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Side : 1850 – 1947”.

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The Image of the prophet in the Bengal Countryside : 1850 – 1947

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It has sometimes been claimed that Islam flourishes in a quasi – urban setting centering around the mosques, the bezaars and the quasbahs.¹ The present study questions the clamim and focuses on some Prophet – oriented folk songs which became popular in the Bengal countryside during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Such songs, common throughout the Islamic world, still await a systematic and conceptualized study. Some attempts have been made in recent times to analyze the growth of Prophet – centred piety by relying on the increasing volumes of sitars (printed biographies of the Prophet) which started to appear from the second half of the n nineteenth century. They narrated the major events in Muhammad’s life with particular reference to his preaching of Islam under adverse circumstances.

Muhammad was projected in the sirats as the model before the Muslims under colonial rule: Muslims were supposed to derive inspiration from their Prophet in their efforts to survive and flourish in a world which was increasingly becoming competitive, complex and insecure. This situation largely contributed to the emergence of a Prophet – centred piety during the last hundred years of colonial rule in Bengal. However, the sirats were mainly accessible to the literate people dwelling in the urban areas and their vicinity. It is equally important to study the minds of the semi-literate or illiterate people in the countryside who also responded in their own ways to various social, economic and political changes. The rhythmic folk songs were easier to memorize and thus helped oral transmission of knowledge among the rural masses who has little access to print or none at all.

The Muslims in the Bengal countryside were not a homogeneous community. Muslims with different social and economic background responded differently to the social and economic crisis during colonial rule. A large number of Muslim population in the Bengal countryside could not interpret in concrete social, economic and political terms the causes of their misery under colonial rule. They presumed that their misery was primarily due to their deviation from the basic tenets of Islam as reflected in the life and works of the Prophet Muhammad. Muslims who shared this view often joined the ranks of the Tariqa –I-Muhammadiya (The of Muhammad) and Faraizi (who regarded the observance of the basic tenets of Islam as a compulsory duty) movements who spearheaded

Islamic revivalism in nineteenth century Bengal. They had several strongholds in Bengal, but by the end of the nineteenth century, they lost their initial vigour to reform Islam. The deep rooted popular culture in Bengal accounts for the limited success of these Islamic revivalist movements in reforming the Muslim society.

Among the different trends which reflected the growth of a Prophet – centred consciousness in colonial Bengal, popular Islam was very important. Unlike the Islamic revivalist movements, popular Islam assimilated many local traditions and naturally became invigorated. The numerous Prophet – oriented folk songs may be taken as an illustration.

A few words concerning the periodization also seems necessary. The decade 1850s is significant in many ways in the History of colonial rule in South Asia. In this decade the first major upsurge against colonial rule had to be suppressed. The new education policy of the colonial government also made its appearance during this period. The Muslim community in Bengal, or at least a part of it, showed an awareness to combine in order to secure an uplift of their community. Steamers started plying on the Ganges on a regular basis from this decade symbolizing an era of change and that also found mention in Bengali folk songs. The Prophet – oriented folk songs which are available in print cannot be traced back before the 1850s. We do not have access to the orally transmitted folk songs of this genre composed earlier in the nineteenth century. The present discussion terminates in 1947, the year of independence.

As mentioned earlier, a large body of mystical poetry is found all over the Islamic world, dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad. The folk poets as well as the representatives of high, classical literature know that the Prophet is the meaning and end of creation and that he will be the one to guide them to eternal life just like a “caravan leader”.²

Similarly in the melodious folk songs of reverie Bengal, Muhammad the mystical leader, appears as the boatman who carries the soul safely to the other shore. Here the soul may be compared to the water hyacinths floating on the surface of the rivulets and canals and the heart resembles the ripples on the surface of the water, moved by changing winds. And again these changing winds in their turn can be compared with the changing social, economic and political forces that led to the composition and molding of these songs.

VARIOUS FORMS OF FOLK SONGS

Among the various Bengal folk songs in which the image of Muhammad is portrayed, the following forms should be noted, Baul songs, K Jari, Maikbhandari, and Meyeli Geet. In addition, there were other forms such as the songs of day labourer and songs to invite rain. The Prophet is represented in various ways in these songs. For a better understanding of the nature of these various representations it is important, to study the context in which the above mentioned songs are composed or sung.

Baul Songs

The bauls of Bengal belonged to a community of mendicant singers not4d for their liberal attitude to all religions. There is much controversy among the scholars concerning the origin of the word baul. According to one view it originated from the Sanskrit word vatula, meaning mad or crazy. Another view suggests that the word baul originated from the word yakula, meaning impatiently eager a third view holds that the word baul is a possible derivative from the Arabic word auliya meaning holy men, saints or companions. Partly due to sufi influence , many Arabic and Persian words such as the word auliya, became incorporated into the Bengali language. The bauls were also influenced by Sufism.³ Apart from Sufism, they were also influenced by vaishnavism, however, they were neither Hindus nor Muslims and were also opposed to the caste system. The baul cult perhaps existed in Bengal as a definable religious group as early as in the early sixteenth century.⁴ However, the nineteenth century, can be regarded as the heyday of the bauls when the famous exponents of baul songs such as Faqir Lalan Shah (d.1891). Panju Shah (b.1851), and Lalan's disciple Duddu Shah flourished. The bauls are mostly seen in Kushtia, Khulna, Pabna, Rajshahi, Faridpur, Dhaka and Birbhim districts.⁵ They generally wear a kind of odd jobba white in colour and play a single string musical instrument made of a hollowed and dried cavity of a gourd called ektara while singing.⁶

During the Mughal period there was a great number of Hindu and Muslim zamindars in Bengal. But in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries nearly all the great Muslim families lost their zamindaris to the Hindus. Firstly, the laws of inheritance prevalent among the Muslims led to minute subdivision among heirs. Secondly, the operation of Sale Laws in the aftermath of the Permanent Settlement (1793) under British rule also contributed to the decline of Muslim zamindars. Theoretically it affected both old Hindu and Muslim zamindars. But in effect it contributed to the dispossession of the Muslim zamindars as the fupplanters of both (Hindu and Muslim zamindars) were almost always Hindus.⁷ The Resumption (after 1828), which involved the resumption of lakhiraj lands by the state also deprived many Muslim families of their livelihood.⁸ In the novel *Abdullah*, it was shown how the Muslim landed aristocrats, who were indifferent to the management of their landed properties, were losing out the estates to their cunning Hindu employees.⁹ The novel also showed how those waning Muslim landed aristocrats took shelter in Islam, which was their last fortress and organized milad to preserve their declaiming influence in Muslim society.¹⁰ This also paved the way to the growth and sustenance of the Prophet – centred piety. Another factor which contributed to the impoverishment of rural Bengal was the destruction of the craft industries. It is important to bear in mind that, when British paramountcy was established in India by the first two decades of the nineteenth century, the economy of Bengal became increasingly dependent on the Western industrialized economy. Instead of exporting its high quality cloth, Bengal's economy which became almost wholly agricultural, relied heavily on the export of

primary goods such as indigo and jute.¹¹ Muslim cotton – weavers of Bengal called jolahas could no longer compete with the comparatively cheaper cotton piece goods from the cotton – mills of the United Kingdom.¹²

