CHAPTER V

BADSAH: cult of a local godling
BADSAH : cult of a local godling

I

Badsah is a local godling whose domain does not extend beyond the frontiers of Karimganj Sub-division and within this boundary, he is more popular in the southern portion of the sub-division than in the north. It is remarkable that this deity with so small an area of diffusion should be able to hold his adherents in so complete submission, especially when his origin cannot be traced back to any accepted scripture. Chandi has a Puranic tale to back up her claim, Manasa has a large following spread over a vast territory, but Badsah has neither. And worse, he bears an Islamic name which could have acted as a deterrent. In spite of these, he survives and reigns, the fact by itself is a proof of the inner strength and vitality of the cult. The Brahmanical elites consider him too alien and insignificant to include him in their pantheon, but his followers, the lower caste people of the Hindu community, stick by him and pay him their sincere devotion. They have attributed to him wide powers over a vast range of human activities.

He is the Malik or lord of the entire region where his cult prevails.

He is the guardian deity of jungles and also of hills. An offering to him must be made before one enters a jungle or combs a hill for gathering fuel or felling trees.
Another of his names is Baghai, the lord of tigers. All beasts obey him and he protects his human devotees from their attack. He rides on a tiger.

A good harvest cannot be secured unless he blesses a field. So, when harvest is over, an offering is made to him in a corner of the field.

He protects cattle. When a cow has a calf, the first bowl of her milk is offered to him.

The first fruit of a tree also goes to him.

Boatmen pray for his favour before starting on a voyage.

He is the fountain of power and prosperity which he bestows on his worthy adherents.¹

He is Shiva in another form.

Badsah is not worshipped in an image and no special shrine is built for him. In every village, there is a shrine of Kali. In its yard an altar of earth or brick is raised. It is covered with a mattress and a bedspread. Four posts at the four corners support a canopy. This is Badsah's seat or than. It bears a curious resemblance to the tomb or burial place of a Muslim saint and pir. Every Kalibari of southern Karimganj invariably has a than of Badsah.

¹ It is believed that Nawab Radharam, a zamindar of Ratabari region, grew very powerful and prosperous by the blessings of Badsah. This zamindar ultimately dared to challenge the authority of the British Government, and twice successfully resisted its attempt to subdue him; third time he became a captive and lost his life.
Sinni (mixture of powdered rice or atta with molasses), ganja, milk and fruits are normally offered to please him. On ceremonial occasions wafted 'gajar' fish is also offered. When he is worshipped elsewhere than the than, say in the corner of the field after harvest, offering of 'gajar' fish is considered indispensable. At dusk, candles are lit around the altar. No mantras are recited in his worship and no special priest is required. In Magh, he is worshipped with a great pomp and splendour but he does not have a date for his ceremonial annual worship.

Evidently, Badsah has a Muslim origin. His name itself is a Hindustani modification of the Persian natiyah which passed into Bengali after the Muslim invasion. His second name, Malik, has a similar origin. His altar is modelled after the tomb of Muslim pirs. The sacred places associated with pirs are called mokam and it is startling to note that this word has attained a generalisation of meaning to such an extent that even a Kalibari or any other seat of a Hindu god is referred to as a mokam by the Hindus of this region. The lighting up of candles around the grave is also a Muslim practice in honour of a departed soul. The 'gajar' fish is forbidden to the Hindus whereas to the Muslims it is a delicacy and the use of this forbidden fish as an offering to Badsah supports his non-Hindu origin.
Notwithstanding these Muslim associations, Badsah is very much a Hindu deity now. And the paradox reaches a point of absurdity when we note that in the Kalibaris where Badsah normally resides with all his Muslim paraphernalia Muslims are officially denied admittance! Muslims are also put on guard constantly by the zealous vigilance of orthodox Maulavis so that they do not indulge in the worship of Badsah, which is considered to be a kind of idolatry. Nevertheless, within the Muslims of lower strata, a stream of devotion has quietly flown down the times. There is a sect of Muslim fakirs known as Monju who beg alms in the name of Badsah. Though they are held in contempt by the orthodox, from the general Muslim mass they receive universal veneration. A Muslim boatman, starting on a long trip, does not raise his oars until he has asked for Badsah's blessings. The Muslim merchants who trade in forest products do not dare to climb an inch of a hill or put a step forward in a jungle until they have made suitable offerings to him.

