences in the perception of faith, the conflict began, so much so from the orthodox quarter.[43] Hence, there are many disagreements between the mystic and the legalist paths. Sufism has been a contested phenomenon in Bengal since the various revivalist movements of the nineteenth century, such as the Faraidhi movement of Haji Shariyat Ullah. Haji Shariayat Ullah is the first Bengali Islamic reformist of the nineteenth century. The concept of religious exclusivity is an addition of this time, presupposing the understanding of what is exclusively Muslim practice and what is Hindu. The Faraidhi movement began in 1818; the moto of this movement was to discard what is not originally Muslim. Haji Shariyat Ullah started this as an Islamic revivalist movement; and *farz* in Faraidhi means what is made obligatory from Allah. Faraidhi calls for the fulfillment of what is only *farz.* While Haji Shariyat Ullah began this movement, his son Dudu Miyan, who resumed leadership in 1838, turned it into a well-organized revolt against the British Raaz (British Colonial Rule).

Asim Roy, a pioneering figure in the field of syncretistic traditions of Bengal, described it as a phase of identity crisis for Bengali Muslims. "The syncretistic character of Bengali Islam continued until the introduction of various revivalist movements of the nineteenth century that left Bengali Islam in an identity crisis."[44] The mausoleums have a syncretistic basis, assimilating practices from other religious faiths than Islam. Their practices have been condemned as implying deviations from the original faith or *Bid'at*. The practices like prostration to the tomb are condemned as *Shirk*, or the association of Allah with other deities, which is the biggest sin in

[43] Sadia Afrin, "The Contribution of Bhaktivada and Sufism in Unfolding the Liberal Outlook of Medieval Subcontinental People," *The Journal of Historical Civilization of Arts,* (2021), 27-38, 33. (in Bengali)

[44] Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press,1983), 7.

Islam. Other than that, there is the incorporation of songs and music, lighting candles and incense in tombs, and offering food to tombs, all strictly prohibited in Islam. With Islamic revivalist movements, these practices were labeled as *Bida't*.[45] In their attempt to become true Muslims, local Muslims discarded those practices, but the Sufi mausoleums that permitted considerable flexibility from the beginning preserved and nurtured those practices. The Sufi mausoleums of Bengal, preserving all the blended practices of different religious traditions, become the bearer of a religiously syncretistic and culturally pluralistic identity.

Mausoleums of Bangladesh

Bengal region has a vast and rich history compared to its parts, Bangladesh and West Bengal. The present thesis focuses on Bangladesh, and fieldwork has been conducted in three mausoleums of Bangladesh. Bangladesh, in 1947 partisan, became part of Pakistan due to its Muslim-majority population, and the Muslim-majority population is, in turn, vastly indebted to the Sufis of Bengal. It is believed the Bengal region was Islamized by the Sufis as the capital of Muslim rulers was far away. The Sufis were more active in the regions that fall to modern-day Bangladesh than in West Bengal, and mausoleum culture is more prominent here.

The above section explains how the Sufis accumulated many followers in Bengal and trained some who became Sufis and continued their work. Later, the Hindu Sufis concept was derived from this idea. One of the crucial facts of Sufi culture is that it always associates a Sufi master and a particular place. Especially in South Asia, a Sufi sanctuary is centered at the tomb

[45] "(P)opular sufi practices, such as veneration of mausoleums of sufi masters, offering food to tombs, believing in the supernatural powers of the sufi shaikhs, and partaking in musical performances, inter alia, were labeled by Farai'dis as bida or innovation." Sarwar Alam "Sufism Without Boundaries: Pluralism, Coexistence, and Interfaith Dialogue in Bangladesh," *Comparative Islamic Studies*, (2013), 67-90, 77

of a Sufi saint. It is customary that the Sufi masters, upon their death, were buried on the very ground where they took their last breath. Many of their followers would get buried in the precinct; nevertheless, only the Sufi master's tomb would be enshrined and venerated for their supposed power of imparting knowledge and bestowing favor.

Those burial grounds became mausoleums from the reverence of their followers. After a Sufi burial ground is made into a mausoleum, the disciples of that Sufi are sometimes buried outside the main shrine. In Bangladesh, hundreds of Sufis, both Muslim and Hindu, are enshrined in Bangladeshi mausoleums. Numerous mausoleums and hospices (Sufi *khanqahs*) vary in size and in number of followers. Some have a greater reach than others. Some mausoleums are so huge that they cover numerous buildings and precincts. Whereas others are small, with a single chamber enshrining the tomb. Each area of Bangladesh has its famous mausoleums; for the Sylhet area, the mausoleums of Shah Jalal and Shah Paran, in Narayanganj, the mausoleums of Haji Baba Saleh, in Kushtia, the mausoleum of Fakir Lalon Shah, in Brahmanbaria the mausoleum of Manomohon Datta, for Chittagong the mausoleums of Bayezid Bostami and Maijbhandari.

Interestingly, I have not found any record of female Sufi mausoleums in Bangladesh so far; nevertheless, tombs with female names can sometimes be found outside the main shrine. For example, in Fakir Lalon Shah mausoleum, Lalon's female followers were buried outside the main shrine. Here comes the question of patriarchy, not considering females worthy to be a Sufi or enshrined in a mausoleum. There may also arise a question of gender bias because female devotees are not allowed to enter the main shrine in some mausoleums, like the Shah Jalal mausoleum or the Bayezid Bostami mausoleum. The mausoleum authorities frequently cite the question of the menstrual impurity of the female body, while most religious prayers are not

allowed. This question has many loopholes, such as the menstrual cycle only lasts a week at most; but what about the other days of the month? Here we see evidence of inherent patriarchy. Although women are not allowed inside the main shrine, there are female prayer halls adjacent to the main shrine. A notable fact is in most of the other mausoleums, there are no such prohibitions. Another fact is for some unknown reasons, the prohibition of the female entrance to the main shrine does not affect the attendance ratio in those mausoleums.

To this day, a significant number of Bangladeshi people, irrespective of faith and creed, turn toward Sufis for spiritual knowledge, guidance, and supernatural assistance. Furthermore, they consider tombs in mausoleums to bear the wisdom of the deceased Sufis. The Sufis who came and settled in Bengal were buried on the very spot where they died, and their followers guarded and venerated their tombs in the same way they did when they were alive. At times, moreover, the Sufis were said to have attained *baka-billah* or union with God. Hence, the Sufis attained the knowledge that no living being can attain. The Sufis impart knowledge from the grave out of their love for their *murids* or followers. The Sufi tradition of "*Kashful-i-Qubur*" or "revelation from the Graves"[46] presupposes that the Sufis impart knowledge from their graves to their nearby followers and try to listen to them. In his book, Asim Roy argued that "The Bengali Muslim folk developed almost a cult and a pantheon of deities, to whom they resorted in the trials and tribulations of their hard everyday life."[47] In their weal and woe, many people turned toward Sufis. They believed Sufis to be closest to their God, and they could work as mediators between God and themselves. "(T)he gap between exogenous *pir* and indigenous converts was

[46] Muhammad Enamul Haq, *A History of Sufism in Bengal,* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975), 118.

[47] Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press,1983), 51.

minimized by Bengali Muslim cultural mediators who developed *punthi*[48][a type of folklore developed from handwritten manuscripts] literature that combined both Islamic tradition and local culture, which ultimately provided Islam a syncretistic character."[49]

The Sufi mausoleums of Bangladesh are famous among many people and receive visits from people all around the country, even from outside. During the annual *ursh*, feasts and fairs are arranged, and people from every faith come. Although most people nowadays do not believe in the divinity of the mausoleums, they come as polite sightseers to entertain the diverse festivities. However, the number of people who believe is not negligible. It is hard to make an exact estimation as there has not been any census.

Moreover, many people in certain periods of crisis turn toward Sufi mausoleums for relevance, while some continue their faith and some do not. It is more like trying out every path in times of difficulty. Nevertheless, there are also constant attendee groups who start to visit mausoleums from an early age, continue throughout their lives, and pass this on to children. The set rituals of mausoleums are performed by devoted attendees, religious difference does not matter. The presence of people and rituals from Islamic and Hindu traditions give the mausoleums a syncretistic look and essence. A detailed discussion of these rituals is presented in the next chapter under regular observances, with a discussion of the practices and the respective religions they originated from.

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[49] Sarwar Alam, "Sufism Without Boundaries: Pluralism, Coexistence, and Interfaith Dialogue in Bangladesh," *Comparative Islamic Studies*, 9.1 (2013), 67-90, 74.

Conclusion

The research question here is whether the mausoleums of Bangladesh present a syncretistic religious identity. The hypothesis is that Bangladeshi mausoleum culture is not exclusively Muslim or Hindu; they present a blended religious and cultural identity and reflect a syncretistic character encompassing both Muslim and Hindu features. Scholars like Asim Roy have associated the concept of syncretism with mausoleums, but there has not been much written on the origin of this syncretistic religious identity. The argument here is that the spread of Islam in the subcontinent is mostly indebted to Sufis, who were immensely liberal and welcomed people of diverse religions as their followers. Hence, the mausoleums built after their death had followers of different faiths and practices; they nurtured a blended identity and liberal outlook; thus, the mausoleums show a syncretistic religious identity. My argument will be supported by the evidence that when people of different faiths visit mausoleums and participate in mausoleum rituals, they feel the similarity with the rituals of their respective faiths; however, they can also feel they are not the same.

The present paper relates the concept of syncretism and identifies its implications in Bangladesh when applied to the Sufi mausoleums and the saintly cults associated with it. This paper reconsiders the possibility of shared cultural and social factors that form and facilitate the syncretized religiosity in the mausoleums of Bangladesh. The larger significance of this study is to explore the possibility of perceiving a common ground in different spheres of public life where people fail to collaborate due to their religious and ideological differences.