As a consequence of their impoverishment from the beginning of the nineteenth century, many Muslims joined the ranks of the mendicant singers to sing in honour of the Prophet, their mystical leader, who would guide them to safety in that period of turmoil. Mysticism, humanism and syncretism are the basic ingredients of baul songs which also reflect various aspects of social and economic conditions affecting the people in the Bengal countryside. Mystic outlook, coupled with social inequality, gave birth to many minor religious and had first hand experience of social and economic inequality which reduced men to insignificance.¹³ The bauls were not religious reformers, but they fought against social inequality, hatred and corruption through their songs.¹⁴

Jari Songs

Jari is a kind of dirge, which owes its origin to the tragic events of Medina and Karbala leading to the deaths of Hazrat Imam Hassan and Hussain. The Shia community of South Asia commemorate the events of Karbala in the month of Muharram by singing marsiyas or dirges on the deaths of Hussain and his followers. Marsiyas are usually sung in Urdu, while jari is its Bengali version generally sung in Muharram in Bangladesh and parts of West Bengal. Both fervour and pathos characterize jari which depicts the unparalleled heroism of

Hussain and his followers on the battlefield of Karbala and the tragic scene connected with their death.¹⁵ The word jari has originated from the Persian word Zari, which means lamentation.¹⁶

According to one scholar the jari originated in the sixteenth century at a time when Sufism and vaishnavism appear to have a substantial influence on each other.¹⁷ Jari has still maintained its popularity among the Hindus and the Muslims alike in the Bengal countryside.¹⁸ In the district of Mymensingh jari is performed by the Shia community to commemorate the events of Karbala in the month of Muharam.¹⁹ But in the districts like Jessore and Khulna the jari is not treated as a religious song but as a seasonal song and is not necessarily performed in the month of Muharram.²⁰ In other words the theme of jari is not merely confined to the Karbala tragedy. In an era of social, economic and political decay, that followed the battle of Plassey (1757), which is symbolically regarded as the Karbala of Bengal.²¹ The Muslims of Bengal turned to their prophet and the other members of his family for spiritual and moral guidance. Like the baul songs, jari also reflect the grievances of the rural population against the prevalent social and economic disparities. Nineteenth century Bengal witnessed several peasant uprisings against the colonial rulers which inspired the jari singers who emphasized the harmony of Bengali religious communities in the face of the divisive impact of colonial rule. If we remember this historical background of jari it will be easier for us to understand why it became so popular during the 'Non Cooperation' or Khilafat movements. This category of songs is to be sung in a group or to be

more precise, between two contesting groups which can create a dramatic atmosphere in village performances.²²

Jari songs are sung to the accompaniment of dancing and musical instruments such as dhol (cylindrical drum beaten at each hand) shehnai (musical instrument like an oboe), cymbal, harmonium and tabla (pair of small drums) are used during the performance.²³ The entire group of singers and musicians followed the instruction of a group leader called bayati who conducts the performance. A bayati generally wears a white Punjabi (loose shirt), pajamas, or langi (cloth wrapped round hips) and lays a white cloth on the shoulder. Besides, he wears a pair of nupurs (ankle bells which create jingling sound) round his ankles and carries a khanjari (small jingled tambourine) in hand.²⁴

Meyeli Geet

Meyeli Geet or feminine songs and confined to the Bengali women folk are sung during family functions such as wedding. As they are sung during family functions, they are also known as functional songs.²⁵

These songs are generally free from the influence of the outside world and are sung by a group of young women within the family circle. Sometimes an aged female singer called geetalu buri is hired for the purpose of singing during wedding ceremonies. She often generates laughter among the audience by her

humorous poses. Meyeli geet is characterized by repetition of tunes. The songs are so spontaneous and informal that the singers hardly find it necessary to use any musical instrument. However, the lower class Muslims of Dhaka sometimes use a type of dhol while singing.²⁶

Maijbhandari Songs

Maijbhandar was a famous centre of marifati songs in Chittagong. According to the name of the place, the marifati songs of this area were known as maijbhandari songs and their singers were called maijbhandari singers or simply maijbhandaris.²⁷

However, it should be mentioned that the maijbhandari singers were not merely confined to Chittagong, they became popular throughout Bangladesh. The maijbhandari singers used to have a murshid or spiritual guide and to a large extent they functioned like a sufi sect.²⁸ This is not unnatural because Chittagong has a rich tradition of Islamic mysticism and is also known as the land of twelve auliya. The maijbhandaris did not follow any institutionalized religion and due to their liberal attitude towards other religions. They were popular even among a section of the liberal minded educated population. A maijbhandari singer required a dholak (drum) for his performance and often a harmonium was played in tune with his song. However, maijbhandari tunes lacked variety. The maijbhandaris used to grow long hair on their heads and were fond of smoking hookah.

Contemporary social and economic conditions were reflected in the maijabhandari songs. Among the religious themes cosmogony featured prominently in these songs.²⁹

Songs of the Day – Laborers

To generate physical strength the day laborers of Bengal sing some monotuned songs while at work. These songs can be categorized as the songs of the day laborers.

These songs are sung by day labourers in chorus while doing hard physical labour such as lifting timber. During the early twentieth century, these songs were popular in the fungly hill tracts and riverine areas of Chittagong. Some aspects of contemporary society were reflected in these songs. But later on due to deforestation and also due to the partial replacement of human labour by modern technological devices such as cranes and bulldozers, the physical strength generating day labourers songs began to disappear.³⁰

Songs of Invite Rain

In the oriental world where agriculture is the principal occupation of the people, proper rainfall is regarded as essential for good harvest. During drought, the peasants find it difficult to use the plough in the field. Under such circumstances,

the religious- minded people in the countryside pray to god for rain. They often offer their prayer in the form of songs which can be called songs to invite rain or simply rain songs.³¹

These songs are sung in chorus by a large number of men both young and old who move from door to door singing. Even in early twentieth century Chittagong. The village people used to make votive offerings to god with the purpose of securing rainfall. Sometimes the entire village population used to congregate in a field under the scorching sun without wearing caps on their heads in order to offer prayer.³² Much information about contemporary social, economic or political conditions are not available from these songs. However, religious beliefs of the rural people are captured in these songs, which were often influenced by Sufism.

The Themes of the Songs Relating To Muhammad

For one convenience we shall offer a thematic treatment of the various folk songs under review. To serve this purpose we have divided the themes into five categories (i) Cosmogony and The Light of Muhammad, (ii) Muhammad the intercessor, (iii) Social, economic and political issues, (iv) Parallelism, (v) Enquiry.

(I) COSMOGONY AND THE LIGHT OF MUHAMMAD

One of the central themes of mystical prophetology is that of the *nur-I-Muhammadi* (the Light of Muhammad). According to the Muslim rationalists, metaphysicians, and theologians, the first thing that the Creator called into existence was intellect, an excellent and perfect substance in which the form of all things was contained and from which other beings emerged in a phased manner. The Sufi notion of creation owes its origin to the philosophical ideas of al-Farabi and Ibn Sina who tried to establish a connection between the divine light (*nur*) and the intellect, the former being communicated to the latter at the first instance by the prime cause, the Creator. The *nur* is the light of the sun around which everything revolves. And around this nuclear concept of *nur*, the Sufis developed the doctrine of *nur-I-Muhammadi*, believed to have been created before all things.³³ In Bengal the idea has featured widely in popular Islam, from the medieval period to the present century. The Christian missionaries had intensified their activities in the nineteenth century Bengal countryside and it was a period of religious competition.³⁴ It is significant to remember in this context that in the same period the bauls of Bengal were also singing songs on the concept of *nur-I-Muhammadi*, presenting the Prophet Muhammad and his mediator ship of creation as a source of authority.³⁵ In doing so, bauls or the *maijbhandaris* were probably responding in a subconscious way to the missionary enterprise aiming at enhancing the status of Jesus Christ and Christianity as compared to Islam and its Prophet. It may be mentioned here that the north Indian Muslim religious group called the Barelwis, who also had a rural base responded to the

missionary challenge in a similar fashion by focusing on the sufi doctrine of nur-I-Muhammadi as a source of authority.³⁶

