

The Contributions of Sufism in Promoting Religious Harmony in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Sufism in Bangladesh is directly connected to the faith, history and culture of Bangladeshi Muslims. Sufis contributed by reducing religious hatred, fanaticism and fundamentalism of any kind among the people of Bangladesh. It has social and economic impacts as well on the people. The paper investigates the influence of Sufism in promoting religious harmony in Bangladesh from 11th to 20th century. It also focuses on the evolution of Sufism in Bangladesh and the history of famous Sufis who were involved in establishing co-existence and peaceful societies there. This study is an attempt to find a way to unite all people of different religions and movements in the world.

Keywords: Sufism, Bangladeshi Sufis, Bangladesh, religious harmony

Introduction

Sufism is a Muslim philosophy, which teaches personal and mystical worship and union with God. It was formulated in opposition to the formal, legalistic Islamic theology of the 9th century. It is indefinable; it is a way of life. If it was ritual, one could learn it by practicing the rituals. If it was mere learning, one could acquire it by studying. To be a true human being, free from all bondage and honest with the Almighty, is being a Sufi. Sufism is known in the Muslim world as Islamic mysticism. The Sufi saints were involved in the spread of Islam in Bengal in many ways. Through their religious and missionary zeal, exemplary character and humanitarian activities, they greatly influenced the mind of the masses and attracted them to the faith of Islam. The *khanqahs*¹ of the Sufis were centers of spiritual, humanitarian and

¹ The Persian word *khānaqāh*, literally means a dwelling place. Technically, it refers to an Islamic institution for spiritual retreat and character reformation, principally reserved for Sufis to meet, reside, study, and assemble and pray together as a group.

intellectual activities and they had a significant role in promoting religious harmony in the country.²

Bangladesh is located in the South Asia. It is bordering with India and Myanmar. India surrounds Bangladesh by the north, east and west while Myanmar borders with Bangladesh by the southeast and southern coastline on the Bay of Bengal. It has an area of 147,570 square kilometers with 150 million people as of 2008.³ Historically, Bangladesh used to be called “Bengal”. Bengal was under the Muslim rule from 13th century to the capture of the British in the middle of the 18th century.⁴ Though the Bengal area was undergone some changes from time to time but the scope of this study is the current geographical area of Bangladesh.

History of Sufism in Bangladesh

The advent of Sufism in Bengal may go back to the mid-eleventh century with the arrival of Muslim and Sufi preachers. For the next six centuries, learned Sufis and saints continued to arrive in Bengal from Arabia, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Khurasan, Central Asia and Northern India.⁵

Sufism in Bengal was a continuation of Sufism in Northern India. The relation between the Sufis of Northern India and the saints of Bengal was extremely intimate. The creed of the Sufis of Bengal was the same as the creed of the Northern India Sufis. According to Sufi historian Mohammad Enamul Haq, towards the end of the 12th century, Bengal had been admitting a regular and incessant influx of Sufis from Northern India and this flow did not abate until after the close of the 11th century. During the 16th and

² Kelly Pemberton, “Women pirs, saintly succession, and spiritual guidance in South Asian sufism”, *The Muslim World*, vol. 96, (January) 2006, pp. 61-87; Peter J. Bertocci, “A Sufi movement in Bangladesh: the Maijbhandari tariqa and its followers”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 40, no. 1, 2006, pp. 1-28; Abdullah Al-Ahsan, “Spread of Islam in pre-Mughal Bengal,” *Intellectual Discourse*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1994, pp. 41-55.

³ Islam Md. Rafiqul, “Islam in Bangladeshi Society,” *South Asian Cultural Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2009, p. 3.

⁴ Muhammad Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslim Bengal*, vol-IB (Riyadh: Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1985), 1-26.

⁵ Dewan Nurul Hussain Choudhury, ed. *Amader Sufiaye Kiram* (A collection of the Life-sketch of the Sufis). (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 2004), 39.

