

Sufi Mysticism and Indian Religions

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The spread of Islam in India took place as an indirect consequence of the peaceful activities of the Sufis as well as acculturation and assimilation spread over several generations. Sufi mysticism and Buddhism have several commonalities in terms of metaphysical doctrines as well as practical training. Thomas Cleary has identified some of them. According to him, both Buddhism and Sufi mysticism lay emphasis on the usefulness of meditation for spiritual growth and meditation themes common to both include the powerlessness and nothingness of the self, the inevitability of death, the impermanence of all phenomena, and the inconceivability of truth. In addition to silent meditation, recitation and incantation of sacred writ, invocations and litanies, and mnemonic formulae also form common grounds between the two.¹ The role of the Sufis in proselytization was rather indirect, in the sense that such commonalities and the work as well as life-style of the Sufis went a long way in gaining Indian people's sympathy towards Islam. Otherwise, the Sufis were much happier when they helped one who was already a Muslim to become a better Muslim than when they saw a non-Muslim become a Muslim.² The most important contribution made by the Sufis was that they furnished Islam's philosophical point of contact with religions of Indic origin.³ It was through such contacts, fostered by the simplicity and broad humanism of the Sufis that Islam obtained its largest number of free converts and it is in this sense that they may be considered missionaries.⁴ In India, as pointed out by Trimmingham, Islam seems to have been “a holy-man Islam” where the Sufis acquired an aura of holiness. It was this aura of holiness which attracted Indians to the Sufis, rather than formal Islam.⁵ Well-documented research has suggested that a great majority of the Indian Muslims are descendants of converts in whose conversion coercion played no role.⁶

Conversion to Islam in India can be put into three different categories: individual conversion, group conversion, and assimilation and acculturation. The first category consisted of those individuals - including pious Buddhist and Brahmanical ascetics - who embraced Islam voluntarily as a matter of conviction, for personal benefits, or under the influence and moral persuasions of the Sufis. It has been correctly pointed out that Islam was no champion of egalitarianism, or for that matter, of the cause of so-called

suppressed people of India. It is manifestly incorrect to say that the people belonging to lower ranks of the caste- hierarchy in Brahmanical-Hinduism embraced Islam for the sake of social justice. It is also patently wrong to say that Buddhists were attracted towards Islam because they saw Islamic egalitarianism as being compatible with the Buddha's views on caste system and other forms of inequality. There is neither any evidence of a direct assault either from the state or the Muslims upon the caste system nor is there any evidence of a revolt from within.⁷ As pointed out by Irfan Habib, there is no sign of commitment to any such equality in the writings of Islamic theologians and scholars of the period. While Brahmanical-Hindus were often denounced as 'infidels,' polytheists, and image-worshippers, there is in the entire range of medieval Islamic literature, no word of criticism of the caste system, the theory of pollution, and the oppression of untouchables that characterized medieval Brahmanical-Hinduism. "Indeed, the sanction for full- fledged slavery in Islamic law should strongly modify any attribution of equality to historical Islam"⁸ R.M. Eaton has also rejected the 'religion of social liberation' theory on the ground that not only the Muslim intellectuals had not stressed the Islamic ideal of social equality as opposed to Brahmanical-Hindu caste but also because the converted Brahmanical-Hindu communities had failed to improve their status in the social hierarchy and that, on the contrary, "they singly carried over into Muslim society the same practice of birth-ascribed rank that they had in Hindu society."⁹ But nevertheless the lower castes did not have much to lose by switching over to Islam, if nothing else than simply for various opportunities that this label of being a Muslim may have offered to them, especially the opportunities that were particularly getting diminished within the Brahmanical-Hindu environment. The pursuit of patronage is one of the most cited incentives to religio-cultural conversion. A person directly dependent on the state for a living might see it beneficial to join the cultural group. Thus, converting to Islam enhanced one's chances of advancement in the job. Muslim control of commercial activity also created favourable conditions for Islamization. A businessman could feel that being a Muslim would not only lead to better contacts and cooperation with other Muslim businessmen both within the country and overseas, but he would also enjoy the benefits of Islamic laws that regulated commerce and also the amiable conditions extended by Muslim officials to their co-religionists.