CHAPTER TWO

SYNCRETISTIC RELIGIOSITY OF MAUSOLEUMS

The medieval and early modern history of Bengal presents the influence of Sufis in the formation and development of the religious and cultural practices of Bengali people.[50] To a certain extent, this influence was exerted through the Sufi mausoleums. Since the later part of the medieval era, a composite feature of combined Muslim and Hindu practices is traced in the mausoleums. The people of different faiths with different perceptions gathered and combined their idiosyncratic religious identity and ethos through a process of integration and synthesis that, in turn, cut through the existing religious and cultural differences. Hence, being greater half of Bengal region, a delicate balance of pluralism and syncretism pervades the base of Bangladeshi mausoleum culture. There are numerous works on the mausoleums of Bengal and later Bangladesh, focusing on the Sufis, the *tariqas* that Sufis are entitled to, the ideology they follow, and the rituals they perform, but not so much about their origin and the syncretistic nature.

The simultaneous presence of Muslim and Hindu people in the same precinct at the mausoleums of Bengal produced a creative synthesis of Hindu and Muslim practices. That resulted in a composite tradition, a flexible synthesis of the Indo-Islamic tradition, that notably included an interfaith convergence. N.K. Das conferred two dimensions of Indo-Islamic syncretistic tradition that he further claimed to be interrelated, “On the one hand, it manifested itself in syncretistic traditions of music, art, literature, and architecture, and on the other, it found

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[50] Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier1204-1760* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1993), VI.

expression in folklore, dress patterns, food habits, names, and surnames."[51] This two-dimensional Indo-Islamic syncretistic theory is applicable in the case of contemporary Bangladeshi mausoleums. The synthesis of Indo-Islamic tradition in mausoleums has both dimensions of manifestation and expression. The manifestation of this synthesis is seen in Sufi songs, poetry, and rhetoric. Its expression is seen in local stories of Sufi miracles and periodical observances. Furthermore, the process of synthesis and integration, the prerequisites of syncretism, are extensive works from the regional level; in that sense, the mausoleums of Bangladesh necessarily provided a ground for synthesis and integration.

History of Syncretism

The syncretistic culture of Bangladeshi mausoleums has a long history of conquest, trade, migration, and religious exchange, in short the history of Bengal region. The history of the foreign conquest of Bengal began with Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1203. The rich soil of Bengal produced many lucrative products like spices and indigo, which attracted traders from far and abroad. Trade has a long history in Bengal, firstly with Arabs and then with European traders. The Arab traders came through the land route, the Khyber Pass; the Arabs, for a long time, had a monopoly over the trade of the subcontinent. Failing to obtain a land route, the Europeans started to search for a sea route to India. A Portuguese navigator, Vasco da Gama, succeeded in 1495, reaching the Malabar port of Goa. The era of European trade began; at first, there were only Portuguese traders, then Dutch, French, and lastly British traders. Some historians have pointed out Arab traders have contributed to the spread of Islam in many places of the subcontinent,

[51] N. K. Das, "Cultural Diversity, Religious Syncretism and People of India: An Anthropological Interpretation" *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology.* Vol 3, No. 2, (July 2006),1-19, 2.

while the Portuguese brought Jesuit missionaries to Goa to spread Christianity. This firsthand contact with the traders and conquerors contributed to the religious exchange. In Bengal, there were numerous trade bases, as Bengal was a great producer of indigo. Bengal is unique here again as it was the first British conquered territory in South Asia. Although like Islam, Christianity could not gain popularity in the Bengal region,

Syncretistic Components

The mausoleums of Bangladesh adhere to many syncretistic components, both as material substances and non-material practices. The presence of candles, shrouds, and *shirni* on the mausoleum premises exemplifies the material forms, and examples of the non-material forms are singing devotional songs, *dhikr*, and prostration. Each of these components has its origin in either Islam or Hinduism. During the formation and development of these syncretistic mausoleum components, Muslim and Hindu populations visited the mausoleums uniformly.

The popular (legalist) perception of Islamic tradition differs from the mystic Sufis. The indulgences of Sufis in poetry and music, along with the regular chanting *(dhikr),* have similarities with Hindu prayer songs (*kirtan, bhajan*) and recitations of names of gods (*Namjap*); the familiarity of their practices made the mystic Sufis or *pirs* more approachable than legalist elites. The *pirs*, who are believed to possess super-human powers, ameliorated the gap between the legalist elites and locals. The native people of Bengal are willing to entertain the idea that certain men have super-human powers and attributes. The anthropomorphized Hindu gods are analogous examples of this view. The idea of *pirs* having super-human power is syncretistic; it is the incorporation of the anthropomorphized Hindu gods into the Islamic Sufi concept. Those *pirs* are revered alive and, while dead, venerated by their devoted Hindu and Muslim followers.

Many syncretistic components are found in mausoleums, and some will be discussed here, along with one or more relatable instances.

Hindu Sufis

Although the concept of Sufi originates in Islam, especially in South Asia, a Sufi need not always be a Muslim. Closer examination provides evidence of many Hindu Sufis in India and Bangladesh. In that sense, the idea of the Hindu Sufi is in itself syncretistic. Michel Bolvin authored a book on Hindu Sufis, titled *The Hindu Sufis of South Asia: Partition, Shrine Culture and the Sindhis in India,* which explored the concept of Hindu Sufis with substantial evidence. His work is based on fieldwork on the historical presence of three Sindhi Hindu Sufis of British India: Nimano Fakir, Rai Rochaldas, and Nimano Fakir. Bolvin implied they were Hindu Sufis because it is evident that their path was the Sufi path, and they remained Hindu throughout their lifetimes.[52] He explained how the Hindus of Sindh met the Sufi masters, originally Muslim Sufis from Persia, and how they pledged allegiance and adapted to this *piri-muridi* relationship.[53] He further explains how these three Sindhi Hindu Sufis and their followers' lives took turns during and after the partisan in 1947.

In that book, Bolvin talked only about the Sindh Area, but other parts of the subcontinent show considerable evidence of Hindu Sufis. In Bangladesh, there are several examples of Hindu

[52] Michael Bolvin, *The Hindu Sufis of South Asia: Partisan, Shrine Culture and Sindhis in India*, (London: Bloomsbury Publication, 2019), 12.

[53] *Pir* is a term commonly used for Sufi master in the Bengali language, and *murid* is a term for a disciple of a *pir* who has taken the oath of serving the Sufi master or becoming one under the guidance of a Sufi master. The journey of becoming a Sufi requires an extreme level of commitment and dedication that is impossible without the guidance of a Sufi master. The relation a Sufi master has with his disciple, a Sufi aspirant as well, is called a *piri-muridi* relation.

Sufis, who were loved and followed by Hindu and Muslim followers alike. In most cases, these Sufis were not traditional Hindus and adhered to some deviation from the original faith, like discarding caste differences or sacrificial rites. Following their wish, the Hindu Sufis were buried, not cremated; their tombs were enshrined in mausoleums. To better understand this syncretistic component, I will discuss the scenario of Manomohan Datta's mausoleum, his ideology, and the practices performed in his mausoleum.

Manomohan Datta (1877-1909)[54] was born in a Hindu family in Satmora village of Comilla district of British India (present Brahmanbaria, Bangladesh). However, he was adept in Hindu texts and well-versed in the Quran and hadiths. Manomohan had several spiritual experiences, including the appearance of the Hindu goddess Kali and the Islamic Prophet Muhammad in his dream. He deepened his religious experience by reading sacred texts from different religions and writing his ideas and experiences in poems and literary works. "While mutually accepting the differences of one another's religions, devotees need to possess a shared recognition of the possibility that the same goal as the one Manomohan embodied can ultimately be attained by pursuing a different path."[55]

Manomohan never identified himself as a Muslim or Hindu but was followed by both groups. "Manomohan attracted many disciples from different religions, who underwent initiation (*disksha/bayat*) with him, according to a surviving list of early disciples both religions were represented; out of 35 disciples, 29 were Hindus and 6 were Muslim. In addition, there were 8

[54] Masahiko Togawa, "Syncretism Revisited: Hindus and Muslims over a Saintly Cult in Bengal," *Numen* 55 (2008), 27-43, 31.

[55] Ibid 32.

Hindu and 2 Muslim ascetics."[56] Manomohan was a Hindu Sufi for Muslims and a Sant for Hindus. Mashahiko described it as linguistic pluralism, a component of religious syncretism. Religion, for him, was a means to attain his spiritual goal, and the same goal can be embodied following different paths; religions are only paths, not ends. He preached the unity of religion, for Islam *wahadat-e-wuzud*, and Hindu *Advaita vad*a, the Oneness of God. Oral stories and *punthis* account for many miracles of Manomohan, like the Prophet Muhammad appeared to him in his dream dressed in a white gown,[57] and the repeated appearance of Hindu goddess Kali in his dreams. When Manomohan sensed his approaching death, he asked his followers not to cremate him but to bury him at a selected place.[58] What makes Manomohan different from other Hindu sants (saints) is his knowledge of the Quran and Sunnah, along with the Bhagavata Gita and other Hindu scriptures. The records found in the mausoleum talk about his continual dreams about Prophet Muhammad and goddess Kali.

The burial ground of Manomohan later became a mausoleum, and to this day, it receives veneration from both Hindus and Muslims. Like other Muslim Sufi mausoleums, people visit here with specific wishes to be fulfilled. The practices observed in mausoleums, in general, are neither exclusively Hindu nor Muslim, like lighting candles, morning and evening invocation, offering shrouds to cover the tombs, food offerings, and singing spiritually inspiring songs. It continues to influence the beliefs of the local population, Muslims and Hindus alike. They visit

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[56] Masahiko Togawa, "Syncretism Revisited: Hindus and Muslims over a Saintly Cult in Bengal," *Numen* 55 (2008), 27-43, 33.