17th centuries, Sufism in Bengal, along with Sufism in India, was in a metamorphic stage.⁶

After the observation of Sufi's entrance into Bengal, Muhammad Enamul Haq divided the Sufi history in Bengal into the following periods:⁷

- Early period (12th to the 14th centuries)
- Middle period (15th to the 17th centuries)
- Last period (18th to the 19th centuries)

The early period was when the spread of Islam in Bengal took place from Northern India. All of the Sufis of this age belonged to the order of *Suharwardi* and *Chishti* Sufis of Northern India. They preferred contemplation, meditation and inspection to action by being militant propagators of Islam. It was a time for the propagation of Islam and Sufis were busy with the rapid expansion of their faith among the masses of Bengal. Bernard argues that Islam spread in Bengal in large numbers of individual conversions. The Sufis were mostly influenced by local conditions and traditions and were amalgamated by them. It is very likely that the ideas, beliefs and practices of the local people of Bengal in the field of religion began to find a place in Sufism then.⁸

The middle period was the period of steady consolidation of Muslim thought and gradual accommodation of local influence in Bengal. The independent Sultans of Bengal gave ample and generous opportunities to the Sufis to settle down permanently in various parts of the country and to come in close contact with the people. Involvement of Bengali Sufis in the politics of the country was another feature of this age. They also influenced the Sultans to make any decision for the country. Most of the independent Sultans of Bengal were the disciples of one of the Sufis. Some of the Sultans had their family *pirs*. Such spiritual connections of the Bengali Sufis with the political head of the country gave them unique opportunities to involve themselves in the political affairs of the country.⁹

⁶ Muhammad Enamul Haq, *A history of Sufism in Bengal* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1975), 2.

⁷ Muhammad Enamul Haq, *A history of Sufism in Bengal*, 154-158.

⁸ Bernard Hours, *Islam and development in Bangladesh*, trans. S.M. Imamul Haq (Dhaka: Centre for Social Studies, 1995), 10.

⁹ Abdullah Al-Ahsan, "Spread of Islam in pre-Mughal Bengal," pp. 41-55.

The last period was the period of decay, perish and corrosion and of moral and spiritual degradation of the Bengal Sufis. The whole religious life of Bengal Muslims was mostly affected by the environment under which they were living during that age. The practice of '*pir-muridi*' (making disciples by the *pirs*) was much highlighted during this period that the whole mystics' creed of the Sufis had to give way to it. Muslims began to believe that initiation to a *pir* is absolutely binding and obligatory (*fard*) on them; such a belief gradually gave birth to polytheistic devotion and attachment in the minds of the people and they began to give votive offerings and donations of huge amounts of money or materials to *pirs* dead or alive. Graves of departed Sufis and saints turned out to be the places of worship with offerings of flowers, vermilion and other objects that normally appeared in Hindu ceremonies or '*pujas*'. Such a deviation and difference form of '*pir-muridi*' in the Sufism of Bengal developed because of the influence of a terrible figure, which was then prevalent and widespread among the Hindus of Bengal.¹⁰

Hundreds of Sufis and preachers arrived in Bengal at different times from Central Asia through Northern India. Many of them were credited with the spread of Islam in Bengal. Bengal proved to be a fertile soil for Sufism to flourish. Several new systematic orders developed on the basis of the teachings of some of the distinguished Bengal Sufis. Thus Sufism played a significant role in the spread of Islam and development of the Muslim society in Bengal.

Among the prominent Sufis who came to Bengal during the 11th to 15th centuries were Shah Sultan Rumi (arrived in Bengal in 1053) and lived in Mymensingh, Shaikh Sharfuddin Abu Tawama (d. 1210) in Sonargaon, Shah Jalal Tabrizi (d. 1244) in Sylhet, Shaikh Fariduddin Shakkarganj (1173–1266) in Faridpur, Makhdum Shah Daulah Shahid (1291) in Pabna, Jafar Khan (1290-1295) in Hughli Pandua, Shah Makhdum Ruposh (d. 1313) in Rajshahi, Shah Sultan Balkhi (d. 1343) in Bogra, Shah Jalal Yameni (1271- 1347) in Sylhet, Shaikh Alaul Haq (d. 1384) in

¹⁰ See: Brannon Ingram, "Sufis, scholars and scapegoats: Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (d. 1905) and the Deobandi critique of sufism," vol. 99, July 2009, pp. 278-501; Kelly Pemberton, "Women pirs, saintly succession, and spiritual guidance," 81.

