

## **The Sufis and the Political Authorities in Medieval Assam : A Historical Study**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Sufism is Islamic mysticism which is applied to a class of Muslim spiritualists who created a different section through their ascetic exercise, contemplation and renunciation under the main rules of Islam. It has been defined as the belief that knowledge of God and real truth may be reached by directing one's mind or through spiritual insight. This mystic dimension of Islam formally originated in Persia in the eighth century. Later on the Sufi philosophy was spread all over the world. The relationship of the Sufis with the political authority is a complex phenomenon. The Sufis relationship with the state can be divided into two broad themes, namely, the conflictual or oppositional and cordial or friendly relationships. Sufism experienced both kinds of relations with the political authorities in the northeastern region of India under the period of review. This will focus on how royal powers had made significant contribution to the growth and development of Sufi tradition in the northeastern region so that the spread of Sufism took place all over the region and touched the hearts of the common masses during the period under review.

**KEYWORDS:** Sufi Saints, Political Powers, Medieval Assam, Their Relation

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### **I. MAIN PAPER:**

Sufism is Islamic mysticism which is applied to a class of Muslim spiritualists who created a different section through their ascetic exercise, contemplation and renunciation under the main rules of Islam. Mysticism is generally believed to be associated with mysterious fact. It has been defined as the belief that knowledge of God and real truth may be reached by directing one's mind or through spiritual insight.<sup>1</sup> This mystic dimension of Islam formally originated in Persia in the eighth century. Later on the Sufi philosophy was spread all over the world.

The relationship of the Sufis with the political authority is a complex phenomenon. The complexity lies in the different response of the Sufis towards the political powers either being engaged in the politics or being refrain from it. There were diverse approaches to this among the Sufis of various regions and *silsilahs* or orders. Some of them avoided any contact with the kings and ministry and discouraged any political association. On the other hand, some Sufis had direct contacts with the political authority in a positive way. Similarly, some of the rulers sought counsel of the Sufis for their personal problems as well as state affairs. That is why, they patronized the Sufis. Some of the rulers thought it better not to interfere in the affairs of the Sufis and allow their *Khankahs* undisturbed whereas other rulers tried to hold control on the Sufi shrines as well. The Sufis relationship with the state can be divided into two broad themes, namely, the conflictual or oppositional and cordial or friendly relationships. Sufism experienced both kinds of relations with the political authorities in the northeastern region of India under the period of review.

#### **I**

The existence of many important Sufi Shrines in Assam indicates that like some other parts of India, Assam also did not lag behind in welcoming the spiritual mission of the Sufi saints. Therefore, they had to face encounter with the royal powers. Actually, before the coming of the Ahoms the region was known as Kamarupa which mainly included Brahmaputra Valley, Barak Valley, and some parts of Bhutan, Rangpur, Mymensing, Sylhet and Koch Behar.<sup>2</sup> In medieval Period, Koch and Ahom kingdoms emerged as two strong powers in this region. The territories of south-east Bengal sometimes became the part of these two kingdoms and sometimes worked as tributary states as the rulers kept on attempting to revive the earlier boundary of Kamarupa.<sup>3</sup> In 1613 AD, the Mughals annexed the kingdom of Koch Hajo including Kamarupa and Hajo regions from Karibari Hills in the south west to the Barnadi in the east.<sup>4</sup>

Muslims penetrated into this region as traders, invaders, *Pirs* or Sufi saints, administrators, migrants and immigrants. The Sufi saints were the missionary activists who came with the invading army. Sometimes, they were sent by their spiritual guide to propagate Sufism in this region and sometimes they came as warrior saints. Therefore, in every aspect they had to come across with the royal powers of this region such as Kamata, Koch and Mughal in the eastern part of Assam and Ahom kingdom in the western part of Assam.

## II

The Bengal frontier marked the advent of Sufism in Assam. The Muslim invasion was one of the major forces behind it. The Turkish Muslim people established a strong kingdom in Bengal in the thirteenth century. The Sufi saints played an important role both in the social life of the people and in the royal court too. But their main aim was preaching the main doctrines of Islam. The Sufi saints sometimes came along with the invaders and sometimes as missionaries to spread their doctrines. The region of Assam attracted the saints of Bengal because this region had a peculiar socio-religious development that was outside the mainstream of Indian life.<sup>5</sup> It was largely inhabited by Mongoloid races and they practiced spirit worship, magic and sorcery; in certain remote parts human sacrifices were in vogue.<sup>6</sup>

Assam first came into direct contact with the Muslims in 1205-06, when Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji marched to Tibet and invaded Kamarupa.<sup>7</sup> Though he failed in his expedition, it had its impact on the geo-political set up of this region. The earliest reference of the conversion of a Mech chief, Ali, is found during Bakhtiyar Khalji's march through north Bengal.<sup>8</sup>