In the second category may be included those people or groups of people who embraced Islam nominally in the light of their leaders' conversion. Such a commitment to Islam may also have been made possible by economic and political considerations. The third category consisted of a large majority of commoners who experienced the gradual impact of Islamic acculturation on their social life through their contact with Muslim settlers or

the Sufis. Syncretism appears as a crucial stage rather than as the culmination of the process vis-a-vis Islam.¹⁰ Islamization took place most profoundly (and irrevocably) in the succeeding generation, since the convert's children in principle were raised within the father's new community, instead of his original one.¹¹

The most crucial hurdle in conversion from Indic religions to religions based in Judeo-Christian tradition appears to be social rather than spiritual - the opposition of the prospective converts brethren and the hesitation in giving up kinship ties and caste-based affiliations.¹² Moreover, most of the converts were initially at least, ill-grounded in Islamic religious precepts, practices, and traditions, and remained attached to and rooted in their pre-existing non-Muslim traditions. The change from one religious tradition to the other was a slow and prolonged one taking many bypaths and extending over several generations.¹³ Such a gradual process of acculturation and gravitation began as a loosening of old religious and social ties rather than for saking these ties right away by adopting the new religious tradition.¹⁴ Thus, as far as Islam was concerned, the process of Islamization at the social level was a process of Islamic acculturation in which individuals and groups gradually broke ties with their traditional beliefs following a road that eventually ended with their adherence to the Shari'ah-bound structure of Islam. Such a hypothesis is supported by R.M. Eaton,¹⁵ who has argued that the singing of Sufi folk songs by women at their household tasks suffused non-Muslim family life with Sufi values. By taking human psychology into account, the Sufis established their *khankhas* (hospices) and *dargahs* (shrines) at places which had acquired a reputation for sanctity prior to the arrival of Islam in India.¹⁶

Another interesting feature about the spread of Islam was that those region of eastern India where Islam gained heavily were considerably free of Brahmanical influence. In fact, the case of early medieval Bengal appears to be exceptional within the Indian subcontinent. This region presented itself as a world of shifting beliefs and social allegiances, religious questing, and social and geographical mobility, making it a domain of bonafide syncretism of belief and conduct which was more multifaceted than any other part of the Indian subcontinent.¹⁷ In a material milieu such as this the reverence towards *pirs* extended far beyond the reach of saints and holy men and as a matter of fact, there existed a complete pantheon consisting of apotheosized warriors, pioneering settlers on reclaimed wastelands, metamorphosed Brahmanicals- Hindu and Buddhist deities, and anthropomorphized animistic spirits and belief.¹⁸

East Bengal (roughly the territory represented by the present day Muslim country of Bangladesh) located far from centers of Islamic power, came to have the highest concentration of Muslim population in the Indian subcontinent. The credit for this goes to

the success of Sufi missions.¹⁹ After the Mongol invasions of Islamic lands across Central Asia, many Sufis moved into eastern India where their previous familiarity with converting Buddhists had far reaching consequences. The activities of these Sufis, Brahmanical-Hinduism's revival movements such as *Advaita*, and the rise of the syncretic *Sakti* movement, contributed significantly to the realignment of beliefs. In such an environment Brahmanical-Hinduism to a smaller extent and Turkish tribes to a greater extent drew not only the indigenous masses to swell their ranks²⁰ but also prospered at the cost of Buddhism which had totally fallen to pieces by this time. Islam essentially had an urban character till it reached Bengal where it moved into the countryside. This may also explain its spread among the tribal people and rural communities in Bengal. But at the same time, one must not ignore "the temper of Hinduism, which finds it easier than Islam to bring new sects and doctrines within its spiritual hegemony."²¹ Upper caste Hindus due to conceited pride in the purity and hence superiority of their religion were more likely to resist conversion to a religion based in the Judo-Christian tradition in sharp contrast to low caste Brahmanical-Hindus, Buddhists, and tribal people who were less likely to put any mechanism in place against the winds of Islamic acculturation. In fact, it has been suggested that some elements among these segments of the Bengali society looked rather agreeably towards the successes of the Turks in Bengal. For instance, giving an account of conversion to Islam in Bengal, I.H. Qureshi has pointed out that the *Sunya Purana*, a sacred book of the Dharma cult of Mahayana Buddhism, has interpolations, inserted after the conquests by Turkish tribes in Bengal, suggesting that Buddhists in Bengal regarded Muslims as their well-wishers vis-a-vis Brahmanical-Hindus. According to him, the *Dharma gajan* rituals include "sentiments of respect and admiration for Islam and a faith in its ultimate destiny.... Such sentiments themselves constitute almost a halfway house towards the acceptance of Islam."²²