Gaur Pandua, Khan Jahan Ali (d. 1459) in Khulna and Ismail Khan Ghazi (d. 1474) in Sylhet.

However, we cannot accurately determine many of the dates in connection with the lives of Bengali as well as non-Bengali Sufis. The conclusions we have arrived at here are generally based on a few materials including the history, traditions, inscriptions and general impressions. They may not always be very conclusive and satisfactory. Secondly, the influence of every prominent Sufi of Bengal seemed to transcend the limits of his own age. They were isolated, furiously and vigorously working for their own lives and those under their responsibility. Thirdly, the activities of the Sufis of Bengal were mostly of more local character than a general one. The places of their settlement were the field of their activities.

Contribution of Sufism to Promote Elements of Religious Harmony in Bangladesh

The real influence of the Sufi in Bengal began to be felt from the very beginning of the 13th century when it was still active and visible in terms of beliefs, practices, songs, traditions, creeds and minds of the people of Bengal. The activities of the Sufis were not only confined to the four walls of their *khanqah* but they also played an important role in the spread of Islam and applied great influence in the people's mind as well as in the society. There was no village and town of Bengal where Sufis did not come and settle down. The Sufis of Bengal were renowned for their simplicity of life, strength of character, devotion to faith and peaceful pursuits.

Most of the Sufis of Northern India and other foreign countries first turned their attention to Bengal. There are a few causes that helped generate success in the Sufi mission in Bengal:¹¹

a) The first cause for Sufis' success in Bengal was because of their indomitable zeal, uncommon piety as well as very simple and pious life. They cut all kinds of worldly bonds and avoided comfort and pleasure. They dedicated their lives for the cause of Islam and for the service of humanity.

b) The liberal and openhanded patronage, permanent settlement of Muslim rule by the Sultans helped Sufis to succeed in Bengal.

¹¹ Haq, *A history of Sufism in Bengal*, 260-266.

c) The religious and social conditions of the country were in their favour which helped them to propagate their faith. At the beginning of Sufis, Buddhism and Hinduism were the two prominent religions of Bengal but their moral and ethical degradation were at their zenith. The society was full of distinction among people but Islam offered them a golden opportunity to raise their social status. In this way, the Sufis became very successful.

The Sufis laid the foundation of communal harmony and peace. They established equality of status, love and brotherhood to the masses and taught people how to respect each other's religion, feelings and practices. Thus, Sufism became an influential factor in the society and the contributions of the Sufis for the betterment of society demand a careful and proper assessment. The influence of the Sufis to the expansion of Muslim society in Bengal may be considered under the following sub-topics.

1. Noble Characteristics of Sufis

Social justice, the ideals of equality and brotherhood of Sufis attracted the Buddhists and lower caste Hindus. Sufis greatly influenced the mind of the masses and attracted them to the faith of Islam by their religious and missionary zeal, exemplary character and humanitarian activities. The *khanqahs* of the Sufis which were established in every nook and corner of Bengal were great centers of humanitarian and intellectual activities and they had a significant role in the development of the Muslim society in this country. Islam offered higher social status in Bengal. Arnold writes:

It is in Bengal, however, that the Muhammadan missionaries in India have achieved their greatest success, as far as numbers are concerned...and in places where low caste Hindus and outcaste most abound...But in Bengal the Muslim missionaries were welcomed with open arms by the aborigines and the low caste on the very outskirts of Hinduism, despised and condemned by their proud Aryan rules.¹²

The famous Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta (d. 1377) personally met Shah Jalal in 1345 and spent three days as Shah

¹² T.W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam* (Lahore: Kashmiuri Bazar, 1961), 280-282.