Shaikh Jalaluddin Tabrezi was one of the earliest visitors to this region. He worked as a pioneer in the origin of Sufism in Assam. The name first appears in *Siyar-al-Arifin*, which is a compendium of Sufi biographies compiled around 1530-36 and Tabrezi died in 1244-45, so it was written three centuries after his death.<sup>9</sup> So, it is mainly based on memories and legends. For example, in that account it was described that Tabrezi destroyed temples, but there is no contemporary evidence that shows that he or any Sufi saint actually indulged in the destruction of temples.<sup>10</sup> His coming to Assam is also testified by the Moroccan traveller Ibn Batuta in his work *Relha*. Many translators of Ibn Batuta's work mention that the saint was Shal Jalal of Sylhet and not Shaikh Tabrezi.<sup>11</sup> But the year mentioned in his account is 1345 AD and Shal Jalal of Sylhet died in the year 1340 AD.<sup>12</sup> The other details provided in *Relha*, such as the travels of the saint and his longevity proved that the saint was Jalaluddin Tabrezi. He did not stay here for a long time. But, he still made a pioneering contribution to the process of Islamisation and the emergence of Sufism in this region. During that period his relation with the local authorities is not known, but immense influence of activities shows the support of the local authorities during that period.

Earlier Sylhet was the centre of Barak and Surma valley, formerly in Assam now in Bangladesh was a Hindu Kingdom. A man named Burhan Uddin who was inhabitant of that region, sacrificed a cow for his son and this act displeased the king of the kingdom, Gor Govind. As a punishment he killed his son and chopped his right hand. On receipt of the news of this barbarous act of the king, Sikandar Shah marched against Gor Govind, but was defeated by the king.<sup>13</sup> In the next expedition, he joined with Shah Jalal, the famous Sufi saint who was searching for appropriate land to settle down with his 360 followers.<sup>14</sup> In that battle Gor Govind was defeated and Shah Jalal settled there with his followers. Then he started to preach Islam and for that purpose he sent his followers to the neighboring regions like Karimganj, Cachar, Jayantiya Hills, Garo Hills etc. Several shrines were established by his followers in the Barak valley in later period, but no evidence is found on their relation with the local chieftains of that region.

A silver coin of Sikandar Shah (1357-89) minted at '*Chawalitan urf Kamru*' dated 759 A. H. had led the scholars to come into the conclusion that this monarch invaded Kamarupa in 1357 AD<sup>15</sup> or that his father, Sultan Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah (1342-57) conquered and occupied this land.<sup>16</sup> However, Stapteton points out that Sikandar Shah's activities were confined to the north of Mymensingh, which was a part of Kamarupa kingdom during that period.<sup>17</sup> His name is associated with Shah Jalal of Sylhet, the famous Sufi saint of Eastern Bengal and Assam of 14<sup>th</sup> century. According to local tradition Sikandar Shah drowned in the Surma River while crossing by a boat. But, the people of Barak valley and Surma valley still remember him as a Sufi saint and companion of Shah Jalal. The History of Bengal adds that during the time of Sikandar Shah's invasion Indra Narayan was the ruler of Kamata Kingdom on the basis of the chronology prepared by N. N. Basu. But, it is more probable that Durlabh Narayan was that ruler in the early years of third quarter of fourteenth century when a part of Kamarupa was invaded by a warrior of the Ilyas Shahi Sultanate of Bengal.<sup>18</sup>

K. L. Baruah considers an expedition into Kamarupa about 1321-22 AD undertaken by Sultan Ghiyasuddin.<sup>19</sup> Some scholars have the opinion that he was the famous Sufi saint, whose tomb is situated in Hajo. But, many scholars disagree in this view. An invasion of Kamarupa by Muhammad bin Tughlaq in 1337-38 AD is mentioned in the *Alamgir Nama*.<sup>20</sup> But, during that period, the kings of Kamarupa who faced these invaded armies are not known.