The pantheistic mysticism of the Upanisads and the devotional mysticism of the *Bhakti* and *Sahajiya* movements based in Vaisnavism presented Sufism with a golden opportunity for rapid growth and dissemination in India.²³ Moreover, after its transformation in India, "Sufism took on the role of a bridge- builder between Arabic and Turkic notions of polity, culture and religion on the one side and their Indic counterparts on the other. Such an attitude must have further helped Sufi ideas to gain wide popularity by capturing the attention of both the masses, and elites. Such ideas, thus introduced, got soon assimilated with the prevalent *Sahajiya* ideas and the result of this amalgamation was the Bauls of Bengal. Murshida-songs of the Bauls are a good example of the commingling of the Indian spirit with the spirit of Sufism. The heterodox spirit of the Bauls, *Sahajiyana*, and Sufism was another meeting point between them. The religious

contents of Sufism were in no way foreign to the mass-mind of India; it is for this reason that Sufism became easily acceptable to the masses. Indian ascetics travelling in pairs and staying not more than three days at one place were directly known to the Muslim adepts, who took from them their fourfold vows of cleanliness, purity, truth, poverty and Sufi features such as the monastic strain, use of rosaries, the attainment of *karamat* or *mujjza* (miraculous powers), *suluk* or - *tariqah* (spiritual path), *muraqabah/maraqabah* (meditation), the doctrine of *fana* (Nirvana) and the system of *maqamat* (stages) on road to being an *al-insanul-kamil* (perfect man) indicate influence of Buddhism.²⁴

In the long run, the *dargahs* and *khanaqahs* played an important role in proselytization as their appeal went far beyond the divisive walls of caste and creed. They acted as an effective syncretic force integrating the non-Muslims into the Islamic community in a land that was characterized by multifariousness in terms of religion, belief and custom.²⁵ Besides, as pointed out by E.A. Mann, the *dargahs* owned, and their administration controlled, considerable economic resources in the forms of property, land and cash income. They became a symbol of power both spiritual and secular-spiritual in the sense of association with God and fulfillment of earthly desires through acceptance of prayer (*du'a*) secular in the sense that economic wealth and social status could be transmitted to the individuals concerned with their administration.²⁶

Khanaqah was the humble rest house where wandering Sufis could lead a devotional life under the tutelage of some master. The village *khanaqahs*, howsoever humble they might have been, offered lodgings and refreshments to travellers and helped the more religious villagers to sharpen their spiritual awareness through *zikr* (invocation of God through recitation, singing, instrumental music, dance, costumes, incense, meditation, ecstasy, and trance). The *khanaqahs* also provided both Muslim and non-Muslim villagers with amulets, talismans, and charms designed to prevent sickness, disease, misfortune, 'damage to crops by natural calamities and other catastrophes. The mutual interpenetration of Sufi ethics and the non-Muslim way of life took place more intensely in the *khanaqahs* of villages and small towns than in large urban centres, where Muslim and non-Muslim communal groups led a more self-centred and exclusive life, coming into contact with each other mainly because of their mutual economic and political needs.