Jalal's guest in his mountain cave near Sylhet town. He states that the *Shaikh* was one of the great saints and one of the unique personalities. He had to his credit miracles (*karāmat*) well known to the public as well as great deeds, and he was a man of hoary age. The inhabitants of these mountains had embraced Islam at his hands, and for this reason he stayed amidst them.¹³

Makhdum Jahaniyan Jahangasht (1308-1384) was a famous Sufi, who was gentle, humble, kind and noble towards people.¹⁴ Abu Bakr Siddiqui (1846-1939), a prominent figure and founder of the "Order of Furfura Sharif", led a simple and generous life. He was bountiful, just, kind, merciful and had a noble character. He was well-liked by the masses irrespective of class or religion because of his religiosity, sacrifice and dutiful manner.¹⁵ Shah Sultan Rumi attracted many people to him by the performance of various miraculous deeds, piety, noble character, kindness, love and goodness.¹⁶ Abdul Hai Siddiqui (1903-1977), the eldest son of Abu Bakr Siddiqui emphasized on people not to commit cruelty. In every congregation he advised his followers about the negative aspects of quarrelling. He also said, quarrelling destroys the community and its harmony.¹⁷ He believed in reconciliation and called the national leader for unity. He often said:

Remember freedom and humanity is separate but where there is no freedom, there is no humanity. Without humanity freedom is worthless. Don't appropriate yourself, gain humanity. What is the difference between inhumanity and beasts? Visible decoration is nothing if there is no humanity in you.¹⁸

2. Role to Establish a Welfare State

Sufis played a vital role in establishing a welfare state in Bengal where justice, equality and human status were upheld. The Sufis

¹³ Ibn Battuta, *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta*, trans. Mahdi Husain (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1953), 238–39.

¹⁴ Chawdhuri Shamsur Rahman, *Sufi Dorsan* (Dhaka: Dibbopkash, 2010), 110.

¹⁵ Abdullah Mamun Arif al-Mannan, *Furfurar Etihās* (Dhaka: Eshayat-e-Islam Kutubkhana, 2005), 13.

¹⁶ Haq, *A history of Sufism in Bengal*, 209.

¹⁷ Al-Mannan, *FurfurarEtihās*, 139.

¹⁸ *Hazrat Abdul Hai Siddiqui* (Dhaka: Eshayat-e-Islam Kutubkhana, 1981), 100.

influenced and impressed on the kings of the region and soon they converted to Islam. Shah Jalal (1271-1347) and his followers cooperated with the Muslim forces of Sikander Ghazi in fighting against the tyrant King Gaur Gavinda and establishing Muslim rule in that part of the country (in 1303). It is believed that Khan Jahan Ali (d.1459) added the territories of Jessore, Khulna and Barisal to the Muslim Sultanate, where he established a welfare state for its subjects irrespective of religion, class and caste. The Sufis also advised the kings on religious matters.¹⁹ To prevent political policy from diverting, and to lead it on the religious path, they made many efforts. They added a moral force as well as contributed to consolidating and saving the state in times of crisis.

Hazrat Nur Qutb Alam (d. 1415) saved the Muslim sovereignty in Bengal when Raja Kans tried to follow the policy of persecuting the Muslims and establishing the tyrannical state in the country after the death of Sultan Ghiyathuddin Azam Shah (1390–1411). Some of the Sufis also stood as champions of the Islamic policy in the administration of Muslim states. Shaikh Abdul Haqq (d. 1384) advised Sultan Ghisyatddin Azam Shah to use Islamic policy in the affairs of the state. King Laksmanasena (1178-1206), impressed by Shaikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi's humanitarian activities and miraculous power, gave him some land and permission to build a mosque. Shaikh set up a '*khanqah*' which later turned into a centre of learning. He played a pioneering role in imparting knowledge throughout Bangladesh. However, there were good relations between kings and the Sufis. Bengal's Sufis and sultans, then, were fatefully connected by ties of mutual attraction and repulsion generally when they were first establishing themselves politically, and especially when launching new dynasties.

3. Spread Teachings for both Muslims and non-Muslims

From the beginning of Sufism in Bengal, the Sufis built institutions to spread Islamic teaching and paid their attention towards educating the people.²⁰ They built mosques, schools and *khanqahs*, which had classes for all education purposes. In this

¹⁹ Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslim in Bengal* (Dhaka: Jatiya Sahitta Prakash, 2007), 154.