The next invasion of Kamarupa Kingdom from Bengal Sultanate was led by Shah Ismail Gazi, appointed by Sultan Ruknuddin Barbak Shah for this purpose. He was also a military cum Sufi leader who invaded Kamarupa Kingdom in 1460 AD. The Persian Manuscript *Risalat-ush-Shuhada* has recorded that Sultan Barbak Shah had suffered several defeat in the expeditions against Kameswar, the Raja of Kamarupa. The Sultan thought the witchcraft of this region to be the reason of their defeat so the generalship of the next invasion fell on Ismail Gazi, who was a Sufi saint. Formerly, he had defeated Gajapati, the king of Orissa. He defeated the king of Kamarupa and forced to pay tribute to the Sultan. But soon, Bhandsi Rai, a commander of

the frontier post of Ghoraghat, got jealous of the popularity and fame of the Ismail Gazi and sent false report to the Sultan that he was conspiring with Kameswar against the Sultan. The enraged Sultan ordered him to be beheaded.<sup>21</sup>In the *PahshahBuraji*, he was mentioned as Masalanda Gazi.<sup>22</sup> Now, the confusion is who Kameswar, the Raja of Kamarupa was, as no one of the three Khen rulers of Kamatapura of the late fifteenth century is known to have borne the name Kameswar. But during that period, Kameswara became a common epithet for all monarchs of Kamata kingdom. So, it can be said that Kameswara was one of the three Khen kings, who had a much flourished kingdom during that time. The ultimate overthrow of the Khen, however, came when Alauddin Hussain Shah, independent Sultan of Bengal invaded Kamatapur in 1498 AD.<sup>23</sup> S. K. Bhuyan states that after the decline of Khen dynasty, Hussain Shah appointed Danyal Shah as the faujadar of Hajo. After his death in the hands of Bhuyan chieftains, Ghiyasuddin Auliya, the famous Sufi saint of Hajo took the charge.<sup>24</sup>

Hence, the Sufi saints and the Kamata Kings stood as rivalries as the Sufi saints came as invader or with the invading army. During that period, they did not consolidate and just introduced the doctrine of Sufism in this region. Ghiyasuddin Auliya started the Sufi mystic tradition by establishing a *Khankah* in Hajo which later came to be known as Powa Macca.

Muslim invasions in Koch Kingdom paved the way for the expansion of Islam in this region. Towards the early phase of the thirteenth century the preaching of Islam spread in western Kamarupa and then many Muslim saints or *Pirs* came in the kingdom and preached their religious and spiritual teachings.<sup>25</sup> But long before some Muslim preachers also came in Bangladesh. The coins of emperor Harun-Al-Rashid has been found in the remains of Pahar pur, Rajshahi district. According to some historians this coins were the outcome of trading relations with the Arabs.<sup>26</sup> The famous Muslim saints or *pirs* were Torsa pir, Shah pir, Shah Garib Kamal, Giasuddin Aulia, Shah Sultan, Maulana Keramat Ali, Moulana Ekramul Haque and Kalu Saheb. The *pirs* had established *khankah* which became the centre for the propagation of Islam. The evidence of conflict between Sufi saints and Koch Kings cannot be found and the existence of so many Sufi shrines in Koch Kingdom proves that the Koch kings were the patrons of the Sufi saints.

During the occupation of Kamarup by the Mughals they took up the work of improving the mosques, *khankahs* and temples in the period between 1558 and 1639 AD.<sup>27</sup> The shrine of Ghiyasuddin Auliya at Hajo was then found in damage condition, on which the present *dargah* was built. An inscription on the wall of the mosque near the tomb says that during the reign of Emperor Shah Jahan and governorship of Shujauddin Muhammad Shah in Gaur and Koch Hajo, the foundation of the shrine at Sujabad (Hajo) was laid by Lutfullah Siraji and the construction was completed by Lutfullah's son Niamatulla in the month of June, 1657.<sup>28</sup>

After the completion of the construction of the mosque and shrine at the Garudachal Hill, Muhammad Shujauddin made a land grant in 1656 AD to a person named Halkhayal and his descendents for the maintenance. The grant refers to Halkhayal as the *Mejwar* or keeper of the tomb of Giasuddin at Sujabad (Hajo) on the Garudachal Hill.<sup>29</sup> The deed of land grant provided that the grantee might use the income of the lands for their maintenance and engaged themselves in prayer for the eternity and welfare of the Mughal rule. In 1657AD, Mughal emperor Aurangajeb besides confirming the land grant by Shujauddin, also granted more lands to the *dargah* in favour of Mortaza, the son of Halkhayal on similar conditions.<sup>30</sup> For more than hundred years Halkhayal and his descendents had been holding these lands. In the meantime this part of Kamrupa came under the occupation of Ahom kings.

Islamic religious institution like *dargahs* was greatly patronized by the Ahom monarch. They considered the Muslim saints to be persons of high regard and made land grants to the *dargahs* and *Maqams*. The *dargah* of Hajo was really popular among the other saints. So, in the *dargah* of Hajo many Sufi saints were laid at rest at different times. Hazi Anowar Fakir was predominant among them who had flourished around 1780 AD, because a copper plate inscription of Ahom king Lakshmi Singha issued in the same year in favour of the saint of Hajo.<sup>31</sup> The inscription relates that the king placed Hazi Anowar Fakir of a family of Persian reader of Assam, in charge of the *maqams* of those Fakirs and he was granted revenue free land with a number of servitors.