The image of the Prophet as a source of authority is also expressed in a well known song of Lalan Shah:

My Prophet is the Pilot of the other World,
All meditation is useless if the Prophet is not remembered,
He is the beginning and he is the end
And he changes shape and form according to his own pleasure.
The sky, the earth, and the wind together with water
Are all born of his luminous spirit.
Tell us of the seat of the Prophet
And of the shape the Prophet had
When these things were born.
God and the prophet are the twin miracles,
Tree and seed we see as they are,
Now you employ your discerning mind,
And choose between the tree and the flower.
One who is enriched by self enquiry
Can determine the subtle difference.
God assumed the shape of the Prophet,
The slave Lalan says.
Seraj became a dervish

Because of the quality of his Master.³⁷

The last two lines are significant since they point to the importance of depending on a spiritual guide (murshid) to attain the status of a sufi saint. The murshid who could trace back the line of his spiritual succession to Muhammad himself, was regarded as a Karmil pir (perfect spiritual guide).³⁸

Cosmogony also finds mention in an interesting jari song entitled Jahar Name (The Poison Episode). The name of the composer is not known but it seems that it was written around the middle of the nineteenth century or a little later which can be regarded as the heyday of the bauls. Our hypothesis is supported by the fact that in some places the above mentioned jari is influenced by the nur-I-Muhammadi concept, which was so popular among the bauls.³⁹ The Summary of the story present in the jari is that God once asked Gabriel (archangel) to bring two shirts from heaven for imams Hassan and Hussain, the two grandsons of Muhammad. The colour of one shirt was red and the other was blue. Gabriel was told by God that the brother who would wear the blue shirt would be poisoned to death the the brother who would accept the red one would attain martyrdom in the battle of Karbala. On his way to meeting Muhammad, Gabriel met Fatima, the beloved daughter of the Prophet. But Gabriel was annoyed to find that Fatima was addressing him as choto chacha (meaning father's younger brother). Gabriel asked Fatima to address him as bara chacha (meaning father's elder brother). Fatima disagreed and started to speak about cosmogony referring to the

superiority of her father Muhammad. But Gabriel was not satisfied with her answer. After that both of them proceeded to Muhammad for a satisfactory explanation of the nur-I-Muhammadi concept.⁴⁰ Muhammad replied.

That God first created him (Muhammad), and he used to exist in the form of a star for a long time. After that soul was created from that starry light. Angels were created such later from that starry light, known as the nur-I-Muhammadi. Muhammad then asked Gabriel to describe about what the latter had seen after being born. Gabriel replied that he saw a starry light. Then Muhammad explained that it was nothing but the nur-I-Muhammadi which proved that Muhammad was older than Gabriel.⁴¹

The remaining portion of the jari is full of melancholy as Muhammad came to know about the fate of his beloved grandsons Hassan and Hussain.⁴² we have mentioned earlier while discussing jari that it became popular at a time when political power was no longer in the hands of the Muslims and they subconsciously tried to fill up the vacuum in the real world, largely caused by the loss of political power by presenting the nur-I-muhammadi concept as a source of authority. A careful listener can never miss the juxtaposition of hope and melancholy in this song which was partly conditioned by the Muslim quest for identity in the midst of uncertainty.

A song in the maijbhandari form, which was apparently composed in the later nineteenth century, is of exquisite beauty and expresses the nur-I-Muhammadi concept with great clarity. However the song is deprived of its musical qualities in the translated version.

I cannot recognize the “light” (nur) which was responsible for the creation of this universe. When the Arabic letter “mimm” is put in the middle of the word Ahad (one).

I see the spiritual birth of Ahmad (another name of Muhammad).⁴³ The Supreme Lord is paying with divine light (nur) and the mystery of that game is not known to me so I desire to go into hiding. Seeing the ripples in the ocean of love. I forget the separation between God and man. The divine light is a reflection of divine majesty (Jala) and divine beauty (Jama) since it represents God and Muhammad at the same time. However, I cannot see the reality of God.⁴⁴

The use of the words such as Jalal and Jamal indicates the enduring influence of Persian poetry, in particular the natiya of Shaikh Sadi Shirazi (d.1292) on the mystic poets of Bengal.⁴⁵

(ii) **MUHAMMAD THE INTERCESSOR**

The idea of intercession by the Prophet began early in Islam. It is mainly the story concerning the Day of Judgement, s found in various oldest collections of hadith, that has supplied the devout Muslims with the basis for their hope in Muhammad's very special role on the day of horrors. According to the tradition, God gathers all mankind on a hill on the Day of Judgment. The sun draws closer to them making them horrified. Finally they agree to seek some one who could intercede with God on their behalf. Then they approach each and every prophet, but all of those prophets express their incapacity to come to the rescue of the believers. But when they come to Muhammad, "the Seal of the Prophets" with the request of interceding for them with God, Muhammad consents.⁴⁶

It is interesting to note that the intercessory role of Jesus figures prominently in the New Testament, which has given a higher position to Jesus than Moses, as a mediator between God and men.⁴⁷ So it is not difficult to understand that in an age of religious competition folk Islam will put great emphasis on the intercessory role of Muhammad to establish him as a source of authority. Jaher Ali, a relatively unknown baul of the late nineteenth century sings in tune with this spirit.

The worried and pensive Jaher says that the Day of Judgment will be troublesome. If you want to cross the sirat bridge.⁴⁸ safely then look for an advocate now.⁴⁹

This advocate is none other than the Prophet Muhammad himself,⁵⁰ who is expected to plead for the believers on the Day of Judgment. Muhammad appears as 'the Pilot of the voyage beyond' as Lalan sang:

No friend can match your compassion

Never leave us, Oh Prophet, now that you are with us.

You are the friend of God.

And the pilot of the voyage beyond.

Without you, the other shore

Can hardly be reached.

With the might of heavenly laws

You put us on the right path,

Do not leave us today

Keeping us in the dark.

We are the people of Medina

But we were like the denizens of a forest,

You gave us comfort.

Without your benign presence

What will happen to us poor men?

Says Lalan, "Such a light will never burn again"⁵¹

Lalan sings on another occasion:

If you choose the Prophet as your helmsman.

Your boat will not sink in the storm...

The boat of faith is propelled by love

And moves day and night

Without wind.

It takes you across the boundless sea when the final call comes.

Says Lalan, “Mind, remember this and behave accordingly.”⁵²

In the baul philosophy, the above mentioned ‘boundless sea’ means the ocean of the (phenomenal) being, popularly known as bhaba sindhu, which is to be surpassed during the final voyage towards the other world.⁵³ Muhammad is also known as mahbubiyat-I-Khuda or Gods beloved friend.⁵⁴ So it is not difficult to understand why Lalan says that the boat of faith (with Muhammad as its helmsman) is propelled by love.” It is also useful to remember that ‘the boat of faith’ concept is popular all over the Islamic world and even finds expression in calligraphy.⁵⁵

The idea of Muhammad as intercessor is also manifested in a jari which became popular during the nineteenth century in the largely Muslim district of Murshidabad. This jari is popularly called the Phulcherater Jari or the “Jari of the Siral Bridge’. It was composed by one Sri Haqnam, about whom we know very little.⁵⁶ Being the seat of the nawabs, Murshidabad played a significant role in the political, economic and cultural history of Bengal prior to the battle of Plassey (1757). Initially jari was patronised by the nawabs of Murshidabad many of whom were Persian migrants and shias by faith.⁵⁷ But during the colonial period that patronage was gone and gradually jari became the song of the masses. Jari

is sung in the district in the month of Muharram to commemorate the tragic events of Karbala,⁵⁸ Which has a symbolical semblance with the Battle of Plassey that had deprived the district of its glory. This background may be regarded as one of the factors responsible for the popularity of jari in Murshidabad.