II

It will be pertinent to mention here a few kindred deities and godlings who have some affinities with Badsah. There is, for instance, the widespread cult of Satyanarayan, who, according to many scholars, has a Muslim origin.?

2. Sukumar Sen, Bangla Sahitya Itihasa (Aparardha), pp. 451-466
His name derives from Satyapir who is often described as a mortal. These narratives are generally the products of unbridled folk imagination. Nevertheless, Satyapir's transformation into Hindu Satyanarayan testifies to a curious fusion of two contending religions accomplished possibly in the latter half of the seventeenth century. Badsah testifies to a similar transformation. But whereas Satyapir had to shed the Muslim part of his name and take the name and character of Hindu Narayana in its stead, Badsah came to retain his original name. Since his transformation, Satyanarayan has been raised to a very high rank of Hindu divinities as an embodiment of Vishnu. Badsah similarly, in the eyes of his humble adherents, occupies a very high position and is tending gradually to assume the position of Shiva, another important god of the Hindu trinity. The inevitable existence of the thana of Badsah in the Kalibaris had already led zealous adherents to identify their beloved deity with Shiva.

Badsah's abode, always modelled after the graves of Muslim pirs, reminds us of the abodes of two kindred deities, Bara Gazi Khan and Manik Pir who dwell on similarly raised platforms covered with bedspreads under white canopies. Bara Gazi Khan is also a tiger-god who in order

3. Ibid., p. 451
4. Gopendra Krishna Basu, Banglar Laukik Devata, p. 44 & 174
ensure his control over Sunderban had to fight a long battle with his Hindu counterpart and adversary Dakshin Ray until the powerful intervention of the supreme God Himself, descending in the hybrid form of half Srikrishna and half Paigambar, forced a truce. The tales recounted in elaborate detail by the Raimangal poet might have been a reflection on the long conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims over the possession of Sunderban. The conflict ended in a compromise and the two contending sects learnt to live amicably together. Thenceforth, Bara Gasi Khan receives veneration from the Hindus of Sunderban along with Dakshin Ray.

Like Badsah, Manik Pir is also a guardian deity of cattle and the latter also receives the first bowl of milk whenever a calf is born. A Musalman Khadem is always the official priest of Manik Pir. At present Badsah does not have a Muslim Khadem anywhere but it is said that there were some independent seats of Badsah maintained by Muslim Khadems but these were deserted following a ban imposed by the Muslim orthodoxy.

8. C. Mitra mentions another godling who is worshipped in North Bengal. He is Pir Sona Ray or Sona Gazi. A god of distinct Muslim origin, he is also the lord of tigers.

5. Ashutosh Bhattacharjya, Bangla Mangal Kavya Itihas, p. 825-840
7. This information is obtained from Prof. Kamaluddin Ahmed, Lecturer in History, Karimganj College.
He is worshipped also for obtaining boons like increase of cattle and wealth. In all these features Sona Ray resembles Badsah to a considerable extent. Scholars agree that most of these godlings — Gazi Khan, Manik Pir, Sona Gazi, had actually been virtuous mortals deified after death.9

During the early days of Muslim invasion and the first phase of the spread of Islam, many Muslim saints played important roles in the conquest of Hindu Kingdoms and did much more to popularise Islam in rural areas.10 Numerous Hindus of lower castes accepted Islam chiefly at their initiative and efforts. They were, in general, virtuous men remarkable for their prowess, their unflinching devotion to the cause of religion, their liberalism and philanthropy.11 They lived simple lives, professed liberal Islamic ideas, and displayed in their action an altruistic love for the lowly and the poor. The low caste Hindus, hard-hit by the tyranny of the upper castes, embraced their religion and came to look upon them as their saviours. These saints brought relief particularly