²⁰ Karim, *Social History of the Muslim in Bengal*, 160.

way their teachings reached the masses in the area. There were many schools (known as *madrakah*) to teach elementary education. The *khanqahs* became centres of preaching about Islam and learning. These institutions received great reputation as seats of learning. During the reign of Sultan Nasir al-Din Mahmud Shah (1442-1459), Khan Jahan Ali built mosques and academic centers in the Khalifatabad region i.e. Southern Bengal and they played significant role in the spread of Islam and distribution of learning in southern Bengal. However, most of the *khanqahs* became learning centers for both Muslim and non-Muslims.²¹

4. Participation in Humanitarian Activities

Most of the Sufis of Bengal attracted the people through their humanitarian activities. Makhdum Shaikh, Jalal al-Din Tabrizi and Akhi Sirajuddin Usman (d. 1357) were influential and great figures, who had charismatic characters to convince people.²² It is said that they established "*Langar Khanah*"²³ which became a centre for humanitarian activities and provided food for the unfed poor, beggars and travelers. Both Muslims and non-Muslims respected them as their '*khanqah*' became the center of inspiration for worldly and spiritually.²⁴

The *Siyar al-'Arifin*, a Sufi biography written around (1530-1536) shows that Jalal al-Din Tabrizi left around 1228 for Baghdad and traveled to India and, not finding a warm welcome in the court of Delhi, eventually moved on to *Lakhnauti*, then the remote provincial capital of Bengal.²⁵ The record showed that when he went to Bengal, all the population there came to him and became his disciples. There he built a hospice and a public kitchen, and bought several gardens and lands as an endowment for the kitchen. There was also a river port called Deva Mahal. Today [i.e., 1530–36], his holy tomb is located at the very site of

²¹ Intiaz Ahmed, *Sufis & Sufism: A Closer Look at the Journey of Sufis to Bangladesh* (Singapore: Middle East Institute, 2010), 20.

²² H. Blochmann, *Contribution to the Geography and History of Bengal* (Kolkata: Asiatic Society, 2003), 52; Choudhury, *Amader Sufiaye Kiram*, 131.

²³ Langar Khana is a free public kitchen where meal is cooked and distributed to the poor without any discrimination.

²⁴ Golam Saklayen, *Bangladeser Sufi-shadhok* (Dhaka: Islamic Foundation Bangladesh, 1982), 182.

²⁵ Maulana Jamali, *Siyar al-'Arifin* (Delhi: Matba'a Rizvi, 1893), 164–169.

that temple, and half the income of that port is dedicated to the upkeep of the public kitchen there.²⁶

Makhдум Shaikh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi's speeches on love, forgiveness, sacrifice, justice toward humanity, unity and affection inspired the oppressed people. Makhдум Jahaniyan Jahangasht (1308-1384) received some presents and sums of money from the king which Makhдум only accepted to help the poor and needy. Makhдум spend all of that wealth as alms and charity. It is said that Shah Alauddin Alaul Huq (d. 1398) spent a large sum of money in feeding the pupils, beggars and wanderers. He also provided the poor, travelers and students with food and lodging.²⁷

Abu Bakr Siddiqui (1846-1939) founded many charitable institutes, orphanages and free health centers. He was also a great educationist who realized it is only through education that he can free the society of all evils and so he founded several *madrashas*, schools and learning centers. According to al-Mannan, he did not only do meditation but also thought about and did the work for men and country. He did humanitarian work for the people untiringly. His son Abdul Qahhar Siddiqui (1940-2006) was involved in many social and charitable works and had patronized many learning centers. He was also very generous and could never see people in pain; he did lots for the oppressed and poor. He fed the servants and served them when they became sick. He was so kind to animals and would save even an ant from drowning in water. He showed kindness to orphans. As a person he was also simple.²⁸

5. Respect Towards Non-Muslims

At the advent of Islam, Bengal was predominantly a Hindu-Buddhist country and the *Brahmins* enjoyed certain superiority over all others, both politically and socially. Their oppression remained through the caste rule and other discriminatory social rules, over the *sudras*, lower class Hindus and even the Buddhists. The *sudras* and other lower class people had no access to religious book or places of worship. When Hindu-Buddhist enmity was very much present in the society, the advent of Islam by the Sufis gave

²⁶ Maulana Jamali, *Siyar al-'Arifin*, 171.