The Phulcherater Jari, mentioned above is unique in a way . in this song Fatima, the beloved daughter of Muhammad, is also interceding for the believers side by side with her father of the Day of Judgment. This elevated role of Fatima can be properly understood if we remember that she enjoys a very high position in the faqiri tattva (sufi philosophy) of Bengal.⁵⁹ In an era of social, economic and political decay the Hindus sought peace and solace by composing songs dedicated to Kali, the Goddess of power.⁶⁰ When the real power was in the hands of the colonial authority. A little later, that is during the nineteenth century, the Muslims also discovered their Ma Kali (Mother Kali) in the form of Fatima who is more popularly known as Ma Barkat (Auspicious Mother) in the faqiri tradition⁶¹ of nineteenth century Bengal. We may now turn to the Phulcherater Jari which states.

When Bibi Fatima will hear that the believers have fallen in hell on the Day of Judgment, she will appear before God to seek his mercy. She will even shed tears for the believers. Muhammad will also intercede on behalf of his followers with indomitable zeal. God will then summon all the angels those who are in

charge of hell to forgive the umma (Muslim community) in honour of Bibi Fatima. (So the poet sings) Those who will follow the path of Muhammad, and those who will love and fear Muhammad will be forgiven from their sins because the father and his daughter (Muhammad and Fatima) will plead for them at Doomsday and will shed tears for them to secure God's mercy... But those who will not honour the gadam (foot) of Prophet will never be rescued from the hell.⁶²

Thus in the context of rural Bengal when Kali and other female deities had powered the Prophet's daughter was brought into play as an effective intercessor for human kind with God.

(iii) **SOCIAL, ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL, ISSUES IN SONGS**

It is useful to study how Muhammad became the model of Muslim existence in a colonial set up when the traditional feudal authorities disappeared and significant changes were taking place in the social, economic and political field. These changes also had their impact on the behavioral pattern of the Muslims in rural Bengal which could not be easily accepted by the folk poets of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nasaruddin,⁶³ who belongs to this group of mystic poets, sings:

The Muslims of Bengal are no better than the forest dweller. They do not follow the hadith (sayings of Muhammad) or the Quran. They have plunged themselves

in using, bribery and adultery. Here the females do not observe the veil, still people receive food from their hands, Men regard it fashionable to keep beard in tune with the European style, Men are also wearing shirts, coats and wrist watches. They are also using spectacles, chewing betel leaf and smoking biri (cheap cigarette of rolled leaf) instead of hockah. The traditional tahaban cap is also becoming obsolete.⁶⁴

The underlying meaning of the song is clear. In the matters concerning dress, appearance, behaviour or economic activities, the Muslims of Bengal have deviated from the sunna (customs of the Prophet) which shocks the poet, songs such as this had great historical significance as they reflected a shift in the Muslim attitude from syncretistic and mystical Islam towards reformist Islam, especially from the second half of the nineteenth century. This such as *Nasihat al – Ajam* (Mymensingh, 1875) written by Murshid Nabi Nawaz Khan. It is also not difficult to understand, against this background, why the large volume of sirat literature started to appear from the second half of the nineteenth century.

A rudimentary form of social consciousness can be discerned in the songs of Duddu Shah, the illustrious disciple of Lalan, as the former sings:

The Prophet made persistent efforts to remove the superiority complex prevalent among a section of Muslim aristocrats. But his noble effort had little or no impact on the vainglorious Sayyids of Bengal, the poet laments. According to

Muhammad, even he pious son of a cobbler is entitled to lead a group of believers. But the poet wonders whether the so called believers follow the path of Muhammad...⁶⁵

The so-called aristocratic Muslims of Bengal took pride in introducing themselves as ashraf (high born) and tried to link their genealogy with that of Muhammad to establish their claim as sayyids. The ashraf despised all other Muhammadans including the functional groups and alkl converts of lower rank as ajtaf (or its Bengali corruption atraf) 'wretches' or 'mean people'. The Bengal census of 1901) also recorded this social division among Muslims.⁶⁶ Muhammad attacked the traditional foundation of the Arab hierarchy and stressed the equality of all believers under the shade of Islam. In spite of that, history, myth and popular ignorance contributed to the perpetuation of this ethnic cleavage between ashraf and atraf.⁶⁷ However this cleavage alarmed many Muslim reformers who used to believe that under such circumstances, it would be easier for the zealous Christian missionaries in the Bengali countryside to convert the despised and deprived atraf to Christianity with honeyed words.⁶⁸

The prevalence of social division among the Muslims in Bengal was also reflected in an interesting jari entitled Kulsumer Mejhani,⁶⁹ or "The Hospitality of Kulsum" which was discovered from a folk singer by poet Jasimudin in the 1950s.⁷⁰ As the complete song could not be traced in its complete form so it is not possible to say anything about its composer or the time of composition.⁷¹ But a close

analysis of the characters and the socioeconomic issues provided by the song may lead us to believe that it was composed something in the nineteenth century. The jari is too long, so for our convenience we shall offer its substance in the translated form.

The jari is about the two daughters of Muhammad – Bibi Kulsum and Bibi Fatima, Kulsum was the wife of Hazrat Usman, who was known for his affluence, while Fatima was the wife of poor Hazrat Ali. Once Muhammad visited Kulsum's house amount of wealth. Muhammad advised her to distribute that wealth among the poor and needy people of the country to secure an easy access to heaven. However this advice had no impact on Kulsum. A little later Muhammad met Usman who readily appreciated Muhammad's advice and soon he became successful in convincing his wife of the importance of following Muhammad's advice. Kulsum agreed to arrange for a huge feast at her residence where all the inhabitants of Mecca and Medina would be invited excepting. "Kebokmatra bad robe Fatima Johra, tar kache patra keho n nibe domra."⁷² Only Fatima Johra will be beclouded from that party and I order you (servants) not to send any imitation letter to her. Though Usman was very much annoyed by Kulsum's attitude the latter was unmoved and said, (Berkat) Sat dare ek kantha pore asbe amar bari, saharer loke fajja amay dibe ghor ghor.⁷³ Barkat (Fatima will visit my place with her shabby wrapper and I shall feel ashamed before my urban guests. At last on that feast day the entire population of Mecca and Median including Muhammad assembled at Kulsum's residence. Muhammad asked Kulsum why he could not

find Fatima and her two sons Hassan and Hussain among the guests. The Prophet reminded Kulsum that by excluding them she did gross injustice to them. Kulsum arrogantly replied to her father that being a Prophet he should have been reasonable enough to realize that the presence of Fatima wearing her shabby wrapper would have damaged Kulsum's prestige among the urban guests. In the meantime all the foods stored in Kulsum's house disappeared in a supernatural event. Then Kulsum tried to purchase foodstuff for their guests. In the meantime all the foods stored in Kulsum's house disappeared in a supernatural event. Then Kulsum tried to purchase foodstuff for her guests by selling her precious necklace but that too turned into iron. Muhammad then said; "Khana banayeechho tumi Barkater ninda kore, gajab korechhe Allah tomar upore."⁷⁴ You have tried to feed your guests by criticizing Fatima, so God has perished you.") Kulsum then asked Muhammad why Allah should become angry when Fatima is criticized. Muhammad replied that Fatima and Allah are inseparable just like the red and blue colours who belong to the same kunji (a type of seed).⁷⁵