[57] Sukumar Biswas, *Manomohan Datta 1877-1909*, (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1992), 18. (in Bengali)

[58] Masahiko Togawa, "Syncretism Revisited: Hindus and Muslims over a Saintly Cult in Bengal," *Numen* 55(2008), 27-43, 33.

the mausoleum to pray and seek help to avoid adversity, such as diseases and calamities. The mausoleum of Manomohan is called *Mazar* by Muslims and *Samadhi* by Hindu villagers. Religious syncretism is a compound phenomenon, and while the mausoleums of Bangladesh generally are syncretistic, the Hindu Sufi mausoleums are even more syncretistic. The argument here is Hindu Sufi mausoleums are even more syncretistic in the sense that a Hindu Sufi itself is a syncretistic or hybrid concept by its very nature, whereas Sufism was borne from the bosom of Islam.

Syncretism in Sufi Poetry and Songs

Sufi poetry is one of the essential components of Sufi culture that facilitates the mystical meeting, *fana-fillah*. The aim is to put the devotee in such a mystical position that he is ready to meet God. The Sufi poetry and the songs sung in the mausoleums function as means to transfer a follower from the physical world to the mystical world. In most cases, Sufi poems are incorporated into songs sung in the mausoleums. The songs composed or sung in the mausoleums are syncretistic. For example, the *baul* songs sung in the *mazar* of Fakir Lalon Shah exude a strong sense of syncretism. The *mazar* of Fakir Lalon Shah is in Kushtia, the western part of Bangladesh. He is undeniably the greatest Bengali mystic poet and *baul* master, who lived in nineteenth-century Bengal. He lived a life of renunciation and indulged in *baul* songs that he composed to make people see through the hollowness of their celebrated religions and realize the main purpose of religion is to unite people, not divide them. The religion that was supposed to bring people together divided them. Lalon denied his affiliation with any religion that divides people. He preached the religion of love and unity of all human beings.

In the vicinity of his *mazar,* disciple *bauls* embrace the precepts of Lalon directly and continue the activities he initiated. The disciples of Lalon serve as singers of *baul* songs and maintain the tradition of ascetics who practice various religious rituals.[59] The mausoleum of Lalon is in Kushtia; some field works of this research are conducted there, which will appear in the next chapter. For a better understanding of the syncretistic nature of Lalon's songs, an English translation of one is presented here:

Everyone wonders, "What's Lalon faith?"
Lalon says, "I've never 'seen' the face
of faith with these eyes of mine!"

Circumcision marks a Muslim man,
what then marks a Muslim woman?
A Brahmin I recognize by the Holy thread;
How do I recognize a Brahmin woman?

Everyone wonders, "What's Lalon faith?"

Some wear a garland and some the *tasbih*,
That's what marks the faiths apart.
But what marks them apart when
one is born or at the time of death?

Everyone wonders, "What's Lalon faith?"

[59] Masahiko Togawa, "Sharing the Narratives: An Anthropologist among the Local people at the Mausoleums of Fakir Lalon Shah in Bangladesh." KURNAI, Vol 06, (March 2013), 20-36, 22.

The whole world talks about faith,
everyone displaying their pride!
Lalon says, “My Faith has capsized
in this Market of Desire....”

Everyone wonders, “What’s Lalon faith?”[60]

The song emphasizes how the religions that are meant to liberate people’s minds bind them instead. From birth to death, human beings are questioned about their religious identity to separate them from others. For Hinduism, the caste system makes people discriminate, making some elites and others untouchable. Moreover, for Muslims, sections like Shi’a and Sunni divide their community. Lalon questions whether religion truly matters, as he has never seen the face of faith. Even the differences in religions, like Hinduism and Islam, are man-made; no difference is found in birth or death. The Bengali people, in a nutshell, were moved by the songs of Lalon for the universal insight presented in his songs, like one’s birth has no consequence in attaining the ultimate truth. Although Lalon Fakir is not a Sufi in the conventional sense, his followers believed in his super-human ability. The mausoleum of Lalon Fakir is one of the most popular ones. Every year a three-day-long “Lalon Mela” is arranged in Kushtia, where *bauls* of every caste and creed gather. There, they sing the songs of Lalon in love and veneration. The songs contain Islamic Allah, *Rasul* (messiah), Hindu *Bhagavan*, and *Thakur* simultaneously and talk about guiding a person through a mystical journey in the love of God. Lalon says in a song,

[60] Fakir Lalon Shah, *Songs of Lalon Fakir*, Tr. by Sudipto Chatterjee, https://www.parabaas.com/translation/database/translations/poems/lalon_sudipto2.html; (accessed February 12, 2023).

"Allah who understands your endless playfulness, only recite the name of Allah for Allah."[61] In this song, Lalon speaks about how futile it is to understand Allah's plan; only through reciting Allah's name can one find solace.

Incorporating music and songs is not permissible in orthodox Islam, whereas most Hindu *pujas* are incomplete without songs. Sufism incorporates songs and music in the love of God, which exudes a syncretistic aura. Besides the *baul* songs, there are *qawwali* songs sung in mausoleums; they also have a strong flavor of syncretism. Along with the inclusive lyrics, they incorporate musical instruments (Harmonium, Tabla, Sarangi, Sitar) just like Hindu *kirtans* and seek the love of God through the love of *pirs*. *Qawwali* songs are common in Sufi mausoleums worldwide; they speak about different stories of the prophets and the Sufis. The infusion of musical instruments in *qawwalis* of the thirteenth-century subcontinent, especially in mausoleums, makes them syncretistic, as musical instruments are forbidden in mainstream Islamic tradition.

The Regular Observances

Mausoleums of Bangladesh incorporate numerous observances, from diurnal practices to annual ones. These observances bear the undeniable presence of religious syncretism in mausoleums; they are so strong that even the visitors who are not devotees of the *pir* can sense the syncretistic aura. I am saying this from a first-person experience. I visited the mausoleum of Shah Jalal when I was fourteen, and as a Muslim girl, I could sense something different than the practice we have in mosques or at home. People visiting the mausoleums are not only devotees

[61] Fakir Lalon Shah, "আল্লাহ কে বোঝে তোমার অপার লীলে, আপনি আল্লাহ ডাকো আল্লাহ বলে. (Tr. by Author), https://www.lalongeeti.com/allahkebojhe/, (accessed June 18, 2023).

but also sightseers. Some mausoleums have such grandeur that they become spots for tourist attractions. Some idiosyncratic practices exist for each mausoleum, like tying thread to an old Banyan tree, throwing coins into wells, or feeding the fauna there. In the mausoleum of Shah Jalal Great, people feed the snakehead fish; in the Khan Jahan Ali mausoleum, people feed crocodiles; and in the Bayezid Bostami mausoleum, giant tortoises are fed by the devotees to receive favor or make their wishes come true. It is widely believed in mausoleums that these faunas are spirit animals; if the devotees satiate the hunger of the spirit animals in mausoleums, they will receive favor or their wishes will be fulfilled by God through the advocacy of the enshrined Sufi master. In the last chapter, there is a detailed discussion about the spirit animal of Khan Jahan Ali's mausoleum—marsh crocodiles.

The everyday practices incorporate morning and evening veneration of enshrined Sufi masters, singing Sufi songs, lighting candles and incenses, prostration to the tombs, chanting (*dhikr*), and distributing blessed offerings to the visitors (both devotees and sightseers). There are some practices performed only by the devotees, believing in the power of the enshrined Sufi masters to perform miracles, like taking vows for wishes to come true, which is called *mannat* (originally a Hindu practice), getting charmed amulets and wearing them to fulfill wishes and cast away adversity. The devotees, Hindus, and Muslims seek those charmed amulets; sometimes, they may include the exchange of money. There are some weekly and monthly observances, and they add to the daily observance with no alteration. These mausoleum observances emanate a syncretistic aura, both in essence and exercise. In essence, the combination of Islamic and Hindu practice and, in exercise, the participation of Hindu and Buddhist devotees alike.

The most prominent observances are the annual ones, like *ursh* or *versi,* to commemorate the events related to the Sufi master.[62] The most common events mark the master's birth and death. The direction of other annual rituals is prescribed through dreams to one or more of the close followers of the Sufi concerned. The Arabic-origin word *ursh* represents the mystical marriage between the Sufi master and the God at the time of death. They are observed with elaborate rituals and a variety of participants. The big annual festival usually brings together the most significant numbers of pilgrims, accompanying fairs, Sufi song performances, *waz mehfil* (special religious speech arrangements), and *shirni* distribution. In *ursh*, devotees make generous donations based on their financial ability, ranging from money to food items. In mausoleums, all donations are alike*;* the *shirni* is cooked from the donated food items and ingredients bought from the donation. People, rich or poor, irrespective of their faiths, sit together and eat the *shirni*. The practice of *shirni* distribution is quite similar to Hindu *prasada* rites, and the only difference is that *prasada* is offered to the deity first, while *shirni* is not.

The *Punthis*

Most mausoleums have collections of literary works done by the Sufi masters or their disciples. Most unique among those literary works is the *punthis* (a type of folklore developed from handwritten manuscripts) that combines both Islamic tradition and local culture. These *punthis*, apart from being excellent primary literary sources, are great examples of religious syncretism; they contained stories of prophets and miracles of local *pirs* with occasional appearances of local deities. The history of many mausoleums and stories and miracles of the *pir*

[62] Vers means year, and versi means yearly commemoration; typically, the death anniversary of someone is called Versi in Urdu.

enshrined in those mausoleums are found in these *punthis*. Until the mid-twentieth century, before the advent of the entertainment industry, listening to the punthis was a major source of entertainment in Bengal, as only a handful of people could read. These *punthis* are a unique combination of local tales, Islamic traditions, and a fair component of religious syncretism.

