CHAPTER VII

"POPULAR ISLAM" IN BENGAL

(Un-Islamic Beliefs and Practices Among the Muslims of Bengal)
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The new culture introduced by the Muslims did not, however, remain purely Islamic in its new geographical set-up. Through centuries of intermixing with the local populace various cults, customs and ceremonies crept into the Muslim way of life and gradually acquired an Islamic orientation. The original form of Islam survived only in the fundamentals of beliefs and practices. Much of this fusion of beliefs and rites was, of course, due to the eclectic character of Hinduism which readily accepted the worship of any saint or even of a martyr. But it also pointed to the close association of Hinduism and Islam among the lower class votaries of both religions a union based upon the ethnical identity of the

two bodies. The spirit of concession, the outcome of circumstances, was accelerated by the personal 'Liberalism' of some of the later Muslim rulers.

Akbar paid adoration to sun and fire and on the full moon of Shaban employed Brahmins to fasten 'rakhi' on his wrist. Akbar's son Jahangir observed Diwali Puja, invited yogi's to dine with him during Sivaratri and in the Eighth year of reign, celebrated his father's Sraddha in his Mausoleum at Sikandra. Dara Shikoh the eldest son of Shah Jahan, composed a work called Majma' al-Bahrayn or the meeting of the two seas, having for its object the union of Hindu and Muslim religious systems. Shahamat Jang and Sawlat Jang (nephews of Alivardi) once celebrated the Holi festival

4. Azizur Rahman Mallick: British Policy and the Muslims in Bengal, p.5
for seven days in the garden of Motijhil. After the treaty of Alinagar Nawab Siraj al Dawla went to Murshidabad and enjoyed the Holi festival in the palace of Mansurganj. Nawab Mir Ja'far crossed the Ganges with all the gentry of the town and in similar manner took part in the Holi festival. It is also said on reliable authority that on his death bed, Mir Ja'far drank a few drops of water poured in libation over the idol of Krittesvari. Some Muslim writers wrote on purely Hindu themes as for example did Shaykh Faydullah whose ballad on the glorification of Goraksha abounds with the mystic beliefs and practices of the Natha cult of Bengal. The works of 'Abd al-Shukur and Sayyid Sultan

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
are similarly imbued with the ideas of the Saiva cult and mystic tantrism.\(^1\) Other typical examples of this class of literature are furnished by 'Alaul, who sang the praises of Siva and Mirza Husayn, who composed hymns in honour of goddess Kali.\(^2\) In Nabi Vansa (Genealogy of Prophets), Sayyid Sultan goes to the length of including Brahma, Vishnu, Siva and Krishna—all Hindu gods—in his list of prophets.\(^3\) Some other Muslim-writers wrote on them from popular Hindu-Muslim belief. One of them represents his hero as having gone to the nether worlds to seek a boon from the seven sages of the Hindus.\(^4\) Another represents god as having

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appeared as half Krishna and half Muhammad to reconcile rival heroes, representing the two communities.¹ A striking example of this class of literature is furnished by ‘Abd al Ghafur who identifies Ganga-Durga, Padma-Siva and all other house-hold gods and goddesses of the Hindus as relatives and friends of Ghazi, the Muslim hero.² The inter-change of ideas and thoughts had long ago led to the evolution of a common god, Satya-Pir, worshipped by both communities and a mass of literature grew up in exposition of that belief.³ Vaishnavism also influenced Muslim writers, and Radha-Krishna legend became the central theme of many expositions for several centuries. In the work called Pada Kalpataru,

¹ Ghosh, op.cit., p.82, Ghazi Mangal of Muslim Poets can be called the counterpart of Rai Mangal of Hindu poets, in some of which Kalu is represented as a crocodile god. Sen, S., op.cit., p.925.


³ Ibid.
Vaishnavadasa has quoted the padas of as many as eleven Muslim poets. The Karta Bhajas, a sect founded in Bengal in the eighteenth century, who called their creed Satya-Dharm (True Religion), included both Hindus and Muslims. The worship of the Hindu shrine of one Manohara Natha "by as many Musalman as Hindu pilgrims" was found to be common by Sleeman in 1836.

The burning of Muslim widows and inter-marriage with Hindus was practised in some parts of the India during the reign of Jahangir. The actual worship of small images, under the name Devi Mata in the Punjab and Sitala in other parts of India among the lower orders of Muslims seems to have been one of the outrageous practices that persisted in the nineteenth century, doubtless as a result of incomplete conversion. The Census Report

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1. Mallick, A.R. op. cit., p.7
4. Elliot, H.M., and Dowson
of 1911, refers to communities, "the members of which admitted that "they were neither Hindus nor Muslims but a mixture of both."¹

The loss of political power by the Muslims, who formed but a small proportion of the Indian population, undoubtedly contributed to the degeneration of Islam in India. For three generations these people without a shepherd receded more and more from their national faith and conformed to every superstitious rite of the Hindus.²

The following description of festivals and peculiarities of belief and customs among the Muslims of India based on contemporary accounts will show the extent of deviation from the original faith which Islam in India, in the nineteenth had undergone.