The impact of the vaishnava concept of the identity of Radha and Krishna is very clear in these lines.⁷⁶ One of the most complex perceptions of the vaishnava is that Radha and Krishna, in their true then Basic form (Svarupa) are eternally one. But they became divided into two separate and individual forms (rupa) in order to taste in a more comprehensive way, sweetness of one another.⁷⁷ This vaishnava perception not only influenced the jari singers, but the bauls as well. According to baul philosophy, the Prophet Muhammad, Krishna and Chaitanya, have become

both man and superman because of his sudden touch. In other words, the bauls regard Muhammad, Krishna and Chaitanya as God incarnate.⁷⁸ As Radha is inseparable from Krishna who is the incarnation of God, so is Fatima also inseparable from Allah, being the beloved daughter of Muhammad who is the incarnation of God. Both Radha and Fatima enjoy a loftier position in the mystical tradition of Bengal. Both are also women, and it is not surprising that the bauls pose themselves as women because they believe that true love can only be experienced by transforming oneself into a woman. From this concept stemmed their idea of Shain or the Man of the heart who is also the eternal Beloved of the sufi tradition.⁷⁹ In the imagination of the Muslim mystic poet Radha (the beloved of Lord Krishna) appears as Fatima and Krishna as Allah.

The remaining part of the story is that, Muhammad then told Kulsum that if she wanted to save her prestige by feeding her numerous guests properly. Then she must invite Fatima to please Allah. Kulsum appeared before Fatima accordingly and begged to be forgiven. Under the request of Muhammad, Fatima had forgiven her sister but said that according to God's desire she ((Fatima) was in charge of food and Ganga (river Ganges) was in charge of water. So Ganga should accompany them in order to make the feast a success.⁸⁰ Fatima then asked her son Mudar⁸¹ to secure the companionship for the river Ganges. Fatima's order was obeyed by Mudar.⁸² Finally Muhammad, Hasan, Hussain, Fatima and Ali, who were collectively venerated by the faquirs as Pak Panjatan or five holy persons.⁸³ Started their journey towards Kulsum's house. Under the

request of Fatima, Allah sent Gabriel with food which could be distributed among the numerous guests of Kulsum.⁸⁴

This Jari can be regarded as an important document on the social and economic history of nineteenth century Bengal. However it did not lose its relevance in the twentieth century as we have shown that the song was collected from a jari singer in the 1950s. We see in the song that being annoyed by Kulsum's accumulation of wealth, Muhammad advised her to spend it on the poor and hungry people of the country. By showing the defiant attitude of Kulsum to her father's advice, the folk poet probably tried to expose how the affluent Muslims in rural Bengal had deviated from the path of Muhammad. Allah has said through Muhammad "Practice regular charity (Zakat)"⁸⁵ whereas Kulsum, who represented the affluent Muslims, was showing indifference to the practice of zakat. Kulsum's antagonism towards her poverty-struck sister Fatima is actually the antagonism of the opulent Muslims towards their poor brethren. However in the fertile imagination of the folk poet, Fatima, the representative of the have-nots emerged victorious over Kulsum, the representative of her opulent if not oppressive feudal lords. That is why we see that all the foods stored in Kulsum's godown disappear in a supernatural event. Bengal was struck by famines during the period under review.⁸⁶ This sort of hoarding actually increased the sufferings of the people during famines. That experience probably prompted the folk poet to remind the opulent Muslims about Muhammad's advice to Kulsum regarding her religious duty which involved the proper distribution of her wealth among the poor and

hungry people. It goes without saying that such a conversation between Muhammad and his daughter is not supported by historical evidence.

When Muhammad asks Kulsum to appear before Fatima in a repentant mood, we understand that the poet is indirectly asking the affluent Muslims of Bengal to become apologetic to their less fortunate brethren who were reeling under poverty, largely due to their indifference towards the latter Muhammad used to say *Al fact fakhri* or Poverty (rather than meditation in God) is all my pride.⁸⁷ And according to the faqiri tradition, poverty and power are juxtaposed in Fatima. The impact of the faqiri tradition is quite clear in this *jari* which is proved by the poets tendency to put much emphasis on the *telesma*(supernatural power) of Fatima, so much so that the poet is even prepared to relegate Muhammad into the backgrounds.⁸⁸ By depicting *Fir Madar* as the son of Fatima, the poet has done scant justice to history but has confirmed his adherence to the faqiri *tattva* (sufi concept). By seeking the companionship of the holy river Ganges, Fatima actually increased the vitality and popularity of folk Islam.

The image of the Prophet amongst the female participants of Bengali Muslim weddings was wonderfully reflected in *Meyeli Geet* (feminine song). Since manicuring has undergone a revolution, a large variety of cosmetics are available to the brides and the bridegrooms of modern Bengali (including Bangladesh). But the situation was quite different in the late nineteenth or even in the early twentieth century when the manicurists had to rely heavily on *menhdi* or

henna (reddish dye) for manicuring the hands and feet of the Muslim bride.⁸⁹ Meyeli Geet was sung on such occasion to create a religious atmosphere referring to the durbar (audience hall) of Rasul (the Prophet) where high quality mehndi is believed to be available.⁹⁰ Thus the female participants in the Bengali Muslim weddings used to sing in chorus:

Where can we search for the mehndi used during Muhammad's marriage? That mehndi is available in the durbar of Allah and Muhammad.⁹¹

After entering into the house of the father-in-law, the bridegroom offers salaam (low bow with spoken greetings) to the elderly in laws and in return he is blessed by the elderly female member of the house who sing in a chorus.

Oh, Allah the Prophet, bless the newly married couple. So that they can live happily for ever...⁹²

In the eastern countries of Islam rain is called rahmat, 'mercy', because in the dry areas a good harvest, as well as the well-being of the cattle entirely depend upon the right amount of rainfall. Now Muhammad was also known for his merciful nature⁹³ which prompted many oriental poets to depict the image of Muhammad as the 'cloud of mercy' or 'rain of mercy'.⁹⁴ Interestingly, one can draw a parallel here with the Buddha, who is described in the Saddharma Pundarika as the great merciful rain cloud.⁹⁵

A new dimension has been added to this genre of rain songs in the district of Chittagong (in Bangladesh), where under sufi influence people sing in the name of Bibi Fatima, the beloved daughter of Muhammad, to secure normal rainfall. During drought the people of rural Chittagong gather in a field under the scorching sun to offer their name (prayer) without wearing the prayer cap. After completing their namaz they sing in a chorus:

Welcome the queen of clouds. Make sure that the water falls upon earth after washing your legs and mouth, Bibi Fatima is in search of water, oh, God! You give that water...⁹⁶

Singing like this was a common practice in rural Chittagong as late as in the 1920s.⁹⁷

In the late nineteenth or even in the early twentieth century the density of the forest in the mountainous region of North – Eastern Chittagong was much greater than it is today. In those days the labourers and woodcutters had to rely on their physical strength that was required for felling trees, lifting heavy timbers from the ground as well as from the rivers since the current of the rivers was often utilized by the labourers to float heavy timbers from one place to another. During such activities the labourers used to sing in the name of Muhammad and other popular Sufis to derive physical strength. For example

‘Allari Allah heinya, Allah – Muhammad heinya Dindhar Allah heinya, Jindaghaz!
Heinya....⁹⁸

in these lines ‘Allari means ‘Oh God!’” Jindaghazi was a legendary Pir and the sound heinya is uttered even today by the labourers all over Bengal to generate physical strength.

