

## **HARMONY AMIDST DIVERSITY: EXPLORING RELIGIOUS PLURALISM IN BENGAL THROUGH THE LENS OF SUFI HERITAGE AND ITS ENVOYS**

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### **Abstract**

This study explores the significant influence of Sufism on Bengal's cultural, religious, and social landscape from the eleventh century to the present. It highlights the contributions of pivotal Sufi figures like Shah Jalal, Shah Paran, and other Sufi orders who played crucial roles in propagating Islam and fostering regional socio-economic development following the 1204 CE conquest by Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji. By establishing khanqahs, these Sufis provided religious instruction and spiritual guidance and promoted tolerance and moderation within Bengal's diverse society. Utilising a qualitative methodology, the research draws on primary and secondary data from local and international archives to underscore Sufism's enduring impact on interfaith harmony and societal cohesion in Bengal. While much literature exists on Sufism in Bengali, academic research is scarce. This study aims to fill that gap by offering a nuanced analysis that emphasises both the positive contributions of genuine Sufi scholars (e.g. coexistence of multiple religions) and the problematic actions of pseudo-Sufi groups engaged in non-Islamic practices (e.g. *shirk*, *bi'dah* and altered false beliefs). This dual focus enhances the academic understanding of Sufism's complex legacy in the region.

**Keywords:** *Sufism, Bengal, Sufi Orders, Propagation of Islam, Religious Tolerance, Peaceful Coexistence, Mutual Respect and Understanding.*

### **Introduction**

Sufism, a mystical dimension of Islam, has played a transformative role in shaping the cultural and religious identity of

Bengal, which includes present-day Bangladesh, West Bengal and Assam in India. Rooted in profound spiritual teachings and practices, Sufism facilitated intercultural dialogue and social cohesion in a region historically characterised by religious and ethnic diversity. This study explores the historical dissemination, cultural integration, and contemporary challenges of Sufism in Bengal, offering insights into its enduring impact on the region's socio-religious landscape.

In Bengal, Sufi traditions succeeded from the mid-eleventh to the seventeenth century with the arrival of mystics from Arabiya, Anatolia, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Central Asia, and Northern and Western India. Local peoples were attracted to Islamic Mysticism, emphasising personal spirituality, love, equality, and community, transcending caste, race, and religious barriers. The conquest of Bengal by Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1204-5 CE further intensified the propagation of *Shari'ah* and *Ma'rifah* traditions, as ruling elites and Sufis jointly contributed to establishing Islam in the region. Sufi leaders utilised their spiritual paths (*tarīqahs*) and humanistic ideals to create an inclusive religious and cultural environment, significantly shaping Bengal's socio-religious fabric.

However, in the eighteenth century, pseudo-Sufi groups emerged, deviating from the core principles of genuine Sufism. These groups commercialised Sufi practices, encouraging rituals such as prostrating before graves and *pīrs* and mixed-gender *dhikr* sessions. The spiritual essence of Sufism was diluted by such deviations, leading to misconceptions and negative perceptions about the actual teachings of Sufism. This phenomenon reflects the complex interplay between authentic Sufi traditions and the socio-religious transformations in Bengal.

The article explores the role of Sufi scholars and institutions in promoting Islam and the socio-educational upliftment of the indigenous people of Bengal. It deals with how the Sufi doctrines of experiential spirituality and flexibility found easy acceptance among the local customs and left permanent cultural marks. The paper also brings into focus the pseudo-Sufi groups that have eroded the genuine Sufi practices and underlines the need to preserve the spiritual essence of Sufism.

This paper contributes to the literature on the history and politics of Sufism in Bengal by investigating these themes and suggesting how its original traditions may be revived to offset the pervasive misunderstandings. The explanation of the Sufism legacy stresses how Sufism can be used as an instrument for common inter-faith understanding, cross-cultural survival, and spiritual nourishment in the world system.