Conclusion

The above discussion conforms to the fact that Islam became grounded in Bengal due to the accommodative nature nurtured by the Sufis; their efforts to absorb the local traditions into the values of Islam paved the way for conversion. The cultural environment produced by Sufis contributed to the survival of the new religion on foreign soil. In this manner, Sufism became the popular form of faith in Bengal. Bengali Sufis demonstrate some influence of Hinduism; and here "Hinduism" is more of an umbrella term used for a wide range of local religions. The umbrella term is used here because Bengali Hindus did not have a uniform identity then. Apparently, Sufism lost most of its Quranic flavor while spreading throughout the subcontinent; assimilating Hindu ideas and practices may have contributed to the fact that it became syncretistic. The fundamental principle that separates Sufism from legalist Islam is the *Ruhani* belief, the concept of the eternal human soul or the *ruh* losing self-identity (*fana-fillah*) and merging with God (*baka-billah*). Muhammad Enamul Haque finds this idea similar to the Upanishadic idea of *Atman*—the individual Self—being a part of *Brahman*—the universal reality. Haq contends that from the seventeenth century onward, "Sufiism *(sic.)* in Bengal became identical in many respects with Tantrikism, Yogism, Nathaism, and other similar systems

of indigenous thought and asceticism."[63] Later on, he finds the Sufi idea of the soul leaving the body at death and merging with the Real Being similar to the idea of Nirvana and "Kashful-I-Kubur" or "Revelation from Grave" (Sufis imparting knowledge from the graves) resembling the *Sava Sadhana* (using dead bodies as a medium of devotional practices) of the Tantric Sadhus. The tantric *sava-sadhana* has little or no relation with mainstream Hindu practices, let alone other religions.[64] He even claims that Arab Muslims knew about Hinduism and Buddhism during the formative phase of Islam, and the later development of *Tasawwuf* (mysticism) in Persia has the Neoplatonic and Upanishadic influence, stating "Islam was never free from the influence of India."[65]

The idea of Sufism developing from Upanishadic influence, however, seems far-fetched. Haq drew his conclusion from mere resemblances between Sufi doctrine and Hinduism and, to some extent, Buddhism. Perhaps he did not take into account the esoteric and ascetic practices prevalent among the Eastern Christian and Jewish mystic practices of the pre-Islamic era. Nevertheless, there are undeniable resemblances and superficial parallels between Sufi doctrines and Hindu texts. That may go back to the Aryans, who most probably migrated from Asia Minor, and the Vedic *Samhitas* of the Indo-Aryans, which have considerable similarities with the Zoroastrian Avesta. While the Persian culture bears the influence of the Avesta and Hinduism of the Veda, their resemblances may stem out of similarities of their roots. The syncretistic features

[63] Muhammad Enamul Haq, *A History of Sufism in Bengal* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975), 52.

[64] Tantric Sava Sadhana is a practice of exorcism through dead body. The practice is found among the Hindu aghori sadhus of South Asia.

[65] Muhammad Enamul Haq, *A History of Sufism in Bengal* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1975), 118.

that Sufism shares originate from the synthesis of Muslim and Hindu practices; there is not likely any scriptural basis for them. The mausoleums of Bangladesh nurture a syncretistic atmosphere not solely because of the dogmatic resemblance of Hinduism and Islam. They became syncretistic because they provided a place where Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims lived, walked, fed, and prayed together. In that process, they consciously or unconsciously shared their religious and cultural traits, imparted some while adopting others. From the thirteenth to mid-nineteenth century, there was a history of uninterrupted cultural exchanges and adaptations.

CHAPTER THREE

SYNCRETISM IN THE MAUSOLEUMS: THREE CASE STUDIES

Since the medieval period, a complex relationship has existed between the people of Bengal and the mausoleums, and an emotional bond has been sustained. The fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries were the golden era of mausoleum construction, most having undergone renovations and reconstructions. People during that time, apart from being influenced by the Sufis, depended on the Sufi masters and, afterward, on the mausoleums for their spiritual well-being. Till the nineteenth century, due to Islamic reformist movements conflict existed between the orthodox *sharia* and Sufi *marifat* followers,[66] and the latter was more popular among the masses. There are many reasons for this, but the primary ones are that the Sufis influenced their conversion and formed the base of their faith. The Sufi concept of *kashful-i-qubur*, revelation from the grave, encouraged the followers to visit the tombs to get the *didar* (vision) of the Sufi master and get knowledge. Till these days hat complex relation exists between the people Bangladesh and the mausoleums,

The study of religious syncretism can be more informative with some substantial discussion about mausoleums from direct observation. Being in the USA, a direct ethnographic study was not feasible for me. Instead, I arranged for a patchwork ethnography by appointing a research associate in Bangladesh, who video-recorded the field visits and conducted interviews with the interlocutors who were provided with consent forms and questionnaires beforehand. For this thesis, ethnographic fieldwork in three mausoleums of Bangladesh were conducted; the mausoleums are Fakir Lalon Shah Mausoleum in Kushtia, Shah Ali Baba Mausoleum in Mirpur,

[66] The knowledge of spiritual truth is acquired through experience.

and Khan Jahan Ali Mausoleum in Bagerhat. An account of these three mausoleums will follow along with brief biographies of the Sufi masters associated with them. Some interlocutor quotations are presented to give a more focused explanation of syncretistic experiences. During the field visits, interviews were conducted with individuals residing or visiting the mausoleums. The sample selection has been random, depending primarily upon their willingness to participate. The research associate made the selection and explained the research purpose. Consent was recorded orally, and interviews were conducted and recorded by the research associate.[67]

Mausoleum of Fakir Lalon Shah

Fakir Lalon Shah (1774-1890) is the greatest mystic poet and folk singer Bengal region has ever seen. His songs talk about love, godly love, and the love man shares with every living being, about the secret of body and soul, the human soul being a part of the ultimate reality. There have been some discussions about the syncretistic nature of Lalon's songs in the last chapter. This chapter focuses on the mausoleum itself, along with Lalon's life. The mausoleum of Fakir Lalon Shah is popularly known as "Lalon Akhra." *Akhra* is a Bengali term from the Sanskrit word *Akhara,* which means a place of practice with facilities for boarding, lodging, and training. In that sense, Lalon Akhra has been a community monastery for religious renunciates in master-disciple relations.

Lalon Akhra is in Kumarkhali Upazila of Kushtia District in the southwestern part of present day Bangladesh. Unlike other Sufi mausoleums, Lalon Akhra was not built at once or right after the death of Lalon in 1890; it was built over time. After Lalon's death, he was buried

[67] Interviews were conducted in Bengali; they were transcribed and translated by the researcher, who is solely responsible for the translations.

at the *akhra* as instructed. His devotees started to flock there, and followers from all over the country came to visit Lalon's tomb, especially during Dol Purnima (now Lalon Mela) and the first day of the Bengali month Karthik (*tirodhan utsav* or death anniversary of Lalon). The shrine eventually developed from the number of pilgrims who visited and flocked there. The main shrine visible today was constructed in 1963, and the then-governor of East Pakistan (today Bangladesh), Abdul Monem Khan, inaugurated the shrine. The mausoleum compound now has a museum and an academic building for Lalon research constructed in 2004.[68]

Fakir Lalon Shah mausoleum is an open-access place. There is a long walk from the entrance to the main shrine, and a bamboo stick lane divides the entry and exit ways. The main shrine has two parts: the outer and inner. In the outer part, there are several tombs of the disciples of Lalon, like Molom Shah, Bholai Shah, Kamini Fokirni, and Parinesa Fokirni; and in the inner part, there are only two tombs; one is of Lalon Shah, and another one is of Motijan, the wife of Molom Shah and Lalon's adoptive mother. The main shrine is open for the people, but they must go through a checkpoint as phones or cameras are not allowed. While entering the main shrine, people perform an act of devotion, touching the ground with their right hand and then touching their forehead. Then, a variety of practices occur. Some people prostrate to Lalon's tomb and sit there; some sing Lalon's songs, and some pray. This mausoleum is undeniably connected to syncretistic religiosity; praying and singing from different traditions occur simultaneously.

[68] Tanzir Khan, "ঘুরে এলাম বাউল সম্রাট ফকির লালন শাহের স্মরণোৎসব -২০১৭". Bdnews24.com (News article in Bengali). https://bangla.bdnews24.com/blog/feature-post/210113 (Published March 15, 2017, and Accessed March 13, 2023).

Lalon's Life

Almost nothing is known about the birthplace and family of Lalon.[69] Historical records say he was found at the bank of Kaliganga River in Kushtia while floating on a banana tree raft, nearly dead from smallpox. Bengali people had a practice of floating incurably sick people on banana rafts, hoping that someone with a cure might find and save the sick person. Lalon was found by a Muslim weaver, Molom Shah, in 1790, on the morning of the Falgun month during the full-moon period (Dol Purnima).[70] Molom Shah and his wife Motijan, a childless couple, saved Lalon. During that time, Lalon was around sixteen or seventeen. Lalon, after his recovery, tried to leave the family, since he was a renouncer; Molom Shah and Motijan urged him to stay and promised him an adobe on the outskirts of the village.[71] Here, Lalon built his *akhra*, and later, after his death, it became a mausoleum over time due to the reverence of the pilgrims who visited that site.

Another noteworthy fact is that Lalon was illiterate; he could not read or write, and his followers recorded his composed songs. According to tradition, Lalon lived a full life of 116 years. When Lalon researchers say most of Lalon's work was unrecorded and even the recorded works were scattered, the credibility of their argument cannot be rejected. The compilations of the songs written down by Lalon's followers are massive. Recently, a Lalon researcher, Shakti

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[69] A 2010 India-Bangladesh joint venture biographical musical Bengali cinema, *Moner Manush*. on the life and philosophy of Lalon, portrayed him as a Hindu who became an outcaste or fallen Hindu after his death rumor and *shraddh* (funerary rite) and his family did not take him back. However, referencing the historical records, the Lalon researchers deny that claim.

[70] Fakir Lalon Shah, *Lalon Sangit*, Vol 1 (in Bengali), ed. Fakir Anwar Hossain (Kushtia, Bangladesh: Mohammad Ali press: 2017), 30.

[71] Fakir Lalon Shah, *Lalon Sangit*, Vol 1 (in Bengali), ed. Fakir Anwar Hossain (Kushtia, Bangladesh: Mohammad Ali press: 2017), 33.