The mid – nineteenth century baul Duddu Shah provides useful information about the increasing influence of reformist Islam in the Bengali Muslim society. Duddu also could not distance himself from that growing trend as he sings:

Under which law do the people earn their living by selling amulets? The Prophet used to earn his bread by hard labour even when he was hungry... Being the follower of such a Prophet who could you indulge in selling amulets? Just like the Brahmins who commodity religion to secure a source of income. Seeing this plight of the Muslims. Duddu burst into tears.⁹⁹

The meaning of the message is clear.

It has been mentioned elsewhere that in many baul songs composed in the nineteenth or early twentieth century. Muhammad appears as an advocate on the Day of Judgment to plead on behalf of his followers. Apart from the great Lalan, the relatively unknown fauls like Syed Rahman showed their inclination to use

litigational words like 'summons' etc in thie songs dedicated to Muhammad. In fact in the tension – prone rural Bengal going to court became a common experience during the period under review.¹⁰⁰ This obviously influenced the bauls like Syed Rahman who sings:

Follow the path of the Prophet, in the field of Hashr,¹⁰¹ he will be your saviour. How long will you allow yourself to be turned by beautiful women? You may be summoned by the court. You may be sent to prison, your property may be confiscated it is high time, surrender yourself at the feet of Mursheid (spiritual guide).¹⁰²

The impact of Vaishnavism upon the baul poet becomes clear when he advises the believers to think about the world during the twilight period of life without being lured by beautiful women.¹⁰³ The poet goes not deny the importance of Muhammad, but since people do not have access to him in this world, he had advised them to seek shelter at the feet of the murshid. This idea owes its origin to the pir – murid (spiritual guide and disciple) relationship of the Sufis or the vaishnave gurubad (theories about spiritual guide) and both of them, in their turns, have striking similarities with the hierarchical and personal relationship prevalent in a feudal society.

The exploitation of the Muslim peasantry by money – lenders was reflected in one Lalan song:

There's no one in this world so rich

That I may go to him

And fall at his feet

And tell him many tale of woe.

The priests I have come to know,

Are engaged in the pursuit of money.

They cheat you out of possession

And do you no good at all.

The poet says brother Muslim, your debt

No one will be able to pay...

The name of Prophet Muhammad is revealed in the Holy Book if the Prophet is entreated

He will ways Lalan, graciously agree

To take the entire burden of our debt.¹⁰⁴

The message is quite clear, Lalan, who came from an agrarian background, was shocked to see the peasantry reeling under the perpetual debt trap created by maharanis (money lenders).¹⁰⁵ The ulama were not prepared to come to their rescue. Under such circumstances Lalan advised the rural folk to pray in the name of Muhammad who would take the entire burden of their debt. The underlying meaning is that in the real world the possibility of paying the debt is remote. But there is a consolation in the world beyond where everyone is deeply

indebted to Allah. Only Muhammad is capable of taking the entire burden of that eternal debt.

Usury is prohibited in Islam, but in fact many Muslims were in its grip Apparently under the impact of reformist Islam, a maijbhandari song. Composed by one Sikandar, warned the Muslims about the wrath of Allah and the Prophet towards the usurers:

You have built your house and multiplied your property by the money you have received as interest if you perform the haji (pilgrimage to Mecca) by spending that money. Allah and the Prophet shall be antagonized.¹⁰⁶

From the second half of the nineteenth century down to the 1940s various parts of India including Bengal were hard hit by several great famines.¹⁰⁷ under such circumstances baul Duddu Shah, who flourished between the mid nineteenth to the late nineteenth century, probably tried to boost up the morale of the famine stricken rural folk by singing.

On brother we have never ever seen such a freend (like Muhammad) who sheds tear for the miserabole millions at a time when he (Muhammad) himself has to tie stones around his abdomen to control hunger says Duddu.¹⁰⁸

Mention should be about the Kabials (folk poets)¹⁰⁹ who flourished in the nineteenth century. Through kabials were common all over Bengal, we shall confine our discussion to the kabials of southern Chittagong who were known for their natiyya (poetry in praise of Muhammad) during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of these kabials had political connections and received the patronage of the Bengali intelligentsia during the first half of the twentieth century.¹¹⁰ The kabials of southern Chittagong had a useful function for a section of the population who had limited access to the press or none at all. The kabials were instrumental in the oral transmission of political ideas in the rural areas where a large section of the population was illiterate. The kabials of Chittagong used to launch his campaign by reciting;

Oh brother, begin in the names of Allah and the Prophet. I recite the Profession of faith remembering Muhammad and that will enable me to cross over (the sirat bridge), I tell you again and again to obey Allah and the Prophet otherwise you shall have to leave the country when the kind will be in trouble.¹¹¹

The message is clear in this song. The indigenous kind was definitely in trouble when the political power passed into the hands of the colonial rulers. Under such circumstances the rural poet was seeking peace and solace in the spiritual world dominated by Allah and the Prophet.

(iv) PARALLELISH

The Hindus and the Muslim had been living side by side for centuries in the Bengal countryside where the relationship between man and man is personal where man has to depend upon man for his day to day existence. This sense of interdependence increased during political, social or economic crisis. The sense of interdependence also created a fertile ground of the promotion of harmony in the relationship between different communities. Many Muslim folk singers also turned towards Muhammad as a source of harmony. Due to many years of coexistence, the Muslim folk singers often came under the spello of Hindu my theologies. Often we find that some special qualities of the Hindu deities are attributed to Muhammad and his beloved daughter Fatima.

For example the jari singers start their concert by praising the almighty. Then they praise their concert in a versical style. In this second phase the jari singer praises the Prophet and his beloved daughter Fatima side by died with the Hindu Goddess Sarasvati. According to one scholar Sarasvati is praised even today by the Bengali Muslim fari singer.¹¹² According to the belief of the jari singers, the success or failure of the concert depends upon the wishes of Fatima. They also expect her invisible presence at the concert Fatima was not known as an accomplished musician. But the veena (a musical instrument) playing image of Sarasyati was so deeply rooted in their minds that they could not but link Fatima,

the beloved daughter of Muhammad with the success of their concerts as it what latter is the counterpart of Sarasvati.¹¹³

Muslims, especially in rural Bengal used to participate in yatras (dramatic entertainment) and Kathakathas (Exposition of mythological stories) presented by Hindu artists. Such participation provided the rural Muslims with emotional satisfaction. Muslims also became greatly influenced by Hindu legends through such exposures. According to one narrative of Hindu Purana (sacred legend of Hinduism), under the order of a Brahmin, a king beheaded his own son and served the head to that Brahmin. This unparalleled loyalty of the faithful towards the Brahmin apparently inspired a jari singer so much that in his jari entitled Jaberer putrabadh (The killing of Jaber's Sons), he aspired to portray similar loyalty of the umma towards Muhammad.¹¹⁴ This jari was collected from Ghani, the famous jari singer of Barisal (in Bangladesh).¹¹⁵ It is not known actually when the song was composed. Since it was collected from a popular jari singer of the twentieth century, we can conclude that the song could maintain its popularity at least during the first half of the present century. What the song narrates is as follows:

Jabber, the king of Arabia once invited the Prophet to attend a banquet at his residence, Jaber slaughtered a goat before his elder son and then went to the market. In the meantime the younger son of Jabaer came to his elder brother and said that he could not see how the goat was slaughtered. Jaber's elder son

wanted to show his younger brother the act of slaughtering in a playful mood. But while song so the elder brother accidentally cut the throat of his younger brother with a knife. Eventually the floor became flooded with blood. Being informed about this the mother started chasing her elder son who started running towards the roof. The frightened elder son ultimately died after falling from the roof, nothing can be more shocking from the point of view of a mother than this incident of losing both the sons for ever. The bereaved mother lamented.