## 2. Literature Review

This review covers the Bengali literature on Sufism, including books, articles, and archival materials. Though there are a lot of narrative-based works, academic analyses related to Sufism in Bengal are relatively few, which creates difficulties in gathering authentic and comprehensive data. However, the review critically discusses the significant contributions within the field.

Muhammad Enamul Haq's (d. 1982) "*Bonge Sufi Provap*" investigates the profound cultural impact of Sufi teachings, emphasising their role in fostering peaceful coexistence, cultural integration, and religious tolerance. However, the work overlooks contemporary issues, such as the rise of fraudulent Sufi practices, limiting its applicability to modern contexts.<sup>1</sup>

Muhammad Mojlum Khan's "*The Muslim Heritage of Bengal: The Lives, Thoughts and Achievements of Great Muslim Scholars, Writers and Reformers of Bangladesh and West Bengal*" provides a collection of biographies of notable Islamic scholars, including some prominent Sufis. While insightful, the work fails to explore the origins, influence, spiritual orders (*ṭarīqahs*), and ongoing activities of Sufism in Bengal, leaving significant aspects of its historical and cultural evolution unexamined.<sup>2</sup>

In *Banglar "Musulmander Samajik Itihas* (Social history of the Muslims of Bengal)", Abdul Karim addresses the spread of Islam across various regions of Bangladesh. However, he provides limited discussion on the specific roles and activities of the Sufi orders, which were instrumental in this process.<sup>3</sup>

"*History of the Muslim Bengal*" by Muhammad Mohar Ali (d. 2007) underlines the impact of Sufism as early as the 12th century and rightly recognises that it played a central role in the gradual dissemination of Islam. Despite this, the detailed biographies of the influential Sufis, an analysis of the *ṭarīqahs*, and any discussion on pseudo-Sufism concerning the contemporary era are not found, which reduces the scope of the work.<sup>4</sup>

The famous traveller Ibn Battuta (d. 1369), in his travelogue *Rihlah*, narrates his encounter with the great Sufi Shah Jalal in Bengal. From Battuta's account, one gets a glimpse into Shah Jalal's deep religiosity and adherence to Islam but very little on the more extraordinary Sufi landscape in Bengal and other saints and their contributions.<sup>5</sup>

The literature reviewed here clearly shows these vast gaps in academic studies. It ranges from acknowledging the presence of Sufism to actual, on-site, and comprehensive analyses of the *ṭarīqahs* themselves, contemporary dynamics, and the shifting relationship within the *ṭarīqahs*. All these issues are also part of what needs to be considered regarding Sufism's impact on the history and culture of Bengal.

### **3. Methodology**

Sufism's impact on Bengal's cultural, religious, and social development over many centuries requires an in-depth qualitative exploration. This paper applies a qualitative research design to understand in detail the contributions of Sufi traditions and the challenges posed by deviant practices. A dual focus will guide this research: assessing the positive contributions of genuine Sufi scholars and the distortions introduced by pseudo-Sufi groups.

The research draws on primary data, especially Ibn Batuta's *Rehla*, and secondary data, including local and international archival records, historical manuscripts, and scholarly publications. Critical materials include translations of Sufi texts, historical accounts of Islamic propagation in Bengal, and analyses of the Sufi order's interactions with local populations. Archival materials were sourced from institutions dedicated to preserving the history of Sufism in Bengal, ensuring the reliability and comprehensiveness of the data.

The paper presents the data analysis through thematic content analysis, ranging from religious tolerance to peaceful mutual coexistence and the institutional role of Sufism. Supplementing this analysis, the historical interpretation places the findings within the historical socio-cultural development of Bengal. This integrated approach allows for a complete comprehension of Sufism's multifaceted influence.

The qualitative approach would thus be most apt for studying the complex cultural and historical dimensions of Sufism. As a non-numerical methodology that focuses on descriptive data rather than numerical metrics, this approach provides depth rather than breadth. It explains how Sufi traditions evolved and continue to feature in Bengal's religious and social lives.