Nath Jha, found a manuscript of three hundred and fourteen songs of Lalon in Shanti Niketan of West Bengal. He claimed Rabindranath Tagore supposedly borrowed this one-hundred-and-thirty-three-year-old manuscript from Lalon while he was the Zamindar (Landlord) of Shilaidaha in Kushtia, Bangladesh. A copy of this manuscript has been sent to the Lalon Research Center recently for further study.[72]

Lalon's *Manav Dharma*

Lalon called his religion *manav dharma,* the "religion of humanity."[73] *Manav* is a Bengali term having its root in Sanskrit, meaning human being, and *Dharma* is also a Bengali term originating from the Sanskrit root *dhri*, roughly meaning religion. Lalon accepted people of every caste and creed in his inner circle. He welcomed the outcasts or those who had fallen out of society. Lalon condemned the caste system or conventional religion. In his *akhra*, Muslims and Hindus lived, walked, talked, ate, sang, and danced together. Lalon took in sick people, even people with contagious diseases, in his *akhra*, and he and his followers nursed them to health. There are records of Lalon saving some Hindu widows from being forced to become *sati*, a Hindu practice of widows being burned alive in the funeral pyre of their deceased husbands. Those women who had fallen from faith and society often flocked to the *akhra* and pledged

[72] "লালনের খাতা নিয়ে গিয়েছিলেন রবীন্দ্রনাথ! ফেরত চান ভক্তরা!" A News Report in a Bangladeshi National Television, Jamuna TV, https://youtu.be/5OwIUBzEJDk (Broadcasted March 14, 2023, and Accessed March 16, 2023).

[73] Fakir Lalon Shah, *Lalon Sangit*, Vol 1 (in Bengali), ed. Fakir Anwar Hossain (Kushtia, Bangladesh: Mohammad Ali press: 2017), 46.

allegiance to Lalon's *Manav Dharma.*[74] The songs Lalon composed and sang preached the religion of love for humanity.

Lalon received criticism from both orthodox Muslim and Hindu quarters, as his religion was neither Islam nor Hindu. From the Muslim perspective, this was because his songs and dancing were considered *Bid'at* (deviation) in the orthodox Muslim belief system. From the Hindu perspective, it was because people of different castes were living together and, more importantly, because Hindus and Muslims were eating and drinking together in the same place. In fundamental Hindu practice, a traditional upper-caste Hindu, let alone Muslims, is prohibited from eating food with or cooked by lower-caste Hindus. There are records of Lalon and his followers being ostracized by orthodox Muslim and Hindu quarters and subjected to persecution. Allegedly, Lalon did not believe in the institution of marriage or family; he lived a life of renunciation and encouraged his followers to live lives fitting for renunciates. His lifestyle and philosophy caused some upheaval in orthodox Muslim and Hindu quarters; some local sources tell Lalon protested against the Hindu custom of *sati,* whereby a widow is burnt alive on her husband's funeral pyre, and he gave refuge to at least one such girl in his *akhra*. With his work, Lalon overcame those persecutions; his popularity outweighed his opposition. Lalon Akhra rose above all the judgments and subjugations, and Lalon's *Manav Dharma* reflects every aspect of his syncretistic religiosity.

The observances of Lalon Akhra range from the diurnal to the annual level. The daily observances consist of singing Lalon's songs with local musical instruments and lighting candles and incense during an evening service. The adoration songs are sung by devotees to obtain a

[74] Abul Ahosan Choudhury, *Lalon Shain, and His Disciples* (in Bengali)*,* (Dhaka: Rodela Prokashani,2011), 15-18.

vision of Lalon, to get spiritual knowledge, and to arrive at peace in one's soul. Other practices include tying cotton threads on the great Banyan tree branch with the hope of a specific wish coming true, and lighting candles and incense beside the tomb. One of the two greatest observances in Lalon Akhra is the annual Lalon Mela, a three-day long event held during the time of Dol Purnima, or the full moon of the Bengali Falgun month.[75] Historical evidence confirms that Lalon's followers started to celebrate this day during Lalon's lifetime as the day of Lalon's new birth (as mentioned earlier, he was found during that time of the year by Molom Shah on the bank of Kaliganga River). Followers who did not live in the *akhra* used to come to participate in that celebration. The practice continued after the death of Lalon, and the gathering became greater over time. Another important observance is the *Tirodhan Utsav*, observed to commemorate the death anniversary of Lalon on the first day of the Bengali month, Karthik (mid-October). *Tirodhan* is a Bengali word that means the departure or disappearance of a great person, and *Utsav* means festival. Like Lalon Mela, this *Tirodhan Utsav* is a three-day event that attracts almost the same numbers of followers.

In both annual observances, people usually begin to arrive seven to ten days before and find places to camp. They arrange their meals personally from the day they arrive to the day the event begins. From the day events begin, everyone is provided vegetarian food from the Mela committee; since people from different faiths come, no fish or meat is offered. The food provided here is the *shirni*, sponsored by the donations the mausoleum receives from the masses. In South Asian culture, people of different castes and creeds sitting and eating in the same place can have different implications. Due to the prevalence of the caste system, it goes deep into and challenges the religious culture of the subcontinent. This theme will be discussed further below.

[75] The Hindu Holi festival.

In the mausoleum, all donations are viewed and treated the same; they are not collected, and the *shirni* is not distributed to followers based on their religion.

These events have become observances on a massive scale. Around one to two lacs (one to two hundred thousand people) assemble during the festivals. Even after the COVID-19 pandemic, around sixty thousand people gathered in the Lalon Mela, as observed on March 4-6, 2023. Fortunately, my fieldwork covered March 4, the first day of Lalon Mela 2023. Naturally, a significant portion of this massive number of visitors were sightseers. During the field visit, seven people were interviewed with open-ended questions, like how often they visit the mausoleum, whether they participate in the observances, and what they think about them.[76] A noticeable fact is the regularity of their visits; most people visit the mausoleum at least once yearly during the Lalon Mela in late February or early March (depending on the full moon) or the mid-October *Tirodhan Utsav*.

About four out of seven people interviewed during the fieldwork confirmed their faith and adherence to Lalon's *Manav Dharma*. One interlocutor interviewed during the fieldwork said that although he believes in Lalon's *Manav Dharma,* he has no conflict with conventional religions. Fakir Meherullah Shah (age 68) said, "I believe in *Manav Dharma*, but I have no conflict with conventional religions. Guruji [Lalon] showed that cherishing the God inside man is the main theme of religion. The songs-music discussion everything talks about love for humanity because we believe God lives inside every human being; we try to find that God inside

[76] The interviews were conducted in Bengali, recorded by the research associate, transcribed, and translated to English by the researcher herself.

man… People coming here live collectively; they do not have any conflict about their religions, and no one is asked about their religion here. It increases the love Lalon preached."[77]

Another interlocutor, Sukumar Bhowmik (age 42), says about his religion, "I am a Hindu by birth, but I am inspired by Shaiji's (Lalon) Manav Dharma; Manav Dharma is more important than any religion, caste or creed." When asked whether, as a Hindu, he feels alienated from his faith through participating in Lalon Mela, he said, "No, Lalon talked about Hindu, Muslim, Christian alike, he accepted all with same open arms. Religious fundamentalism finds no place here."[78]

Fakir Wayaj Shah (age 75), a regular visitor of Lalon Akhra for the last forty-five years and a follower of Lalon's *Manav Dharma*, says, "Everyone comes here with his/her own motive, who has the headache with others' religion. People come here on their own, in devotion to Shaiji (Lalon) sing songs. Here Hindu and Muslim are the same; everyone is only human being here, nothing else."[79]

Khairul Islam (age 45), who introduced himself as a Muslim, "In heart everyone's faith is unique, Lalon Shai placed the human being above all. Apart from being Muslim, Hindu, or Christian, we all are human beings; that is what matters."[80] He believes Lalon's *Manav Dharma*

[77] The interview date is March 4, 2023, and the place is Lalon Akhra. Conducted in Bengali and translated into English by the researcher.

[78] The interview date is March 3, 2023, and the place is Lalon Akhra. Conducted in Bengali and translated into English by the researcher.

[79] The interview date is March 3, 2023, and the place is Lalon Akhra. Conducted in Bengali and translated into English by the researcher.

[80] The interview date is March 3, 2023, and the place is Lalon Akhra. Conducted in Bengali and translated to English by the researcher.

has no conflict with Islam, "I never feel any alienation from my religion, Lalon Shai never belittled any religion, we can find the mention of Allah-Messiahs-Prophets in his song."[81]

The above verbatims of interlocutors prove the point of syncretistic religiosity in the mausoleum of Fakir Lalon Shah. Here, the syncretistic religiosity runs so deep that many people follow Lalon's *Manav Dharma* as a crucial model of religious syncretism. Irrespective of their faiths, Meherullah Shah, Sukumar Bhowmik, and Khairul Islam, followers of Lalon's Manav Dharma, Hinduism, and Islam, respectively, participate in mausoleum observances. All three of them come to the mausoleum regularly and sing Lalon's songs in love and veneration.

Shah Ali Baba Mazar in Mirpur

Sayed Shah Ali Baghdadi, popularly known as Shah Ali Baba, is a *Chistya tariqa* Sufi of the fifteenth century. Allegedly, Sayed Shah Ali came to Bengal from Baghdad via Delhi during the first quarter of the fifteenth century. The stories about him say Sayed Shah Ali was a descendant of the Meccan Quraish clan, whose ancestors migrated from Mecca to Baghdad, Persia (now Iraq). [82] Shah Ali is believed to be the eldest son of the local ruler of Baghdad, Sayed Fakhruddin Raji, and was a learned scholar of Islam and had no interest in state affairs. At twenty, Sha Ali accompanied one hundred Sufis and traveled to Delhi to spread Islam in the subcontinent; his arrival to Delhi was recorded around 1412. Supposedly, the then Sultan of Delhi was pleased by his endeavor and gave him a *Pargana* (a unit of local administration territory) of around twelve thousand acres of land as *jagir* (local administrator post) in Faridpur,

[81] The interview date is March 4, 2023, and the place is Lalon Akhra. Conducted in Bengali and translated into English by the researcher.

