Introduction

SUFI TRADITION AND CULTURE:
A STUDY OF SUFI SAINTS AND GROWTH
OF SYNCRETIC SHRINES IN MEDIEVAL
NORTH EAST INDIA
The word Sufi is derived from Suf meaning 'wool' and the ascetics, who wore woolen garments in place of finer ones like silk or cotton as mark of ascetism and self denial, were known as Sufis. Generally a Sufi used to have very simple life and strove to achieve the inner realization of divine unity by arousing intuitive and spiritual faculties. Hasan Basri, a prominent Islamic theologian describes the characteristics of a sufi as "he who wears wool out of humility towards God increases the illumination of his insight and his heart, but he who wears it out of pride and arrogance will be thrust down to hell with the devil."

The Sufism derives its conception from the theory of "Unity of Being" (Wahadatu'l Wujud), which has been enunciated by Ibn Arabi (1165-1240). According to the theory, 'God is both transcendent and Immanent as
transcendence and immanence are two fundamental aspects of Reality where: He is absolute Being and is the sole source of all existence, in Him alone Being and Existence are one and inseparable (and) there is no such thing as union with God in the sense of becoming one with God but there was the realization of the already existing fact that the mystic is one with God”. This philosophy was very compatible with the theistic philosophy of the yogic cult particularly with Nath yogis.

The Sufis indulge in meditation and also used music (sama) to attain ecstasy; they were organized in different orders (silsilah) and had established Khankah (hospices), which emerged as center of meditation, mutual love and trust. This was opened to all irrespective of caste, class and religion. These had become so popular that even after death of Sufi, these emerged as center of pilgrimage for every section of the society particularly of the Hindu and Muslim communities – giving emergence to the syncretic shrines and as symbols of mutual love, trust and brotherhood.

The Sufism entered into India around 11th century and gradually there emerged some Prominent Sufi silsilah (order) like Chisti, Shattariyyas, Qadiriyyas, Naqshbandiyyas and Suharwardy. These silsilah had attained immense popularity and their Khankha were visited by every section of the society. The Sufis taught message of love and humanity and were greatly instrumental in bringing a syncretism in social order where the stress was on co-existence, mutual love trust. We find the Sufis had influenced the Hinduism and had also imbibed several Hindu traditions, such influence can be seen in Kashmir where Shaikh Nuruddin Rishi was influenced from Saivite women yogi saint Lalla or Lal Ded (Lalla Ygesvari). Shaikh’s teachings are embodied in his Kashmiri verses and most of them are similar with those verses composed by Lalla and through these Shaikg emerged as an ardent devotee of God trying to reach the Unknowable in the heart by lighting the lamp of love. He and his follower preferred to call themselves Rishis and main theme of their teaching remain universal love. They served the people

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without considering caste and class distinctions and tried to turn Kashmir into a heaven for the neglected sections of society. He believed eating meat entailed cruelty to animals so he became vegetarian. Similarly Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya was also impressed by the yogis and believed their theory of division of human body into the regions of siva and sakti where the area from head to the navel associated with siva was spiritual and the area below navel associated with sakti was profane. Shaikh Nasiruddin Chiragh-I Dilhi observed that controlled breathing is the essence of Sufism. The theory of Wahadat ul Wujud and Sufi analogies were very similar to the yogic philosophy. Shaikh Hmiduddin Nagauri’s verse shows the yogic influence. The Nath doctrines had a far reaching influence on the Chisti Shaikh Abdus Quddus Gangohi where his imperceptible lord was Alkh Niranjan and he identified Niranjan with Khuda and in his treatise Rushd-nama he equate saint Gorakhanath with Ultimate Reality or Absolute Truth (siddha). The union of sakti sun moon was symbolized by prayer performed hanging upside down with legs suspended from roof of branch of a tree. This practice was also adopted by the Mughal King Akbar.

The Nath ideas found popularity in the 15th century Bengal where Amritakunda a treatise on Nath yoga composed by a Brahmin from Kamrup was first translated into Arabic in the 13th century and later Shaik Zahid wrote in Bengali Adys Parichaya and Sayyid Murtaza wrote Yoga Qalader based on the Amritakunda Sayyid Sultan of Chittagaon also composed a number of Bengali works on Muslim themes of absorption into God with Hindu and yogic overtones.