Sufis, who within the framework of Islam attempted to achieve direct communion with God, were the natural religious guides of the people whom men and women from cross-sections of the society solicited for spiritual guidance and worldly advice. Their miraculous powers and social values attracted non Muslims towards them. Interestingly, social interaction between the Sufis and the local population worked towards slow and steady conversion to Islam in the framework of different Sufi orders as this kind of

interaction intended to break down social and communal barriers. Many of the Sufi saints and poets for their poetical compositions derived and acquired images and similes from daily life. Their ample and appropriate use made it further convenient even for the unlettered people to understand their content and grasp their meanings easily. Emphasizing equality of the Muslims and non-Muslims and refuting the concepts of *kufar* so far as it applied to dealing with people of other faiths became a common theme for many Sufi poets. The Sufi mystics played an extremely important role in reaching past the inhibitions and prejudices and building bridges of communication and understanding between conflicting faiths. The anti-particularist, anti-clerical, and anti-ritualistic thrust of the teachings of the Sufi poets laid the foundations of bringing non-Muslims into the Islamic fold.

The rate of conversion was indeed very low in those places of northern India which were the strongholds of Muslim power. In the south too it was minimal. But in Bengal especially in its inaccessible eastern parts, it was very high. Some forced conversions did happen, but census data prove that most of these converts must have lapsed. The most famous examples of reconversion were the brothers Harihara and Bukka, founders of the great Hindu empire Vijayanagara (1336-1565), who were forced to convert to Islam by Muhammad Tughlaq in 1327. The most striking example of mass reconversion happened in Kamataka where Tipu Sultan (1750-1799) required that all his citizens convert to Islam. The ineffectiveness of royal proselytism may be measured by the fact that today only five percent of the population in the region ruled by Tipu is Muslim, while the adjoining Malabar Coast has thirty percent Muslims,²⁷ primarily because they settled in this area as peaceful traders in the eighth century. With regard to voluntary conversion, one would expect a direct correlation between areas controlled by the Delhi Sultans and the Mughal emperors and highest Muslim population. But census data does not support this. Thus, voluntary conversions and conversions as a result of royal proselytism seem to have been only insignificant contributory factors. Moreover, the Muslims, who settled on the western borders or on the Malabar Coast from the eighth century onwards, came in small communities and did not produce any large disturbance in the settled populations. The fluid mass of thought and religion had therefore time to settle.

When Xuanzong visited Kashmir in the seventh century, Buddhism had passed its prime and Vaisnava and Saiva sects had been gaining ground at its coast. However, there is evidence of its survival in Kashmir till at least the twelfth century during which period it continued to enjoy the patronage of some nobles and rulers. But, by the time of Marco Polo's travels in the thirteenth century, the valley of Kashmir appears to have become almost entirely Brahmanical-Hindu. At this time Buddhism survived only in small

pockets and there was a small number of Muslim converts.²⁸

Thereafter, Kashmir's transition to Islam took place gradually over a period of nearly five centuries. During this period, Brahmanical-Hindu population and the last vestiges of Buddhism adopted Islam through a gradual process of acculturation, at the centre of which were the Sufis and *Rsis*. Thus, as far as Buddhism was concerned, it may be said with certainty that the decline of Buddhism had begun long before king Rinchana, the son of a Buddhist Ladakhi chief, laid the foundations of first Muslim dynasty in Kashmir in 1320 CE. After having moved into the valley, Rinchana, a soldier of fortune, captured the throne of Kashmir and embraced Islam. His establishment of a *khanqah*, the first of its kind in Srinagar, may be seen as an indicator of his keen interest in the diffusion of Islamic culture in Kashmir. The Buddhist followers of Rinchana who had accompanied him from Ladakh to Kashmir also appear to have adopted Islam after Rinchana's assumption of political power and subsequent conversion.²⁹ It has been suggested that Rinchana's conversion to Islam was neither an isolated case nor was it merely a matter of political expediency.³⁰ In fact, this event is seen as an indicator of the fact that though Buddhism may have still remained in monasteries, it was no longer available as a power-base, possibly not even as the religion of any significant number of households, whereas a sizeable converted Muslims nucleus had already appeared in the urban centre of Kashmir.³¹ Moreover, Rinchana may have taken into consideration the possible political and economic benefits of being a Muslim king at a time when kings with Islamic affiliations were ruling in the plains of northern India.