[82] Md. Shahid Miya Chisti Vidyakuti, *Sultanul Awliya Hadhrat Shah Ali Baghdadi*, (in Bengali) (Dhaka: Ala Hadhrat Prakashani, 2008), 28.

Bengal.[83] The history of Shah Ali receiving Jagir from the Sultan of Delhi is challenged from several quarters. Golam Saklayen, in particular, has questioned the claim that from 1358 to 1538, Delhi had almost no control over Bengal; this was the time of the independent Bengali Sultanate. It is implausible of a Delhi Sultan to award a *jagir* that is not under his jurisdiction.[84] Nevertheless, with or without the *jagir*, it is certain that Shah Ali, around 1438, came to Faridpur from Delhi with three of his one hundred companions and started to live there. Shah Ali lived a simple life of Sufi ideology and condemned the life of luxury. In Faridpur, he became immensely popular. Historical records show how people accepted Islam under his influence and followed him. Many people who did not accept Islam became his Hindu followers.[85]

As the records show, Shah Ali's heart did not find peace in Faridpur. He again traveled from Faridpur to Mirpur (in Dhaka, now the capital) and stayed in a mosque (built-in 1480 by the then Governor Jahir Uddin Khan) with his followers. In Mirpur, he accepted the training of Chistya Tariqa from Sufi Baher Shah and became a Sufi of Chistya Tariqa. Till the end of his life, he lived in Mirpur and attracted followers from every quarter of the society. His followers included Muslim elites, converted Muslims, upper and lower-caste Hindus, and Buddhists. It should be noted, of course, that Christianity did not reach Bengal before the sixteenth century.

After coming to Mirpur, Shah Ali meditated in the mosque. His last meditation was forty days long, and a miraculous story was attached to this event. Shah Ali supposedly resolved a

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[83] Md. Shahid Miya Chisti Vidyakuti, *Sultanul Awliya Hadhrat Shah Ali Baghdadi*, (in Bengali) (Dhaka: Ala Hadhrat Prakashani, 2008), 29.

[84] Golam Saklaen, *The Sufis and Saints of East Pakistan* (in Bengali), (Dhaka: Bangla Academy 1962), 95.

[85] Md. Shahid Miya Chisti Vidyakuti, *Sultanul Awliya Hadhrat Shah Ali Baghdadi*, (in Bengali) (Dhaka: Ala Hadhrat Prakashani, 2008), 29.

forty-day-long meditation in a closed chamber of the mosque and asked his followers not to open the door no matter what. The followers heard a heart-wrenching cry from the closed chamber on the thirty-eighth day night, and disobeying their master broke the door on the thirty-ninth day. The story says that after breaking the door, the followers found the body of Shah Ali in pieces, and the pieces were doing *the dhikr* of Allah.[86] People believe that if the followers had obeyed Shah Ali's order, the scenario could have been different.[87] Like other oral stories, the reliability of this story should be questioned. However, it is certain that Shah Ali died in the mosque of Mirpur, and the followers were ordered to bury him there, which later became the renowned mausoleum of Shah Ali Baba.

There are some disputes regarding the construction time of the mosque and the mausoleum. A widely acknowledged view is that the mosque is older than the mausoleum. When Shah Ali came to Mirpur, he settled in a mosque, where he spent his last days and died during meditation. After his death, following the rules of a Sufi master's burial, Shah Ali Baba was buried in the mosque, which turned into a mausoleum through the veneration of his followers. Furthermore, another mosque was constructed on the compound precinct. There are disputes regarding the timeline of the mosque in which Shah Ali spent his last days. The dispute comes from the view of historical theory. In Bengal, mosques were built after the arrival of a Sufi, not before. Muhammad Enamul Haq argued that the mosque could not have been built before the arrival of the Sufi; nevertheless, historical evidence like fragmented manuscripts found in the mausoleum from Sayed Enayet Hussain Rizvi says Shah Ali settled in a mosque. There is a

[86] A continuous chanting of Allah's names and praises is very popular among Sufi aspirants and devotees of Sufi mausoleums.

[87]Md. Shahid Miya Chisti Vidyakuti, *Sultanul Awliya Hadhrat Shah Ali Baghdadi*, (in Bengali) (Dhaka: Ala Hadhrat Prakashani, 2008), 39.

possibility that the mosque was built after another unknown Sufi visit, where Shah Ali came and found a place to live with his followers.

Five people were interviewed while the fieldwork was done in the Shah Ali Baba mausoleum. Three of them narrated an oral tradition regarding the great Banyan tree in the mausoleum precinct. This tree is revered by the devotees who visit the mausoleum regularly; people coming from afar with *mannat* lights candles.[88] The banyan tree in the precinct is believed to be the walking stick of Shah Ali. Before entering the closed chamber for his last meditation, Shah Ali planted his walking stick vertically on the land. After his death, that walking stick turned into a banyan tree. The people who come for visitation pray in the main shrine, and with the hope that their wishes will come true, many light candles in the shade of the banyan tree. The shade of this tree has a peaceful aura; people, irrespective of their faith, light candles here.

The mausoleum of Shah Ali incorporates daily, weekly, and annual observances. For the daily observances, there is praying in the main shrine, along with morning and evening services of lighting incense and *dhikr*. The weekly observances of the Shah Ali mausoleum are more prominent, and the gathering on Thursday is extraordinary. There used to be *qawwali* song performances every Thursday in the Shah Ali mausoleum, and regular mausoleum visitors also participated in those performances. The second chapter explains how the *qawwali* is a type of devotional song in the South Asian context.

Along with the local *qawwali* singers, on special occasions like the annual *Ursh*, professional *qawwali* singers are hired to sing. After the COVID-19 pandemic, the regularity of

[88] *Mannat* is the act of devotional promise; in mausoleum, it is an act of devotional promise for a specific wish or wishes that will be carried out if the wishes come true through the aid of enshrined Sufis.

these *qawwali* performances has been disrupted. The annual observances include a five-day-long *Ursh* before Eid-ul-Adha (one of the two greatest Muslim festivals, held on the tenth day of the Arabic month Dhu al-Hijjah).

Although the annual observance is held on the date of a Muslim festival, just like Lalon Mela is held on the Hindu festival Dol Purnima, it has no consequence on the amount of participation. Indeed, the Muslim gathering is more significant in number as the population of Bangladesh has a 90% ratio of Muslims. The presence of other religious people is significant, considering their ratio to the country's overall population. People visit this mausoleum for various personal reasons; they visit during life events, like seeking blessings after the birth of a child, before marriage, or taking board exams, and sometimes in periods of trouble and sickness, to pray and ward them off.

During ethnographic fieldwork, people were asked what they felt about people of different religions visiting the mausoleum and participating in the observances. Morsheda Begum (age 45) said, "Here, people of different religions come with their faith in Shah Ali Baba. Baba (Shah Ali) makes some of their wishes come true, no one is asked about their religion here, and upper-class and lower-class people are treated the same. They come here to pray together, sit, and eat together. Some sing and dance…Yes, I believe the mausoleum is religiously syncretistic; people of every religion come here, and through this gathering, interfaith harmony is enhanced."[89] While asking some more questions, we learned she has been continuously visiting the mausoleum from an early age and has observed a diverse religious population. She seemed to appreciate the presence of people other than her faith. When the blended religious identity,

[89] The interview date is March 23, 2023, and the place is Mirpur Shah Ali Baba mausoleum. Conducted in Bengali and translated into English by the researcher.

especially the syncretistic identity of the mausoleums, was explained to her, her answer was affirmative.

Siddikur Rahman (42), who introduced himself as Muslim, asked whether he ever felt alienated from his faith through his participation in the mausoleum observances. He answered, "Never. Shah Ali Baba was a *Wali* of Allah,[90] who showed the path to ignorant people like me. By coming here and participating in regular observances, I feel closer to my religion, Allah." While asked how he feels about different religious people visiting the mausoleum, he replied, "Certainly, people of all religions should come. The *Wali* of Allah is not only for Muslims; everyone knows about the greatness of Shah Ali Baba. Baba never distinguished his followers based on their religions. Who are we to distinguish?"[91] Morsheda Begum (age 53) gives a similar answer, "I believe in the miraculous power of Shah Ali Baba; people who come here believe in that power as well. Muslim or Hindu people coming here do not bring any religious tags with them. They are all devotees here."[92] Almost all the interviewees were asked whether they feel alienated from their faith, as the mausoleum practices are deemed as "bidat" or deviance from the mainstream Islamic faith, and none of them said they feel alienated. Furthermore, some said visiting the mausoleums calms their soul; they feel at peace while visiting mausoleums. When asked why so, answers are different; some say they feel peace coming near Pir Baba (the Sufi master) or the surroundings of the mausoleums are soothing to eyes and soul. One thing that may

[90] A term typically used by Bengali Muslims to refer to the Sufis, which means friend or helper of Allah.

[91] The interview date is March 23, 2023, and the place is Mirpur Shah Ali Baba Mausoleum. Conducted in Bengali and translated into English by the researcher.

[92] The interview date is March 23, 2023, and the place is Mirpur Shah Ali Baba mausoleum. Conducted in Bengali and translated into English by the researcher.

appear to researchers who conduct interviews is how accommodating the mausoleum visitors are. In most mausoleums, there are some accommodation facilities; nevertheless, considering the population, they are pretty low. People usually share everything they have here: food, water, sitting arrangements. I have observed the most syncretistic scenario in the Shah Ali Baba mausoleum. The last time I visited that mausoleum, I witnessed two women lighting candles side by side, one wearing a *burkha*, the religious attire for Muslim women, and another wearing a *shakha* (conch-bracelet) and *sindoor* (vermillion), the symbols of married Hindu women. They stood there, praying for something they wished to obtain, obviously from different gods. Although their appearances are poles apart, their faith in Shah Ali and his mausoleum is similar. So far in this field study, that is the most vibrant example of religious syncretism in mausoleums.