I cannot bear the loss of my sons, immediately after I picked up a dagger to commit suicide, But soon I could remember that the Prophet was invited to attend a banquet at our residence. My death would have forced him to return home without taking his meal. So I started cooking after covering my dead children with a blanket. Even I did not divulge the sad news to my husband...¹¹⁶

Soon after the arrival of the Prophet, meal was served before him, But under the instruction of Gabriel the Prophet asked Jaber about his sons. Jaber's wife replied that "They have gone out to play." Muhammad was not satisfied with the answer and said that he would not eat anything without those children. So Jaber's wife had to disclose that tragic event. Then Muhammad said.

Where are your dead sons, I (Muhammad) want to see them. Hearing that, Jaber's wife removed the blanket which was covering her dead sons.

Muhammad saw the dead bodies from a distance and it seemed as if the sun and the moon were lying on the ground...¹¹⁷

After that Muhammad prayed before God and in a supernatural event the dead sons became alive again. Muhammad then finished his meal served by the happy mother.¹¹⁸

This episode is also an unique example of mehmadari (hospitality) which finds frequent mention in the habit. This concern for the instructions of habit was a significant friend because in spite of the influence of Hindu legends. Muslim folk singer was becoming more and more aware of scriptural Islam. It proves that the impact of reformist Islam continued to increase throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Bengal countryside.

We have mentioned earlier that the Muslim folk singers have presented Muhammad as a boatman who is supposed to carry the soul peacefully and safely from one shore of the river to another interestingly enough, according to Hindu belief, their God Hari is also expected to play a similar role, that is to carry the soul peacefully across the ocean of the (Phenomenal) being (bhava singhu), If we study the baul songs produced during the late nineteenth or the early twentieth century, we will find that the Muslim bauls are so much influenced by this belief that the noted bauls like Nasanuddin went to the extent of accepting Hari as their helmsman. For example Nasaruddin sings:

It the name of Hari the helmsman is changed, problems will disappear. Your (Hari) boat is ready to rescue the sufferers and sinners. Hari the helmsman will be able to rescue them by his own virtue. Come brothers come, Yama,¹¹⁹ will not be able to touch you if the name of Hari is chanted...¹²⁰

If we study this song of Nasaruddin side by side with another song composed by his spiritual guide Phulbasuddin, we will find that Muhammad is playing the role of a helmsman in the second song instead of Hari though the appeal of this song is not different from that of Nasaruddin's song for example Phulbas sings.

On Rasul (The Prophet). You are the saviour of the drowning man. My heart is a broken one... Guide me safely forwards the shore in the midst of storm...¹²¹

It will not be inappropriate to mention in this context that even the greatest baul lalan has identified the guru (spiritual guide) with the Prophet, Krishna, Khuda (God) and also with the Vaishnava guru Chaitanya. In other words the guru is indispensable, according to Lalan, to attain salvation.¹²² Much to the consternation of the Muslim reformists of the nineteenth century, some faqirs even went to the extent of identifying Krishna with Muhammad.¹²³ Probably the Muslim reformists reacted in a similar fashion when a folk singer sang.

"Kalighater Kalima Hari Ali, Hai Fatima *¹²⁴

In these lines the Hindu Goddess Kali – Ma (mother Kali) of Kalighat. (in Calcutta) where the famous Kali temple is situated, seems to have no difference with Hazrat Fatima. We do not know anything about the composer of this song or about the time of its composition. But after scrutinizing its language and style it may not be wrong to deduce that it was composed in the mid nineteenth century or a little later. The impact of the Hindu Tantra.¹²⁵ is quite clear in this song.¹²⁶

(V) ENQUIRY

British Paramount was established in India by the second decade of the nineteenth century. Due to the political and cultural combination of the West, there were many uncertainties in the minds of the rural folk. Christian missionaries were also finding fault with Hinduism and Islam. Under such circumstances the colonized people started their quest for identity. Largely due to the colonized people started their west for identity. Largely due to the colonial presence, urban Bengal was experiencing a renaissance during the nineteenth century which encouraged rationalist thinking among a section of the urban Bengal. In this section we shall try show that the spirit of enquiry, which is an essential prerequisite for renaissance thinking also developed in the Bengali countryside. However, there was an element of spontaneity in that development because the folk poets, unlike their urban counterparts, did not have access to the “New Learning”,. The Spirit of enquiry in the Bengali folk songs had several

dimensions. However we shall confine our discussion to that plane where this spirit revolved round the image of the Prophet. It goes without saying that for nurturing the spirit of enquiry many folk singers were labeled as semi – heretics in the more orthodox quarters.¹²⁷

Hazarat Muhammad has been depicted as Hayat – ul – Mursalin by the bauls which means the life of the Prophets. ‘The Arabic word Mursalin is apparently borrowed from Sura LXXVII. This Sura is known as Mursalat or ‘Those Sent Forth’, implying the Prophets. The bauls do not believe in the death of the Prophet Muhammad, because according to their philosophy the death of the Prophet symbolizes the death of truth.¹²⁸ Anyway, the use of words such as Mursain under the Quranic influence is very significant. It proves that the increasing influence of reformist Islam was making the folk singers scripture oriented.

Historically speaking, Muhammad was born in Meca and died in Medina But according to Lalan, the real Prophet is immortal and he resides I the bodies of his true followers. So the baul poet sings:

Through your prayer try to distinguish between the Prophet who is mortal and the Prophet who is the life of his followers.¹²⁹

Lalan continues:

Try to recognize the Prophet who is present in your body and cling to the edge of his (Muhammad's) garment, says Lalan, if anyone is interested to move into the world beyond safely.¹³⁰

According to the faith: Quaub-al momenin arsh Allah Tala. Or "The throne of God is situated in the heart of the believers'. According to the bauls Kaba shanf is not the real Mecca, the real Mecca is situated in the human body. The Prophet who was born in Mecca had died. But can the real prophet die? Did the real prophet posses a body? Many such queries were raised by the bauls. So Lalan sings:

In Medina once arrived a man called Mohammad. Although a mortal, still peerless Nothing in this world an be flittingly compared with him. When the sun is ablaze the could gives him a shade. His body has no shadow and yet his shadow can be seen throughout this world. Try to understand the meaning of this riddle. Where there is a body there is a shadow, but the man Mohammad is shadow less. Says Lalan 'I am afraid to tell of his might.'¹³¹

The spirit betrayed in this song cannot be explained in words, it is a matter of realization. In the past many sufi saints who tried to divulge the mystery rooted in such songs were persecuted by the orthodox. Lalan is also singing the song with caution because Mansur Hallaj was executed for revealing the truth (mystery) Hallaj used to say 'Anal Haq' or 'I am the Truth (God)" The bauls also equate the

prophet with God (Truth) But the ulama are opposed to the unfolding of such mystical truth so Lalan is afraid.¹³² Here the bauls are putting much importance on the power or capacity of man.