Dr. Buchanan found the ceremony of Muharram performed in Bengal "with much gaudy pomp, tumult, and musical parade" remarkable alike in "magnificance of

show and in intolerable din". ¹ M. Gracin de Tassy was of the opinion that the mummeries of the Imām bara were copied from the Hindus, especially the fastening of the mouth which was much in use among the Hindu ascetics. ² He further pointed out that the ceremony resembled, in many ways, the Durga Puja of the Hindus—the Taziyah like the Durga Puja lasted ten days and just as the Hindus on the tenth day, forming a grand procession amidst the sound of musical instruments cast the statue of the goddess into the river, so did the Muslims pass in procession to throw down the Ta'ziyah. ³ Dr. James Wise finds likeness between the Muharram and Ratha Yatra of the Hindus, in both of which "the greatest merit is attributed to the persons dragging the car." ⁴ The orthodox Muslims were as much surprised as the Europeans at the performance of such a ceremony which would be counted sacrilegious in Persia and Arabia. ⁵ One of the

most remarkable features of the Muslim worship in India during the nineteenth century was the veneration the people came to lavish on the Saints. In fact the Muslim masses entered into the worship of Saints "with more enthusiasm than into the regular religious exercises, which are obligatory." 

The dargahs were visited by the people in distress or in fulfilment of vows or for earning religious merit and in their journey to these places of sanctity, they underwent "as much exposure and fatigue in reaching them as the strict Hindus on their pilgrimages to the sacred places of Jagannath or Brindaban." Every conceivable object of earthly desire—children, health, fortune or honour—would be asked for by the devotees propitiating the Saints by offering some vows. By the first half of the nineteenth century, however, the Muslims of India had agreed that Khidr "discovered

the source of the water of life" of which he was the
guardian.\textsuperscript{1} Khidr was also regarded as a
guardian spirit of the seas and rivers of India "pro-
tecting'' manners from shipwreck."\textsuperscript{2} De Tassy, on the
authority of Jawan, tells us that in the month of Bhadra,
all those whose wishes had been fulfilled set afloat
boats in honour of Khwaja Khidr with offerings of milk
and grain.\textsuperscript{3}

Zindah Ghazi is a mythical hero in the eastern
part of Delta of the twenty-four Pargagans. Every
d village in the twenty-four Parganas had shrines dedicated
to Muhurra Ghazi and no one could enter the forest and
no crew sailed through the district without first of all
making offerings to one of the shrines. The guardians
of these shrines, claiming descent from the Ghazi,indicated
the limits within which the forest was to be cut.\textsuperscript{4} Of yet

\textsuperscript{1} A.J., Vol. VII, 1832, p.142.
\textsuperscript{4} Based on Statistical and Geographical Survey of the
twenty-four Pergunnah district by R. Smyth,
another type were the ceremonies connected with Salar Mas'ud Ghazi, believed to be either a brother of Tughlaq Shah or nephew of Mahmud of Ghazni and in either case worshipped as a martyr hero.\(^1\) To his shrine at Bahraich in Oud, pilgrims came from all over India "with lances decorated with red flags, and having at their head musicians singing and playing on tambours.\(^2\) Some carried articles necessary for a marriage ceremony, convinced that Mas'ud Ghazi renewed his nuptials, he being killed on his wedding day. This ceremony, according to Dr. Willson, was celebrated especially by the lower orders of the Muslim society and by some low caste Hindus.\(^3\) It was the common belief that Mas'ud Ghazi resided for some time at Gorakhpur where 50,000 people annually assembled to celebrate his memory at two shrines built on the sacred spot.\(^4\)

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2. Mallick, A.R., op.cit., p.20
The legend of martyrdom on his wedding day is also attached to Sayyid Badr al-Din Madar, though another version represents him as being father of 1,142 sons and having had died at the age of 395 years 9 months and 26 days. In the festivals connected with the memory with the Saint, pikes again appear. The pikes were planted in different towns and villages of India where musicians appeared beating a kind of drum and faqirs danced crying 'Oh Madar' and passed through the lighted for that purpose. On the seventeenth of Jamadi-I devotees assembled at Makanpur to celebrate the annual festival. Dr. Buchanan reported of as many as 1600 families in Purnea alone as belonging to this order and son the order increasing. He also met large numbers in Rangpur where admission to the order was allowed to both sexes. Some Madaris in their costumes

resembled Hindu Sanyasis "going nearly naked in all seasons, braidning the hair and smearing the body with ashes and wearing iron chains round their wrists and
necks."\(^1\)

The list of Indian Saints whose tombs had become objects of worship were 'Abdul-Qadir,\(^2\) Sultan Sarwar,\(^3\) Shams al-Din Danial,\(^4\) Qutb al Din,\(^5\) ShaykhBah-al-Din Dhakariyah,\(^6\) Farid-al-Din,\(^7\) Shaykh Nizam al-Din\(^8\) and