9. (a) Ashutosh Bhattacharjya, Bangla Manjal Kavyar Itihas, p. 831
   (b) Sukumar Sen, Ibid, p. 461
11. Abdul Karim, Social History of Muslims in Bengal, p. 142
to the Buddhists who had lost their political prominence during the reign of the Senas of Bengal and suffered greatly in the hands of renewed belligerent Hinduism that had grown under the patronage of the new rulers.\textsuperscript{12}

Buddhism was more popular amongst the people of the lower castes and their large scale conversion to Islam was a redeeming feature of early Muslim rule in Bengal. It was only natural that these converts should have a special regard for these Muslim saints. And at the same time it may be presumed that these saints were also venerated by their fellow brethren who did not embrace Islam for sentimental, traditional or other reasons. This latter group of people, who were ultimately absorbed within the fold of Hinduism as lower castes, were equally affected by the altruism of these saints and impressed by their deeds and attitudes. They venerated them as long as they lived and when they died they haloed the dead saints with supernatural powers and subsequently deified them. In some cases, not Muslim saints but Muslim warriors, equally noted for their virtues, were deified. It is assumed that Bara Gazi Khan was one of such warrior heroes.\textsuperscript{13}

III

It is evident that the transformation of Muslim saints and heroes into Hindu deities did form a pattern

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 135
\item \textsuperscript{13} Gopendra Krishna Basu, \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 43-47
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in medieval Bengal. It would not be rash to suggest that the cult of Bad Shah also fits in the same pattern to a considerable extent. There are reasonable grounds to think that the cult of Bad Shah had sprung out originally from the worship of a Muslim saint who was deified after his death. The name of this saint was perhaps Shahid Hanja, who came into this country with Sheikh Shah Jalal, the great Muslim saint of the fourteenth century. In support of this suggestion, the following facts may be taken into consideration.

In Sylhet, the spread of Islam owed chiefly to the personality of Shah Jalal, the warrior-saint whose saintly fame has increased with the passage of time. He was sent to Sylhet by the Sultan of Bengal by the early part of the 14th century and defeated Gour Govinda, the last Hindu King of Sylhet and annexed the state to the Sultanate.\(^5\)

Shah Jalal was accompanied by 360 disciples\(^5\), whom local tradition describes as Aulias. The great saint deployed them in all corners of the annexed kingdom to preach the Prophet's message. Most of them were virtuous saints who had dropped their arms and advanced with the Quran in their stead. One such disciple was Shahid Hanja. Tradition current in northern Sylhet asserts that Shahid Hamja was


a man of colourful personality who used to ride a tiger and had supernatural power over the ferocious animals of the forests. It is believed by the Muslims of Sylhet that Shahid Hamja entered Sylhet riding a tiger and that unprecedented sight created panic amongst the Hindu soldiers of Gour Govinda. Unfortunately, tradition has not preserved more details of Shahid Hamja's life, but his association with the tiger is a significant phenomenon. Votaries of Badsah believe that the godling rides a tiger and actually village folk while mentioning a tiger often use the term "horse of Badsah" as a synonym for a tiger. So riding a tiger is an attribute common to both Shahid Hamja, the mortal, and Badsah, the godling, and this striking similarity suggests identity of the two. This assumption is strengthened further by the fact that the folk tradition of Sylhet does not associate any other Muslim saint with tiger riding.