This research finally synthesises the findings from historical and contemporary sources to present a holistic perspective on the legacy of Sufism in Bengal: how the Sufi scholars succeeded in establishing Islam in a region historically dominated by Hinduism and Buddhism, and how their teachings have been integrated into the

local context. It further points out that a deviation like pseudo-Sufi groups in Sufism needs to be handled carefully for its true essence to prevail and serve the overall study of the tradition.

#### **4. Result and Discussion**

The influence of Sufism on the socio-religious framework of Bengal was so profound that, throughout history, religious and cultural development in the region had taken place. This paper identifies Sufi mystics as the chief agents for the spread of Islam throughout Bengal through their spiritual teachings, exemplary conduct, and incorporation of local customs. Sufis' plea for coexistence and tolerance struck a deep chord in the people of Bengal, creating for themselves a unique syncretic tradition which connected Islamic precepts with indigenous beliefs such as Hinduism and Buddhism.

Some of the significant findings that emerge relate to the fact that the Sufi presence in Bengal dates to the 11th century with the arrival of pioneers such as Sultan Rumi (d. 1075), Fariduddin Ganjshakar (d.1266), Shah Jalal (d. 1346), and Khan Jahan Ali (d. 1459). These Sufis established religious and educational institutions that helped spread Islamic teachings, thus facilitating the translation of the Holy Qur'ān into Bengali and the composition of commentaries to make Islamic knowledge accessible to the masses. This educational outreach reinforced Islam as a cultural and intellectual force in Bengal while preserving the region's linguistic and artistic heritage.

The discussion elaborates further that the inculcation of Sufi practices into the socio-religious life of Bengal contributed to the gradual and voluntary conversion of the local population. The Sufis' emphasis on spiritual devotions, personal experiences, and moral conduct attracted rural and agrarian people because they wanted to listen to this message of equality and universal love. The contact with the local tradition meant an effortless blending of Islamic ways into the Bengali way of life, which only reinforced peaceful coexistence and strengthened social bonding.

The study concurrently depicts several challenges to authentic Sufi traditions that emerged in subsequent centuries. The fundamental spiritual and moral principles of the tradition were weakened by the rise of pseudo-Sufi organisations in the 18th century that exploited Sufism for financial gain. Shrine worship, materialistic vows, and ritualised devotion all contributed to the development of misconceptions about Sufism by overshadowing its humanistic and intellectual aspects.

#### **4.1. Sufism in Bengal: Tracing Its Roots and Transformations**

Sufism significantly influenced the socio-cultural and religious aspects of Bengal. It was crucial in bringing people of different religions to Islam in Bengal, especially in Kolkata and Asam in India and Bangladesh. The Sufi movement in Bengal began in the 13th century, shortly after the conquest of Bengal by Ikhtiyaruddin Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji. Only after the conquest of Bengal by Khalji did the Sufis receive support from the state to spread Islam. In addition, the morals, ethical behaviour, and spiritual practices of the Sufis greatly influenced the local population. The “humanistic ethos” of Sufism played an important role in introducing the Bengalis to Islamic spiritual and cultural values during the Middle Ages. The Sufis emphasised universal moral principles that were in perfect harmony with the spiritual aspirations of the local community, among them compassion, tolerance, and purity of heart. As a result of their efforts, Islam was more readily accepted by everyone, and Islamic culture was established in Bengal.

Islam spread in Bengal through three general channels: the Sufis, Muslim rulers, and Arab traders. The Sufis had the most lasting impact on the moral and spiritual life of the people, although Muslim rulers and traders from Arabia, Central Asia, and Anatolia were the first to introduce Islamic cultural and economic traditions to Bengal. The Muslim rulers introduced the political aspects of Islam to the people, the traders introduced the morals and integrity of Islam to the people, and the Sufis introduced the moral aspects of Islam, the issues of *Tazkiyatun Nafs*, to the ordinary people and non-Muslims, due to which a large group of non-Muslims in Bengal readily embraced Islam as their religion. Many Hindus and Buddhists began to convert to Islam.