Obviously such mutual interaction led to assimilation of each other’s religious traditions, which has led to growth of composite culture or syncretic culture in India. Sufis close interaction with the common masses left indelible imprint on life of the people. They were ascribed several magical power such as healing power and power to grant anyone’s wishes etc. several legends had been credited to these Sufis which played its own role in creating

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the syncretism so much so that after the death of the Sufis their tombs emerged as syncretic shrines attracting all communities.

The Sufis appeared in Bengal in early 13th century and Shaikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi (d.1244) and Shah Jalal Mujarrad (d.1346) had established their Khankah at Lakhnauti and Sirhet (Sylhet) respectively. Contrary to the hagiographical account both of them had spread message of co-existence and love, which has been testified by the Ibn Battuta. As described the yogic, treatise Amritkunda was translated into Arabic and Persian at Lakhnauti by Ruknuddin Samarquandi and then it appeared in Gujarat as Bahr al Hayat authored by Sufi Ghaus. This suggests a form of religious syncretism. Similarly Chisti and suharawardi silsilah Sufis were also active in Bengal and particularly eastern Bengal. Obviously Kamrup and other parts of medieval north-east had attracted a large no. Sufis.

The Muslim entered into Assam as invaders, administrators, preachers, peers and invitees of the Ahom kings and settled permanently. Along with them several Sufi saints had also come in 14th, 15th and 16th centuries and become immensely popular among the people. Some of these prominent Sufis were, Peer Shah Madhar, Pagal Peer, Sufi Chand Khan (Known as Kabir of Assam), Sayed Roushan Ali Chishti (Boga Baba) Shah Ghazi Akbar, Hazarat Shah Miran (Ajan Fakir). These Sufis had been attributed so many legends that their tombs have become syncretic shrines of all religion. Some of these Sufis have close interaction with the Vaishnavite cult of Sankardev and they have also written Kirtans. Sufi Chand Khan had become disciple of Sankardev. Ajan Fakir has composed large number of Zikir (Zikir) besides composing some kirtan and all these have preached message of love and humanity. They have inculcated a sense of mutual love, trust and co existence among the people particularly among the depressed section of the society.

The Muslims of Assam have a history of more than eight hundred years since the beginning of the thirteenth century and have passed through many sweet and sour experiences before getting deeply settled on the soil of Brahmaputra valley as well as whole Assam and at present they formed one
forth (1/4) portion of her total population. During the whole course of period, the war captives (who were captured by the soldiers of Kamrupa as well as Asam), the religious missionaries, spirituals, saints, the business personnel’s and others who were infiltrated to the region had taken their settlement and could establish their influence over the native population of the region. Even some Muslim professionals were also invited by the Ahom kings and were employed in their respective profession of the royal court. Moreover, a good number of local people were also attracted to the holy preaching of the spiritual saints and thus converted into Islam and increased the number of Muslim population.

Even after the establishment of British rule over the provinces of Assam, a large number of Muslims came to Assam from erstwhile Bengal (Present Bangladesh) and got their settlement in almost all over Assam and gradually in course of time they became an integral part of greater Assamese Community and culture.

The land of medieval Assam, has been a cradle of Sufis and Sannyasis from time immemorial. After having a glance over her history any scholar can easily understand that the soil of this country had always been a fertile soil for the Sufi saints and preachers of different religions and its atmosphere have proved to be very much suitable for their religious devotions mystic practices and prayers. This is the reason why the holy land have not only give birth to a large number of Sannyasis, Sufis and saints but also have drawn the attention of a galaxy of religious personalities in every period of history. But it is a matter of great concern that no due attention has been paid. So far to the life and activities of these Sufi saints and growth of syncretic shrines in medieval north-east India particularly in the Brahmaputra Valley. Only some casual discussions and references over them are found in the writings and biographies of some scholars and writers who have written the political history of Assam and Bengal. But nobody, however, has made any comprehensive study over the subject.