On another occasion Lalan sings in the same spirit:

He (Muhammad) himself is the God. He cannot be separated from Gad. He is know as the life of all the prophets'.¹³³

Lalan continues:

Muhammad the prophet of Arabia has a body and a shadow he should not be identified with God...¹³⁴ Here Lalan is speaking about two Prophets (two images of Muhammad) much more clearly. One is the real Prophet. Who is called Hayat-ul-Marsalin (the life of all the Prophets) and the other is the historical Prophet of Arabia. However, these two images of Muhammad are not available in the Shari at. According to baul philosophy the Man of the Heart' is the Cosmic Man' The Cosmic Man's' is the relation of God and is not an individual human being. This 'Cosmic Man' pulsates through everybody.¹³⁵ It is possible that this sufi philosophy prompted the bauls to identify the Prophet with the Man of Heart' or 'the Cosmic Man' who is the reflection of God. This real Prophet' or the real Muhammad is called Hayat-ul-Mursalin by the bauls it signifies that the bauls are offering a loftier place to Muhammad in the spiritual hierarchy of Phophets and

thus indicating the emergence of a Prophet – centered piety, in the Bengali countryside.

We shall now turn our attention to another Lalan song where he had attached the satiate Muslims¹³⁶ by singing:

It shariat is the only way to salvation then why did the Prophet spend fifteen years in the solitary case of Hira for meditation? It is said that those who do not perform the prayer and fasting are subject to punishment on the Day of Judgment. It should be remembered that the merciful Prophet did not perform the prayer during the first forty years of his life...¹³⁷

These songs by Lalan prove that though there was an increasing focus on the Quran, hadith and the Prophet among the bauls, they did not conform to the shariat in its entirety.

On one occasion Nasarudding indirectly raised a question about the authenticity of mirage (Muhammad's heavenly Journey) by singing:

The Prophet cannot be separated from Gad as I have heard. They are linked with each other just like the milk and butter. If this is the case, then tell me why did it become necessary for Muhammad to get involved in mirage?...¹³⁸

The majority of commentators take this Night Journey (mira) literally.¹³⁹ but the baul poet has raised a question by saying that if God and Muhammad are inseparable from each other then the question of Muhammad's 'Journey' to meet God should not arise. The popularity of the nur-I-Mahammadi concept among the bauls also implies that they believe in the sufi philosophy which claims that the God created Muhammad from. He is won Light. Due to the prevalence of these concepts among the bauls. God and Muhammad are regarded as inseparable. Moreover it has been discussed earlier that the bauls regard Muhammad as the incarnation of God because of His sudden touch on Muhammad. Under such circumstances it is difficult for the bauls to believe in mirage in the spatial sense.

Lalan's disciple Duddu Shah who flourished during the mid nineteenth century onwards has challenged the validity of the fatwas (religious decree) issued by the traditionalist mullahs (priestly class) to ban music.¹⁴⁰ Duddu used to sing:

When the Prophet entered into Medina, a small tambourine was played to welcome him... So Duddu asks whether there is any authentic source for issuing fatwa against music.¹⁴¹

On another occasion Duddu sings:

How is it possible for the Prophet to meet God during mira? According to the hadith God is bodiless and shapeless and so he is bereft of hands and legs. Then why does he require a throne to sit upon to meet the Prophet... ?¹⁴²

By raising such a question, the baul poet is indirectly challenging the possibility of Muhammad's miraculous physical journey to heaven. It should be mentioned here that many believers take this journey in the spiritual sense.¹⁴³

The Changing image

There had been focus on the Prophet in medieval Bengali literature too, when Islam was spreading in this region. For example the nur-I-Muhammaadi concept, the miraj and various other aspects of Muhammad's life figures prominently in medieval Bengali literature.¹⁴⁴ A close perusal of that literature produced in medieval environment may lead us to deduce that a concern for the other world is predominant there. It is hardly surprising that under such circumstances human qualities are to a great extent likely to be superseded by divine qualities. But when significant social, economic and political changes were being ushered in by the colonial set up during the period under review, the folk poets could not be fully satisfied with their concern for the other world. This concern for the other world did not disappear from the Bengali folk tradition, but side by side a concern for this world also developed which culminated in an increasing focus on

the individual. And the model of a perfect man is undoubtedly the Prophet, as the baul Panju Shah (b.1851) sings:

If the human body is properly searched, it will be discovered that the nur-I-Muhammadi exists there to illuminate the human life...¹⁴⁵

The song is a perfect blending of the traditional concept of cosmogony (associated with the nur-I-Muhammad) and the newly emerging anthropocentrism.

On another occasion an anonymous baul sings:

Bahold that steamer, where the Prophet is the passenger and God Himself is the ticket master...¹⁴⁶

The time of its composition is not known but it will not be inappropriate to deduce that it was composed sometime in the mid nineteenth century when the steamer began to ply regularly on the Ganges.¹⁴⁷ The underlying meaning of the song is very significant. The steamer was not there in medieval Bengal. So it is a new idea. Not only that, supernatural power is attributed here to Muhammad. He is down to earth being a common passenger. Here the model friend Muhammad is reminding his followers to purchase their tickets which is synonymous with following the path of god. So that they can travel safely to the world beyond. The

ticket system was also a new introduction. And probably the image of the Prophet as a law abiding passenger, was to help his rural followers to get accustomed to a new set of laws introduced under the colonial set up.

We have mentioned elsewhere about the Tariqa-I-luhammadiy movement which was against dance and music. As a defence against syncretism, the Tariqa-I-Muhammadiya played a remarkable role in the nineteenth century Bengal. To evade their persecution, the bauls now adopted a new policy. Without changing the main theme of their songs, they just changed a few words for example in place of Kasi- Vrindavan, they put Mecca – Medina, and Lord Krishna yielded his place to Muhammad. Which did not necessarily change the tunes of their songs.¹⁴⁸ The poets who were giving much importance to the Murshid (spiritual guide) ignoring Mahammad now quickly changed their position by singing.

No one but the Prophet will save us¹⁴⁹

Even the great Lalan who had many queries about the shariat, probably could not ignore the circumstances as he sings:

One who does not recognize the helmsman Prophet' will remain as a blind man. The Profession of Faith and the performance of fasting, prayer, pilgrimage and charity are essential for salvation...¹⁵⁰

It is significant that a mystical poet like Lalan is putting so much emphasis on the five main rituals of Islam. It again points to the increasing influence of reformist Islam in rural Bengal.

We have mentioned earlier that in the jari concert. Muslim singers praise Goddess Sarasvati. But in the twentieth century Bengal. Sarasvati is quickly yielding her place to Fatima, the beloved daughter of Muhammad.¹⁵¹ as a result of Islamic revivalism in rural Bengal.

CONCLUSION

In a colonial set up, when institutionalized religion lost its landed patrons, focus shifted to the development of the individual devotee and in this field mystical movements played an important role by presenting Muhammad as the model of a perfect man. Many songs dealt with in this chapter, were orally transmitted so the folklorists found it very difficult to collect them in their original forms. Many narratives in the songs did scant justice to history, so we see pir Madar appear as the son of Fatima and the latter is seeking the companionship of Ganga. We have also seen how Muhammad emerged as the counterpart of Hari or Krishna, and how some special qualities of the Hindu deities were attributed to Muhammad and his beloved daughter Fatima. This sort of coexistence and companionship actually increased the vitality and popularity of folk Islam. Indeed, the custodians

of Islamic culture in modern Bengal (including Bangladesh) have much to learn from these folk poets.

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