Though Kashmir had been the abode of *Rsis* long before the advent of Islam, Nuruddin, the son of a Hindu convert, gave a special direction to the role of *Rsis* in the Kashmiri society. He was able to accomplish this through his social behaviour which was more in consonance with local practices than those of scholars, jurists or Sufi missionaries. Nuruddin, who is known as the founding father of an indigenous order of Muslim mystics (*Rsi Silsilahs*) is credited with making the *Rsi* movement socially significant in Kashmir. It may be pointed out that some scholars consider the *Rsi* movement as only "marginally Muslim" and equate it with the Bhakti Movement³² said to have been founded in Kashmir by Lal Dcd, the Saivite mystic of the fourteenth century.³³ The thinking of these *Rsis* was nurtured in their Hindu and Buddhist environment which appears to have played an important role in helping the main configuration of pre-existing Kashmiri popular religion to adapt itself to the wider Islamic framework. Even during Nuruddin's time and long after his death when the *Rsi* movement was strong, Brahmanical ascetics had a large following among the illiterate masses of Kashmir. Such people were drawn into the fold of Nuruddin and other Muslim *Rsis* since they did not see much difference between the

goals espoused by the Muslim Rsis and their own. Thus the Rsi movement, apart from being largely characterized by elements of social protest, became a haven for the surviving vestiges of Brahmanical ascetic tradition to exist in Islam. It is interesting to note that asceticism of the Brahmanical saints converted to Islam was particularly suited to provide a framework for the survival of such residues and the assimilation and reinterpretation of elements as were not totally incompatible with the esoteric dimension of Islam.³⁴ Nuruddin and his followers shared with the Hindu-Buddhist ascetics such traits as wandering in the forests, not taking meat, avoidance of onions and green vegetables, fasting, sexual abstinence, austerities, celibacy, self-deprecation, relative seclusion, altruism, deep meditative exercises, supererogatory prayers and above all, non-injury even to plants, birds, animals, insects etc. Such practices of the Rsis "must have weakened the contrast in the common mind between Islam and Hinduism or Buddhism thereby paving the way for the acceptance of the values of an alien system"³⁵

The Rsi concept of peace with all was borrowed from Mahayana Buddhism which flourished in the Kashmir valley.

While the role of the *Rsis* and immigrant Sufis from Central Asia and Persia cannot be denied in conversions, it would be wrong to attribute the so-called 'dramatic mass conversions' of Kashmir to their miraculous exploits. Their activities leading to certain individual conversions might have been followed by group conversions in a social milieu characterized by the powerful belief in the spirituality of saints. As elsewhere in India, many people appear to have accepted Islam in Kashmir nominally in the wake of their leader's conversion or due to political and economic motives. Initially this process generally consisted of the converts' passive adherence to Islam, but in the end progressed into harmony with the *Shari'ah*. Such a process is also visible in the religious career of Nuruddin, whose efforts to bring about reconciliation between Muslim and Brahmanical-Hindu/Buddhist practices opened the doors to the gradual acculturation of the Kashmiri masses into Islamic identity. The survival of pre-Islamic names among the *Rsis* and continued existence of the pre-Islamic customs and beliefs is also a clear indication of Kashmiri's experiencing a gradual cultural and religious shift. Like in East Bengal, as a result of this prolonged and gradual acculturation, extending over a period of at least five centuries, a considerable part of the Kashmiri population either became Muslim or was understood to be so.

On the whole, the role of the Sufis in the conversion of Brahmanical-Hindus and tribal communities to Islam in India was, though quite important, largely an indirect one. Prolonged and slow acculturation and assimilation spread over a long period of time must be seen as the force behind these conversions. The Sufis basically contributed towards

doing away with the distances between the Muslims and the non-Muslims. As far as Buddhism was concerned, except for parts of eastern India, the Sufis did not play any significant role. The simple reason for this was that Buddhism had become a spent force in India by the time the Sufis began their work. Thus only remnants of Buddhism were assimilated into Islam as an indirect result of their activities. In eastern India, Islam was able to get a large number of converts through Sufi-assisted assimilation and acculturation from a population which followed different kinds of strange cults and practices emanating out of Buddhism, Saivism and Tantrism.

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