Ahom king Kamaleswar Singha who reigned during 1794-1809 AD, made an enquiry of into the land grants that were made by the earlier rulers in 1804. After the enquiry the lands that were granted earlier to the *Dargah* by the Mughal and Ahom rulers were confirmed by the king by a deed called *Siddantapatrain* favour of *Khadim* of Hajo *Dargah*, Gadar Shah, who was the last *Khadim* from Halkhayal's descendents.<sup>32</sup> These lands were called *Pirpal* lands as they were granted to a *Pir* for his *Pal* which means support and for maintaining the shrine at Hajo. After British occupation of Assam, the British government again made an enquiry of these granted lands and confirmed under the Lakheraj enquiry made in 1870s.

There are also examples of clash between Sufi saints and Ahom monarchs. Azan Fakir was one of the most famous Sufi saints of Assam who had flourished in the seventeenth century. His growing popularity had become threat and a matter of concern to the Ahom king Gadadhar Singha. Azan Fakir could not escape the opposition and hostility which come as the lot of every reformer. His activities were misinterpreted to the Ahom

king by one of his official Rupai Gariya. His two eyeballs were got extracted which regrettable is elaborately described in his *Zikirs* (Assamese Sufi Song). Consequently, there was a heavy downpour and a big flood in 1642 AD, which caused a great havoc in the kingdom. When the king learnt about the saint's innocence he repented and begged for forgiveness. The fakir excused him and in his the king sentenced the complainer to death and granted a monastery and revenue free land to the saint.<sup>33</sup>

The Sufi saints had experienced as both bitter and sweet relations with local political authorities in the medieval period. Except the Mughals, the other powers like the Koch, the Kamata and the Ahom were Hindus. Still they provided land grants and patronage to the Sufi saints. As a result of this the Sufis preached universal brotherhood, equality and fraternity in the society irrespective caste, creed, religion and gender so that a kind of syncretic culture was developed in the region. Some clashes were visible there but that were not so serious, because the Assamese society did not have rigid caste system. The neo-Vaishnava movement also created a common platform for all people from every caste, creed and religion. The Sufi saints gave indigenous colour to Sufi traditions by using Assamese idioms and making a close interaction with the Vaishnavite cult of Sankardeva. All these work helped Assamese people to from their lives in a new way discouraging the entire barrier among them. Though, the Fakirs mainly used Assamese language form writing the songs, but they bravely used Arabic, Persian and Urdu words and sometimes whole sentence. This has two consequences, firstly some word had been included in Assamese and Bengali language in course of time and secondly they were used in the letters of Ahom royalty and in the conversation of Muslims of Assam. This shows the close relation between the Sufi saints with the Ahom sovereigns leading to a cultural assimilation and universal harmony.

The popularity of *Dargah* still the present day proves that they received very good response from the people of Assam especially from the lower caste and poor people. Incidentally, poverty was one of the main rules of Sufism and most saints preferred to stay in poverty. The Sufi saints were called *Fakirs* as their livelihood was very simple and poor. This helped the saints to get close to the local people. They Sufi saints reduced the difference between Muslims and non-Muslims by bringing about similarity in customs and manners. The Sufi saints of Assam always maintained cordial relation with the local authorities accepting grants for their development. But they did not take part in the political affairs and always chose their field away from the government. However, the royal powers had made significant contribution to the growth and development of Sufi tradition in the northeastern region so that the spread of Sufism took place all over the region and touched the hearts of the common masses during medieval period.

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES:

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<sup>3</sup>S. K. Bhuyan, *Studies in the History of Assam*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1985, p.21.

<sup>4</sup>J.N. Sarkar, *The History of Bengal*, B. R. Publishing Cooperation, Delhi, 2007, p. 287, reprint.

<sup>5</sup>Richard M. Eaton, *op.cit.*, p. 346.

<sup>6</sup>*ibid.*, p. 346.

<sup>7</sup>S. L. Baruah, *op.cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>8</sup>F. A. Qadri, Sufis and the Process of Islamisation in the Pre-Colonial North-East India in *Society and Economy in Northeast India*, Vol-2, F. A. Qadri (ed.), Regency Publication, New Delhi, 2006, p. 346.

<sup>9</sup>Richard M. Eaton, *op.cit.*, p. 73.

<sup>10</sup>*ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>11</sup>Mohammad Yahya Tamizi, *op.cit.*, p. 357.

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