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4 M. Y. Tamizi; *Sufi movement in Eastern India, P-10 (Introduction)* New Delhi - 1992
The present work has taken up to make a through study on the life and activities of the Sufi saints and growth of syncretic shrines of Assam in general and that's of Brahmaputra valley in particular. The Brahmaputra valley, begins from the confluence of Dihing, Dihang and Lohit in the east, gradually extending towards the west, reaches the delta of Bengal, covering a large sector of lands throughout Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Nowgong, Kamrup, Barpeta, Goalpara and finally crossed the Dhubri district and in the present study it is intended to cover up the whole region of the valley.5

Interestingly the contribution of these Sufis to the growth of syncretic culture and shrines are immense that Assam had not seen the kind communal hatred and violence as seen in other parts of India despite recent agitation on the issue of foreign nationals. But the contribution of Sufism in the growth of these shrines have not been studied so far. This work is an endeavor to study Sufi tradition and culture and growth of syncretic shrines in the medieval North East India. However, within the region our main area of focus shall be Brahmaputra valley where Sufis were very active during the medieval period. We hope to provide a comprehensive understanding of the social evolution in the region.

SURVEY OF LITERATURE:
Large number of work have been done on Sufism and its role in creating syncretism in India but all these works have not studied similar development in North East India popularly in Assam. S. Athar Abbas Rizvi, History of Sufism India, Yusuf Hussain's Sufism of India did not mention about the understanding of development in our area of study though these work are important for our understanding of Sufism in India. Similarly, recent work by Richard M. Eaton, The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760 though provides us information about Shah Jalal but did not discuss Sufi tradition of eastern frontiers particularly Assam and other

5 Ibid; P-XI-XII (Introduction).
parts of present north eastern region. Some works are available in Bengali and Assamese but these suffer from lack of empirical study and are full of unauthenticated legends thus one can not rely on these works.

This has provided an empirical analysis of the development of Sufi tradition and culture and the growth of syncretic shrines in medieval North East India.

OBJECTIVE OF STUDY:

The study set the following as its objective. The study has accomplished most of the set objectives.

1. Advent of Islam in the medieval North East India particular in medieval Assam and mutual interaction between Islam and Hinduism. Even in Assam we shall be studying the development in the Brahmaputra Valley more intensely as Sufis were very active in the plains of Assam.

2. Arrival of various Sufi saints and their silsilah (order) in different parts of the region and establishment of Khankahs. Whether they belonged to the silsilah popular in other parts of India or established completely new order.

3. The teaching and attitude of Sufis to the society and state. Attribution of mystical powers to the Sufis.

4. Sufism and Bhakti movement in region and their mutual interactions.

5. Emergence of syncretic shrines and cult.

METHODOLOGY:

The empirical methodology has been used for the work where the primary sources are subject of close scrutiny being used for the study.

ORGANISATION:

In order to keep only the sequence of the subject matter, a very brief sketch, over Sufi saints and syncretic shrines have been mentioned. It has also been tried to have a pen picture over the geographical location, her people and growth of syncretism during medieval period of Assam.

For convenience of study the work has been divided into six chapters.
The first chapter introduction and the second chapter under the caption of a brief history of medieval Assam and origin, development and spread of Sufism in Northern and Eastern India. But the prime emphasis has been given upon the advent of Islam in the medieval North-East India particularly in medieval Assam and mutual interaction between Islam and Hinduism. Even in Assam we shall be studying in the development the Brahmaputra Valley more intensely as Sufis were very active in the plains.

The third chapter has been included as to see how and when the various Sufi saints arrived and their silsilah (order) in different parts of the region and establishment of Khankahs. Whether they belonged to the silsilah popular in other parts of India or established complete new order.

The fourth chapter deals with the teaching and attitude of the Sufi saints to the society and state and their shrines who had flourished in the Brahmaputra Valley during the period of study. Their life, their activities and obviously their shrines and their role over the society, policy and culture of Assam received prime treatment in the work. The trace will be given on the attribution of mystical powers to the Sufis.

The fifth chapter under the caption, Sufism and Bhakti movement in the region and their interaction. The trace will also be given on the sacred duties of the Sufi saints and active role of the reformer of the Bhakti movement and their monotheistic appeal to the masses.

The sixth chapter deals with the emergence of syncretic shrines and cult. The close contact of the Sufi saints with the common masses and their mutual interaction with the state and people, even after the death of the Sufi saints their tombs and teaching emerged as syncretic shrines and cult attracting all communities.

The last chapter is the conclusion which gives an assessment of the (Sufi tradition and culture) A study of Sufi saints and growth of syncretic shrines in the medieval North-East India in general and the Brahmaputra Valley in particular.