Khan Jahan Ali Mazar in Bagerhat

Khan Jahan Ali (1369–1459), also known as Ulugh Khan, was a local Muslim ruler (Khan-e-Azam) of Turkic origin and a Sufi. He was initially a Tughlaq noble who migrated to Bengal around the early fifteenth century after the capture of Delhi by the Timurid Dynasty in 1398. Twelve Muslim Sufis welcomed Khan in Champanagar (later named Barobazar after the twelve Sufis; *baro* means twelve in Bengali) and stayed with them for some years. During that time, he supposedly received training from the Sufis. Ulugh Khan acquired land near the Sundarbans as a Jagir from Sultan Mahmud Shah of Bengal, that falls is present day Bagerhat district of Bangladesh. He was given the title Khan e Azam as the local ruler under the Bengal Sultanate. Later, he became popular under the name Khan Jahan Ali. He cleared up some dense forests for human settlement and rice cultivation with the help of his son Fateh Khan. Under his

direction, one hundred and twenty-six water reserve tanks,[93] locally known as *Dighis,* were dug to supply drinkable water since water in the Sundarbans area is salty. Khan Jahan Ali constructed numerous mosques and *madrasas* (schools for Islamic education). Most significantly, he is credited with the building of the Sixty Dome Mosque that is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site.[94]

Although Khan Jahan Ali came to Bengal as a Tughlaq elite and became a local ruler, his elite status or administrative work did not hinder him from serving people or preaching Islam. After his retirement, Khan got more involved with serving people. Those who settled in the previously uninhabitable area considered Khan Jahan Ali as their *Pir,* one who has the super-human power to make uninhabitable land habitable.

After his death on October 25, 1459, Khan was buried in Bagerhat beside the One Dome Mosque and a huge tank. In time, this monument enshrining the tomb became a mausoleum from the devotion of his followers. This mausoleum has been restored and repaired by the archeological department of the Bangladesh Government and is now declared a protected monument.[95] The monument is part of a complex covering a mosque and a *dighi* (tank) where Khan Jahan Ali lived from his retirement to his death. During this time, Khan Jahan Ali lived the life of a Sufi; he attracted numerous followers, both Hindus and Muslims. Especially his humanitarian works, such as clearing the forest and digging *dighis*, are among the many reasons local Hindus were attracted to Islam. Even after being a person of vast wealth, he lived a simple

[93] Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier*, 1204–1760. (Berkley: University of California Press). 209–257.

[94] Ibid 209–257.

[95] John Sanday, *Bangladesh: Building Conservation and Repair,* (Paris: UNESCO, 1983).

life, and among his many followers, Khan had Sufi disciples. Shaykh Muhammad Tahir, known as *Pir* Ali by the locals, is one of his disciples who received Sufi training; he is also buried in the mausoleum of Khan Jahan Ali.[96]

The actual grave of Khan is in a crypt inside the main building; like most Muslim mausoleums, it has inscriptions containing information about Ulugh Khan's life. There are two stones by the side of the tomb; people visiting the mausoleum with special wishes make wishes by touching those stones or the main shrine's walls. Making *mannats* if the wish comes true with the passport of Khan Jahan Ali, they will do the act of devotion as promised. The Muslim devotees recite the Quran sitting beside the tomb, and some perform *dhikr* day and night. Apart from the mosque, there are places of prayer, separate for men and women. People of different religions pray there as per their religious faiths; people bring shrouds and candles for mausoleum services in reverence.

The mausoleum precinct has a vast tank named Khan Jahan Ali Tank. People bathe and take tank water home, hoping to ward off evil and make their wishes come true. In the tank water, there are resident marsh crocodiles in a semi-captive situation. The earlier crocodiles were believed to be the descendants of the two crocodiles, Kalapahar and Dholapahar, that Khan Jahan Ali once released into the water so that no one would pollute the drinking water. The names continued, Kalapahar for male crocodiles and Dholapahar for females, and this legacy of the crocodiles went on for six hundred years till the death of the last male crocodile, Kalapahar, in 2006 and the female crocodile, Dholapahar, in 2015. After the death of Dholapahar, some marsh crocodiles were brought from India.

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[96] "Khan Jahan Ali's Tomb and Mosque," *Attractive Historical Places,* http://www.bagerhatinfo.com/attractive-historical-places/khan-jahan-ali-tomb-mosque-complex, (Accessed March 26, 2023).

The tank crocodiles are considered spirit animals of the mausoleum. They make the mausoleum of Khan Jahan Ali more syncretistic, since in Islam there is no concept of a spirit animal (that comes from local beliefs). The concept of a spirit animal in a Sufi mausoleum offers the Khan Jahan Ali Mausoleum a syncretistic coloring. People bring their farm-reared chickens or ducks to feed the crocodiles, believing that if they satiate the hanger of Khan Jahan Ali's crocodiles, their heart's desire will be fulfilled.[97] No one is asked about their religion here; the *Khadem* (central server of the mausoleum) accepts the birds and orders other people to feed the crocodiles.[98] Due to the crocodiles in the water tank, people are requested by the Mazar authority not to bathe in the water, but people coming with *mannat* rarely pay heed to them. People of different faith and caste bathe in the same *ghat* (descending platform for a water source), unique in Bengal, even for the subcontinent. Although the situation has changed, previously in Bengal, people of different castes, let alone religions, had different *ghats* for bathing and collecting water. The practice of bathing in the same *ghat* of Khan Jahan Ali Mausoleum tank has been prevalent for centuries. That is the space in Bangladesh where syncretistic religiosity thrives.

In the Khan Jahan Ali mausoleum, the annual *ursh* is held on the full moon of the Bengali month Choitro; during that time, thousands of people come to the mausoleum. They visit the main shrine, and devotees adore and venerate the tomb of Khan Jahan Ali. Like other mausoleums in *ursh*, *shirni* is cooked and distributed; during that time, an annual fair is arranged, and *shirni* is distributed among the devotees and sightseers alike. People sit together and partake

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[97] "Who was Khan Jahan Ali?" (a news article*) The Business Standard Report*, https://www.tbsnews.net/feature/explorer/who-was-khan-jahan-ali-234892, (Published on April 21. 2021 and Accessed on March 15, 2023).

[98] "Marsh Crocodile at Khan Jahan Ali Shrine Bagerhat, Khulna, Southwestern Bangladesh" *Environment and Ecology*, https://www.sarakuehn.com/marsh-crocodiles-at-khan-jahan-ali-in-bagerhat-kulna-southwest-bangladesh, (Accessed March 26, 2023).

in the *shirni* cooked from the donated items and items bought from the donation money. I have mentioned earlier that in the subcontinental culture, people of different faiths and castes sitting and eating together usually have different connotations. The Hindu people in the subcontinent have been very particular about the food cooked by people of other castes or religions. Which remained the same, even after their conversion to Islam or Christianity. There are Dalit Muslims and Christians in South Asia.[99] However, in the mausoleum, no one asks about the *jat* (caste) of the cook or the serving people. People sit and eat the *shirni* together, Hindu and Muslim, rich and poor alike.

Md. Amanullah (age 36), a Muslim interlocutor, when asked what he thinks about people of different faiths coming and participating in the observances, replied, "People come in Khan Baba's *dargah* for *mannat,* many come to pray for the cure of sickness as well. People come with their faiths. Whose wish will come true depends on the mercy of Allah."[100] While asked the same question, Chandan Biswas (age 40), a Hindu interlocutor, replied, "Religious practice is one thing, and individual conviction is another. I have come here with my faith in Khan Baba's grace to pray for the cure of my daughter's sickness."[101] These two people, although belonging to two completely different faiths, both believe that Khan Jahan Ali has the power of mediation with the Almighty, whether Allah for Muslims or Bhagwan (Hindu God) for Hindus. In mausoleums, the rivers of different faiths merge into the same ocean.

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[99] Joel Lee, "Who is the True Halalkhor? Genealogy and Ethics in Dalit Muslim Oral Traditions" *Contributions to Indian Sociology 52*, 1 (2018), 1–27, 3.

[100] The interview date is March 16, 2023, and the place is Khan Jahan Ali Mausoleum, Bagerhat. Conducted in Bengali and translated into English by the researcher.

[101] The interview date is March 16, 2023, and the place is Khan Jahan Ali Mausoleum, Bagerhat. Conducted in Bengali and translated into English by the researcher.

Monirul Islam, another Muslim interlocutor, says, “This *mazar* is not for any single religious people; to visit the mausoleum, one does not need to be a follower of a particular religion.”[102] When asked whether he thinks the mausoleum practices are syncretistic, he answered that he does not know much about syncretism as per his understanding; if syncretism means the amalgamation of different religious people and their practices, then the mausoleums are syncretistic, in his opinion.

Mausoleum-visiting people who participate in that observation usually do not think about the significance of their participation; they are alienated from their original faith. They feel they are getting closer to their God. Siddikur Rahman (age 45), when asked, “Did you ever feel you are getting from your religion through participating in these observances?” replied, “No, on the contrary, I feel closer to my religion. Through *dhikr* and devotional *qawwalis*, I get a spiritual feeling and a closeness to Allah.”[103]

Interestingly, although the orthodox Muslims consider the mausoleum attendees deviants from Islam, the devotees never feel alienated from their religion. Around twenty people were asked this question, and none said they felt alienated from their religion; instead, they felt closeness toward God through the mausoleum attendance. Although they are part of mausoleum observances, most of the time, they do not perceive the syncretistic nature of these observances. In the first chapter, I have presented the argument that they are part of this syncretism without any apparent knowledge of this syncretistic religiosity.

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[102] The interview date is March 18, 2023, and the place is Khan Jahan Ali Mausoleum, Bagerhat. Conducted in Bengali and translated into English by the researcher.

[103] The interview date is March 18, 2023, and the place is Khan Jahan Ali Mausoleum, Bagerhat. Conducted in Bengali and translated into English by the researcher.