Moreover, in the hilly forest regions of Patherkandi and Ratakari Thana (Kurimganj Sub-division), Badsah is known as Sahija Badsah and in all probability Sahija was the local name of the saint who was later deified. It would not be very much farfetched to contend that Sahija was perhaps the abbreviated or corrupted form of Shahid Hamja. In the course of four or five centuries, Shahid Hamja could easily take the form "Sahija" (Shahid Hamja)

16. A.C. Choudhury, Ibid., Chap. II, p. 50
17. Villagers in their effort to entrap a tiger sing, "O Badsah, please send your horse"
Sahidaaja> Sahidaja> Sahidja> Sahija). If this contention is accepted then we can further assume that Shahid Hanja was deployed in this region by Shah Jalal to preach Islam as well as to administer this hilly part of the newly conquered territory. His temporal and political authority over the region perhaps tempted the local people to call him Badsah and also to regard him as the Malik of the region.

A number of mokams of Ratabari and Patherkandi regions claim association with Badsah. The most famous amongst them is the mokam located at Chhalag Mara, in the dense forest of Pratapgarh Pargana (Patherkandi). Regarding this mokam, Achyut Charan Choudhury, the renowned local historian and a native of the place, made the following observation:

"In the dense forest of Pratapgarh Pargana, there is the famous mokam of Chhalag Mara which is also known as the mokam of Badsah. All timber merchants, Hindu and Muslim alike, consider it a duty to visit the mokam and offer worship there. At times tigers visit the mokam and eat any food left for them by the merchants. Lower caste Hindus of Karimganj Sub-division also pay homage to Sahija Badsah. This Sahija Badsah is regarded as the presiding deity of the forest. It is stated in the official record that an emperor of Delhi resided in the lonely jungle of Pratapgarh who founded this mokam. But
we think this observation is not based on fact. Because the people never mention the name of any Badsah of Delhi. They simply mention the name of Sahija Badsah." It is probable that Shahid Hamja or Sahija was buried at Chhagal Mara, and so this mokam has attained a special sacredness. And the influence of Badsah is so intense in the villages around Chhagal Mara that in all probability this mokam was the centre from which the cult of Badsah spread.

That Badsah, and a number of other deities of Muslim origin like Bara Gazi Khan, Sona Gazi and others should have a relation with the tiger deserves consideration. While nothing can be said for certain, it can only be conjectured that these gods were pioneering Muslim saints and adventurers who led hordes of people to enter jungles, clear them and make them habitable. These wild regions were naturally infested with wild beasts but the courage and valour of these saints overcame the dangers. They killed the beasts, chiefly tigers, felled the trees and in course of time exaggerated accounts of their achievements spread among their grateful followers who passed the stories on to their descendants who in awe began to worship these heroes as gods of tigers.

It is only natural that in a tiger-infested region, there should be a tiger deity of a more primitive origin. In some places tiger deities are often identified with Kshetrapal (protector of arable land). This identification is, perhaps a remnant of the remote past when men started settling in agriculture reclaiming dense forests and when men-eaters were closer neighbours of men to hamper their agricultural pursuits. In some places tiger deities are often identified with Kshetrapal (protector of arable land). This identification is, perhaps a remnant of the remote past when men started settling in agriculture reclaiming dense forests and when men-eaters were closer neighbours of men to hamper their agricultural pursuits. In some places tiger deities are often identified with Kshetrapal (protector of arable land). This identification is, perhaps a remnant of the remote past when men started settling in agriculture reclaiming dense forests and when men-eaters were closer neighbours of men to hamper their agricultural pursuits.

In Mynensingh there is a tiger god named Baghai, who is propitiated at the time of harvest. In the Habiganj and Sunamganj Sub-divisions of Sylhet this Baghai is worshipped on the last day of Kartik (mid-November) just before the harvest. It has already been mentioned that in the Karimganj Sub-division, Baghai is another name of Badsah. It can reasonably be suggested that originally Baghai was a separate deity having no relation with Badsah and he was the primitive tiger deity of Mynensingh, Habiganj, Sunamganj as well as of Karimganj area. But after the advent of the Muslims, in Karimganj Sub-division, the godling Baghai has been completely absorbed in the Badsah cult. Today, in this locality, only the name Baghai is left of the earlier cult as its last remnant, that too as a secondary name of Badsah.