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2. Born near Baghdad in 471 A.H., was gifted with the power of miracles and died in 571 A.H.
3. It was believed that the blind, the leprous and the impotent were cured by prayers at his tomb.
6. Born and died at Multan, Qanun, p.434.
7. He was reported to be so holy that by his looks clods of earth were converted into lumps of Sugar. A.J., Vol. VII, 1832, p.144.
8. He lived and died at Delhi. Qanun p.434.
Khwaja Muin al-Din Chishti. Khwaja Muin al-Din Chishti was one of the most celebrated Saints of India. His tomb at Ajmer is visited by crowds of Hindu and Muslim pilgrims. Some carried their zeal so far as to take away stone or brick of the building, to be placed in their homes, which in turn would become a place of pilgrimage. Emperor Akbar was one of his great devotees and he went on pilgrimage several times on foot to secure the birth of a son to succeed him.¹

In East Bengal alone each district had its own patron Saints. The more important of whom, Dr. Viso records, were Shah Jalal of Sylhet, Panch Pir, Munnah Shah Darwish and Khandkar Muhammad Yusuf of Sonargaon, Shah Wali Baghadadi of Mirpur, Pir Badr of Chittagong, Shah Jalal Dakhini of Dacca and Adam Shahid of Vikrampur.²

The practice of asceticism on Hindu lines had come to be widely adopted among some Muslims of the

later period. By the nineteenth century, Bengal seemed -
to have some three major orders of Faqirs of this category -
Arjunchahi, Madari and Bonawaz. They belonged to the
category of "beshara" sufis. The use of Ganja, opium
wine and other intoxicated liquors, strictly prohibited
by Islam, was common among a large number of these so
called faqirs who often were great debauches.

The ideal of brotherhood and equality, on which
much stress is laid by Islam, was modified by Indian
Muslims in imitation of the Hindu community. The Sayyids,
the Pathans and the Mughals thought themselves superior
to the rest and formed the Ashraf, aristocratic class;
but even amongst them inter-marriage did not always
take place.

'BAUL' OF BENGAL

Bauls of Bengal form a great community. Bauls are
a group of mystic people, some of whom are quite stoic
and indifferent to the world and some of whom are worldly
than stoic. The former ones are called Udasin and the
later one are called Grihi. Different groups of Bauls hold different opinions with regard to the originator of their community. The Bauls are found both among the Muslims and among the Hindus. The originators of the Muslim Bauls are called faqirs and those of the Hindus are called Gurus. Among the faqirs the names of Hazrat Gobra, Pagal Nath, Khusi Bighas, Saheb Dhani, Lalan etc., are noteworthy. Among the Gurus, the names of Hari Guru, Banachari, Seva Kamalini, Akhil Chand, Aul Chand etc., are prominent. Dr. Enamul Haq says, all these Gurus or Faqirs were the inhabitants of the district of Nadiya and the life time of none can be traced up to a time earlier than the sixteenth century A.D. In these circumstances, we are inclined to hold the view that Baul community was not founded by one man; it was a community that gradually sprang up out of the incorporation of a good number of men quite indifferent to the world, and that the district of Nadiya was a famous cultural centre of Bengal from the earliest time up to the time of Chaitanya Deva, and it is quite natural that such an ancient cultural centre would produce a class of mystic like the 'Bauls' in the sixteenth century A.D. a century pregnant with mystic ideas of the

1 - H.S.B., p.300
2 - Ibid., p.296
3 - Ibid.
Sufis and Vaisnabs. ¹ The Bauls are differently known in different places. In eastern Bengal they are called Murshiddya Gan; in north Bengal they are known as Dehtatta Gan; in West Bengal they are described as Baul Gan. Excepting the difference in names and imageries, there is no difference whatsoever in the thought underlying them all.² But the Ulama do not consider the Bauls to be Muslims in the Shariya point of view as their songs lead to shirk.³

These folk-beliefs should be viewed in their proper perspective and should not be over-emphasized or over-rated. They are specific to microscopic Muslim Communities and are generally the exception rather than the rule. They were challenged by the fundamentalist, orthodox and modernist movements alike in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They have completely ceased to exist in the westernized upper classes. In the predominantly Muslim regions which now constitute West Pakistan their hold was not very strong even in the lower classes, and fundamentalism is now rooting them out. In the lower classes of East Pakistan, some folk-beliefs still persist.

¹ - H.S.B., p.296
² - H.S.B., p.123
³ - Akram Khan, op. cit., p.122.
despite the fundamentalist Fara'idi movement's success in the nineteenth century, the Jama'at-i-Islami's and Ahle Hadith Movements growing influence on religious life today.

In India the situation is potentially different. Orthodoxy, in the form of the political influence of the Ulema, is still powerful, but the extent of its influence is confined to economically retrogressing and numerically dwindling middle classes, which, in India are no longer to play the role of a creative minority by providing leadership for the vast masses of Indian Muslims. These masses, especially in the rural areas, are yielding to popular Hinduism's pull of absorption, largely through folk-beliefs and through participation in Hindu festivals.¹