²⁷ Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslim in Bengal*, 128.

²⁸ Al-Mannan, *Furfurar Eithas*, 361.

the *sudras* their importance in both the political and social life of the country. There was no distraction between a *brahmin* and a *sudra*, a Hindu and a Buddhist.²⁹ The Muslims came in contact with the local people in various ways. Centuries of contact between the Hindus and the Muslims had profoundly influenced both, so that the social and religious life of the Muslims profoundly influenced Hinduism.³⁰ Ibn Battuta described co-existence of Hindu-Muslim in the period of Shah Jalal and distinguished people from the agrarian society of the Surma plains below the hills of Sylhet, a society and clearly identified as Hindu.³¹

Bengal Muslims were deeply influenced by local customs, Hindus and Muslims shared in each other's festivals. The Muslims brought with them their food habits, culinary, arts and dress, but they had to adjust these to the local climate.³²

Abdul Qahhar Siddiqui referred to his father's attitude towards non-Muslims:

My father said that the moonlight and sunshine are available for all. The wind blows for all irrespective of rich, poor, nation, religion and caste. Is God distributing these for men more or less? Are the crops and fish distributed more or less for Muslims and non-Muslims? If Allah treats all the same, why does your heart rend? O people! Remember that, I treat the Hindus, Buddhists and other non-Muslims how my Allah treats them. He would treat non-Muslims like the Sunnah of the Prophet. That is why most of the non-Muslims respected and rendered him. They went to Hazrat before the beginning of any new work. He never showed the harsh character towards them. So after hearing his lectures many converted to Islam.³³

²⁹ Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslim in Bengal*, 204.

³⁰ Sirajul Islam, ed. *Banglapedia (National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh)*, (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 2003), 5:312.

³¹ "The inhabitants of Habanq [near Habiganj] are infidels under protection (*dhimma*) from whom half of the crops which they produce is taken." Ibn Battuta, *The Rehla of Ibn Battuta*, 241.

³² M. Murshid Tazeen, *The Sacred and the secular Muslim Discourses (1871-1977)* (Calcutta: Oxford University press, 1995), 32.

³³ Al-Mannan, *FurfurarEtihas*, 487.

Nisaruddin Ahmed (1872-1952) was one of the influential persons to preach Islam in the Indian sub-continent, especially in the southern part of Bengal. His area was mostly inhabited by Hindus but there is no single evidence of any conflict between them and the Muslims. He came forward to help new-Muslims during their destitute time. His magnanimity, humanity, sympathy and compassion towards others are the uniqueness of his character. He treated all people the same way.

However, the principles of equality and brotherhood of man expressed by Islam came as a revolutionary force to the caste-ridden and Brahman dominated Hindu society. Muslims did not have to distinguish themselves between the high and low castes of the Hindus and all of them were on equal footing with respect to employment and education. Non-*brahman* Hindus acquired respectable positions in society through education, state, employment and literary activities patronized by the Muslim rulers. In simple terms, there was freedom for the Hindus and they welcomed Islam as their saviour from the *brahman* oppression. Islam influenced deeply the local religious and local systems. The most important influence of Islam in Bengal is to diminish the superiority of the *brahmins*.³⁴

6. Open-hearted Approaches

In general, Sufism helps to form bridges between Muslims and other religious communities and promote a spirit of humanism. The Sufis helped reinforce ties between the Hindus and Muslims in Bangladesh, when Muslims regarded Hindus to be heretics and Hindus regarded Muslims to be untouchables, just like the lower caste Hindus. Abdul Karim states, “*The Sufis reveal two important facts. First, people thought that they were endowed with superhuman power, and secondly, their Khanqahs were open to all poor, destitute, mendicants and wanderers.*”³⁵ In Bangladesh, early Sufi teachers were influenced by the language and cultural thoughts of Hinduism and Buddhism and often expressed Islamic concepts in similar terms. The Sufis also helped in maintaining peaceful and healthy relations between people of diverse religions

³⁴ Muhammad Mohar Ali, *History of the Muslim Bengal*, Vol-IB (Riyadh: Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, 1985), 805.