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19. Ashutosh Bhattacharjya, Ibid., p. 824
20. Gopendran Krishna Basu, Ibid. p. 149
It is intriguing that Badsah co-exists with goddess Kali within the very inner campus of Kali temples. Kali is supposed to be the most fierce and malicious of the Hindu divinities and her wrath for heretics and non-believers is well known. How the village folk with their simple belief and unqualified regard dared to accommodate a godling of presumed Muslim origin with a definite Muslim name within the abode of Kali is a problem worth investigating. The infiltration of a godling like Badsah into the established temples of Kali worship is highly improbable; rather there is scope for assumption that the process was quite the reverse, i.e., Kali was installed at a later date in the shrines where Badsah had been the earlier object of worship. At the present state of our knowledge such an assumption should be regarded as tentative, but if we take into consideration some aspects of the social background of the region it would appear that a possibility of such an occurrence cannot be altogether ruled out.

The region, where Badsah is zealously worshipped and venerated, is populated mainly by Hindus of so-called lower castes. Actually, till the time of independence, there were only two villages in the region where caste

22. Till 1947, caste Hindus had settlement only in two villages, namely, Kayasthagram and Bagbari.
Hindus had settled in any significant number. They, too, had migrated to the region after the advent of the British. Local Muslims, who formed the bulk of the indigenous population besides low caste Hindus, are also descendants of converts and their forefathers were also lowcaste Hindus. So, it can be assumed that at the time of Muslim conquest of Sylhet, the region was mainly inhabited by people who were regarded as low in the Hindu social scale.

Scholars are of opinion that Buddhism had a stronger hold over the people of the lower strata of society in the pre-Muslim days. It is also said that Sylhet was one of the last strongholds of Buddhism. So, the lower caste people of this part of Sylhet were presumably under the influence of Buddhism at the time of Muslim conquest. Now, it was a practice of the Buddhists to erect small stupas or mounds, as an imitation of the great stupas of Bodh Gaya or other sacred places, in their places of worship. Historians have termed these imitations as 'votive stupas'. It was a possibility that the Buddhists of this region also were in the habit of raising such stupas in their places of community worship or religious assemblage.

The pioneer Muslim preacher whose memory the cult of Badshah preserves might have left a deep impression in

the minds of these Buddhist people. Some of them did embrace Islam under his dynamic influence and, those who did not, also venerated him. After the death of this preacher, his burial place or grave became an object of worship to converts and non-converts alike.

After the lapse of two or three generations, the grip of Buddhism was completely withheld from the country. The non-converts, i.e., the descendants of the indigenous Buddhist population of the locality, having no central authority to guide their religious life, were left with no other alternative but to follow a loose type of Hinduism. But perhaps they did not have any opportunity to know much of Brahminical Hinduism as there was no caste-Hindu settlement in the region till the first half of the eighteenth century. So, probably, these people went through a period of religious vacuum and during this period, the real significance of the votive stupas erected by their forefathers in their ancestral places of worship was completely forgotten. It would not be rash to presume that Badsah, the cult-hero who was being worshipped by their Muslim neighbours and venerated by their forefathers as well, assumed the form of a godling at that period taking advantage of this vacuum. The Badsah cult perhaps became the only living cult of the period. Thus the votive stupas, which had already lost their original significance, were remodelled by them in the fashion of...
a Muslim grave, more precisely as an imitation of the grave of Shahid Hamja and they started worshipping them as the abode of Badsah. This way Badsah was deified and each village came to possess a than of Badsah without leaving any trace of constraint or conflict.

At a later date, when caste Hindus started pouring in to settle in the region, the natives came in contact with the more ornate form of Brahminical Hinduism. Their reverence or love for Badsah was so deeply rooted by this time that in spite of this contact, they retained Badsah as a prominent deity in their ancestral places of worship, though goddess Kali was also installed there. Perhaps this way Kali, the fiercest of Hindu divinities, came to share premises with Badsah, a godling of Muslim origin.