Conclusion

The ethnographic fieldwork in the three Bangladeshi mausoleums provided substantial evidence of the syncretistic religiosity of the Bangladeshi mausoleums. Interlocutor accounts reflect their dedication toward the Sufi mausoleums and their openness toward having people from different religious communities visit and worship them. Numerous syncretistic components were traced through the field visits in the three aforementioned mausoleums. The religious diversity of the mausoleum attendees adds to this syncretism.

The interlocutors' accounts shed light on many aspects, including the regularity and length of their visits. Their visit's regularity and length take their mausoleum experience to a different level. In the Lalon Akhra, people above the age of seventy were interviewed who had been visiting the mausoleum regularly for more than fifty years; the other two mausoleum interlocutors of regular visits for twenty to thirty years are pretty standard. The mausoleums have been influencing their lives and beliefs for an extended period.

The length of their visit is important here because the people visiting mausoleums from childhood to old age demonstrate how their lives have revolved around the mausoleums. While interviewed, many people who visit mausoleums said they find peace there. Some of them said that coming near to the tomb of the *pir* calms their soul. This extended period of visits is true for people of diverse faiths; these people pointed out how some practices have died out, and some have been incorporated over time. These extended-length visitors confirm the story of syncretistic religiosity over time, the changes the mausoleum has undergone, and whether these changes made them more or less syncretistic.

CONCLUSION

The mausoleums of Bangladesh present myriad specimens of syncretistic beliefs and practices. A complicated relationship exists between a mausoleum and its pilgrims, reflected in the regularity of their visits to mausoleums. While some started to visit the mausoleums very early, others started after facing inevitable life adversities. The influence mausoleums have in their life is profound and difficult to measure; to some extent, mausoleums are functioning as the foundation of their emotional and spiritual stability. In a mausoleum, no one bothers about other people's religion, and the syncretistic aura that characterized the Sufi abodes of the medieval era still lingers in the mausoleums of Bangladesh today.

A widely agreed-upon notion is that subcontinental Islam, more specifically Bangladeshi Islam, differs from the Islam of the Arabs; some have addressed it as Bengalised Islam. "The Islamization process is connected with the proliferation of Islam in Bengal, and the history reveals that Sufi Islam profoundly influenced Bengalised Islam."[104] Like Islam, Bengali Sufism is a different entity than the Sufism of Persia or other parts of the world. One may posit that the syncretistic religiosity of the mausoleums has contributed to that fact. Perhaps it is a two-way process; subcontinental Sufism has accommodated the practices of both Hindu and Muslim religions, making it syncretistic, and this syncretism makes it unique in the wider world. As a part of the subcontinent, Bengal bestowed Sufism with that unique, syncretistic identity, with the turn of history Bangladesh received the same syncretistic identity. The Hindu influence in subcontinental, more especially Bengali Sufism, gives it a syncretistic flavor; hence, the Sufism

[104] Shafi Md Mostofa, *Islamist Militancy in Bangladesh: A Pyramid Root Cause Model*, (Springer Nature, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 40.

here can be pointed to as Bengalised Sufism. And Bangladesh being the greater part of Bengal region owns this Bengalised Sufism concept greatly.

The mausoleums of Bangladesh appeal to Sufis of different Tariqas, even religions. Those who attend the mausoleums frequently come from diverse religious backgrounds, and this co-mingling of adherents allows its syncretism to flourish. From diurnal services to the annual observances, the mausoleum assimilates practices from both Hindu and Muslim traditions. The service they perform and the devotional songs they sing talk about the Unity of God and His creation. During the annual *Ursh*, feasts, fairs, and *Shirni* distribution, people from diverse faiths participate in these activities. Syncretism also lies in the linguistic pluralism found in the mausoleums, namely in the terms used by different religious adherents who worship there. A mausoleum is called *mazar* (an Arabic term) by Muslims and *samadhi* (a Sanskrit term meaning a memorial for the dead) by Hindus. When food is offered in the mausoleum, it is called *shirni* for Muslims and *prasad* for Hindus. Mashahiko Togawa defined linguistic pluralism as a component of religious syncretism, explaining how the same component of a mausoleum has different names for people of different religions.[105] Sufism in Bengal has similarities to Hindu Avatarism, as well as *chaityas* and *stupas* in Buddhist traditions. A Sufi is a holy person loved by the Islamic God Allah, who has super-human powers like an avatar or Hindu deity. Consequently, a Sufi is necessarily an example of syncretistic belief. However, the egalitarian aspect of Islam manifested by the simple and unostentatious life of the Sufis attracted the local population, who experienced a rigid caste-bound society and communal tension over the centuries and were thus led to embrace this new expression of religion.

[105] Masahiko Togawa, "Syncretism Revisited: Hindus and Muslims over a Saintly Cult in Bengal," *Numen* 55(2008), 27-43, 31.

As noted earlier, there has been a reduction in the mausoleum devotees from the eighteenth-century Islamic reformist movements. The number reduced slowly but gradually, and by the end of the twentieth century, some Islamic extremist groups appeared who deemed the mausoleum devotion as a deviation from the faith. Furthermore, from the partition in 1947[106] and the liberation war in 1971, the Hindu population of the land now called Bangladesh, then East Pakistan, received blow after blow, and the majority Hindu population migrated to India.[107] Hence, the mausoleum-going Hindu population has reduced as well. Nevertheless, Bangladesh is such an overpopulated country, even though the reduced mausoleum going population is noteworthy. Although the mausoleum devotees received criticism from the Islamic fundamentalist groups, no record could be found that demonstrates any persecution or subjugation.

With the reduction in the number of people believing in the spirituality of mausoleums, the circle of attendees has become very concentrated. This concentrated circle had less population but the same diversity; moreover, this enhanced the gathering of multiple religious people in the same sphere with the same interests. That, in turn, worked as the basis of diversity and syncretism. Interestingly, the attendance at the mausoleum runs in the family. If a person is a mausoleum attendee, in most cases, his other family members are likewise mausoleum attendees. The interlocutors' comments suggest that people who started visiting mausoleums from an early age did so with their parents and continued those practices with their children. Apparently, the established scenario of Bangladeshi mausoleums is different. The ratio of people who believe in

[106] The partition was materialized based on the Two Nation Theory of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, whereby India would be a Hindu state, and Pakistan would be a Muslim state.

[107] In the 1940s census, the non-Muslim population of Bengal was 48.38%, most of which were Hindus. At present, the Hindu population in Bangladesh is 8.5%.

the spirituality of mausoleums started decreasing from the dawn of the nineteenth century. Spirituality of mausoleum here means the peoples belief in the power of mausoleum, that is effective in helping the worshippers to obtain their wishes.

Nevertheless, the number of people in Bangladesh who kept their faith in mausoleums remains substantial. There is a widespread belief in Bengali culture that mausoleum cults run in the family. Monirul Islam (age 42), an interlocutor from Shah Ali Mausoleum, says, "I cannot remember the exact age, from when I began to come to the mausoleum. As far I remember, I used to come here with my parents and siblings."

As I mentioned in the first chapter, there has been a drastic decrease in the mausoleum attendees from the nineteenth century onward, owing to the Islamic Reformist movements. People started to question the practices of what is "Muslim" and what is not, accepting the former while discarding the latter. Currently, the majority of Muslims do not believe in the divine presence at the mausoleums. From the orthodox Muslim point of view, this mausoleum culture is *bidat*- a deviation from the original form of the religion, and the mausoleum attendees are deviants. The Orthodox Muslims consider the mausoleum culture as a form of heterodox deviance and do not believe in the spirituality of mausoleums. Some Muslims even consider the prostration to a Sufi tomb as *Shirk,* the gravest sin a Muslim can ever do. The mausoleum attendees believe they are making prostration to Allah through the Sufis. Indeed, some fundamentalists see visiting mausoleums as a threat to their faith. However, as discussed in the last chapter, those who visit the mausoleum claim never to feel alienated or estranged from their faith. There lies a massive gap in the views of mausoleums between these two groups. There is also a third group of people who do not entirely believe in the divinity of the mausoleums. However, they entertain themselves in the diverse festivities held at these sites. I would describe

them as humble visitors who are occasionally regular attendees. These humble visitors belong to diverse faiths and likely observe the festivities but rarely participate. During annual celebrations, the presence of diverse people and rituals from Islamic and Hindu traditions give the mausoleums a syncretistic look and essence. Growing up, I saw that my family had no faith in the divinity of mausoleums. However, they occasionally enjoyed some festivities and patronized the mausoleums as a space for interfaith harmony. One should not discount the idea that there are Bangladeshis who visit mausoleums without subscribing to the beliefs of the divinity of the *pirs.*

This thesis's research question has been whether Bangladesh's mausoleums present any sign of religious syncretism. My argument is in favor of this proposition. The mausoleums of Bangladesh present a syncretistic religious identity that tolerates and reflects both Muslim and Hindu features. The phenomenon of Bangladeshi mausoleums presents a blended religious and cultural identity within a society that is otherwise considered Muslim. It is important to recognize that mausoleums are an amalgamation of multiple religions and diverse religious components, facts that have been established in previous chapters. The current thesis recounts the notion of syncretism and identifies its implications in Bangladesh when applied to the Sufi mausoleums and their saintly cults. Of the numerous mausoleums in Bangladesh, some preserve the memory and bodily remains of Hindu saints and others of Muslim Sufis. Irrespective of faith and social norms, Muslims and Hindus in the surrounding area join various rituals observed at the mausoleums. That makes the audience reconsider the possibility of shared cultural and social factors that form and facilitate the syncretized religious beliefs and rituals of the people of Bangladesh. The study invites further scholarly scrutiny of religious syncretism or, to be more specific, its application in different cultural settings. The larger significance of this study is to

explore the possible existence of common ground in different spheres of public life where people otherwise refuse to collaborate due to their religious and ideological differences.

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APPENDIX

RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

Date: 3-20-2023

IRB #: IRB-FY2023-425
Title: Syncretistic Religiosity in the Mausoleums of Bangladesh
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