³⁵ Abdul Karim, *Social History of the Muslim in Bengal*, 149.

in the country. They enriched the literature and music of several languages. Sufism also was a step forward in the direction of women's empowerment. There is no restriction in a *durgah* or Sufi shrine, where men and women worship alongside each other.³⁶

Some prominent Sufis whose peaceful mission and humanitarian activities played an effective role in this land, where all people were able to enjoy divine bliss, peace of mind, security of life, honour and property and freedom of religious observance. Shah Makhdum Rupos (d. 1313) won the hearts of the local people through his noble character and excellent manners that thousands of people would gather around him every day and embrace Islam. Whoever had come to him were charmed by his passion. Newly converted-Muslims were so respectful and devoted towards him that they did not want to return to their homes after they had gone to his *khanqah*. Sometimes they settled beside his *khanqah* but he would tell them to return to their families.³⁷

7. Influence to Communal Harmony

Communal harmony had spread among the people of Bangladesh because of the spread of Sufis' spiritual thoughts. The aim of the Sufis was not merely to spread Islam, but also to spread spiritual values in society. As a result, these Sufis had become a bridge in achieving co-ordination between Hindu and Islamic religions and cultures. Because of the arrival of the Sufis, the sweetness of Arabic and Persian languages also blended into Bengali language. Islamic traditions entered Hindu culture. The Life style, customs and clothing of the new Muslim class however, remained the same.

The death anniversary of the Sufis began to be celebrated in the form of '*ursh*'³⁸. As a result, such celebration became the platform of emotional unity of both Hindu-Muslim societies.

³⁶ Alyson Callan, "Female saints and the practice of Islam in Sylhet, Bangladesh," *American Ethnologist*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2008, pp. 396-412.

³⁷ Choudhury, *Amader Sufiaye Kiram*, 70.

³⁸ *Ursh* is a fair and gathering of the Sufi disciples, where they remember their *murshid* and perform various activities designed by *khanqah*.

Under ‘*ursh*’ Sufi music and songs and ‘*kawalis*’³⁹ became the attractions of both societies.⁴⁰

Such goodwill appeared in social contacts, flourished more in religious places of faith. A large number of the Hindu society could be seen offering coconuts or flowers with faith on the shrines and mosques of Sufi saints. Thus, the communal goodwill and unity cultivated in religious faith and social, cultural, food, lifestyle and clothing domains among the people of Bengal were the contributions of Sufi saints. However, people were mostly influenced by these saints for their openness towards people of other religions and helped to establish a society with religious harmony.

Conclusion

From the above discussion we can say that Sufism has played a vital role in promoting religious harmony in Bangladesh. The Sufis educated the new Muslims in religious principles, helped the poor and needy, attracted the local people, converted them into Islam and occupied a respectful position in the socio-religious life of Bengal. The Sufis penetrated a new spirit of tolerance, brotherhood, equality, and universal love in this country so that the masses accepted Islam while Hinduism was deeply affected as visible in reforming the brahmin society. All people irrespective of caste, creed, race, sex and religion loved the Sufis. They taught people about humanity, human relations based on judicial equality and the importance, greatness and comprehensiveness of Sufism. It helped the people to be clear and clean and their heart became sacred, filled with divine love. That is why human beings and humanity occupy principal place in Sufism. The spiritual power and noble character of the Sufis won the hearts of the local people. Actually, the ‘*khanqahs*’ of the Sufis were the centres of reconciliation of Hindus and Muslims.

³⁹ *Qawwali* is an energetic and divisional music performance of Sufis that aims to lead listeners to a state of religious ecstasy — to a spiritual union with Allah (God).

⁴⁰ Peter J. Bertocci, “A Sufi movement in Bangladesh: the Majbhandari Tariqa and its followers”, pp. 1-28.

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