The study on Muhammad Enamul-Haq’s seminal work, *“Sufi Influence in Bengal (the 1960s)”*, “traces Sufi’s presence in Bengal back to the eleventh century.”<sup>6</sup> Key figures such as Sultan Rumi, who arrived in Bengal in 1053, and Baba Adam Shahid, who travelled extensively with Sufi scholars to spread Islamic teachings, established the foundation for Islamic dominance in the region.<sup>7</sup> Equally noted in the annals of Sufi history in Bengal is the contribution of Jalaluddin Tabrizi (d. 1244), who came in 1303.<sup>8</sup> Enamul-Haq relates, among other things, the massive cultural impact of Sufistic teachings on Bengal, focusing on their role in promoting mutual coexistence, cultural interblending, and religious tolerance.

Muhammad Mohar Ali argues that the impacts of Sufism in Bengal were visible as early as the 12th century. The observation, as stated above, was before he left. The author also observed that in the

later part of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th century, many ordinary people in Bangladesh converted to Islam, majorly because of the influence of Sufi networks. During the next six centuries, so many Sufis from various parts of Anatolia, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Khorasan, Central Asia, Pakistan, and North India came that the land of Bengal became the destination for migration.<sup>9</sup> The spread of Sufism in Bengal thus generated the movement. In this manner, the Sufis were responsible for the sluggish yet unending spread of Islam over the region.<sup>10</sup> Their interactions involved people from all walks of life, and their pedagogical modes and teachings commanded the highest regard from many quarters.<sup>11</sup>

The renowned explorer Ibn Battuta (d. 1377) encountered Shah Jalal in 1345. The event described earlier took place at the Dargah of Shah Jalal, located close to Sylhet in Bangladesh. Battuta was at the dargah for three days, during which time he meticulously chronicled his experiences and thoughts regarding Shah Jalal and the local population in the area. Subsequently, the observations were consolidated and documented in a travelogue authored by the individual in question, titled "*The Rihlah*." Battuta was profoundly moved by Shah Jalal's display of profound religiosity and his steadfast dedication to the Islamic faith. This exhibition left Battuta with a profound impression.<sup>12</sup>

According to Abdul Karim, the author of the book "*Knowledge Sea, during the spread of Islam throughout Bangladesh*," The forefathers of Bengal were a cluster of various groups of individuals who professed either the Hindu or Buddhist religions. The preaching of the Sufis attracted them most as it was full of love, pity, and patience. The Sufis proved exceptionally able to reach out with friendships to every class since it was to people with a background of Muslim and non-Muslim preoccupation that the Sufi teachings appealed most strongly. Besides, they demonstrated the ability to accommodate changes in their preachings regarding changing practices and beliefs of the natives to increase the number of people who would accept the message; it is because of the Sufis that Islam spread over Bangladesh within a very short period.<sup>13</sup> By the advent of the 15th century, Islam had acquired the status of the most dominant religion in the region.<sup>14</sup>

Carl W. Ernst, 1993 maintains that though they are placed in low caste rank in society and the poorest sections, the practitioners of Islam in Bengal attained remarkable achievements. The author asserts that Islam conveyed the message of equality and social justice, which appealed to people who had been marginalised due to caste. Ernst further observes that Muslim preachers in Bengal received hospitality from the natives, especially those who held low ranks within the caste

system.<sup>15</sup> He quotes the words of Shah Jalal, a Sufi mystic from Bengal who once said that Islam was essentially egalitarian and fraternal. No distinction was made between people according to caste or class. The social and theological environment of the Indian subcontinent, especially Bengal, changed dramatically due to the attraction of Sufism among the lower castes.<sup>16</sup>

The above phenomenon led to the mass conversion of people to Islam as well as paved the way for a more egalitarian social order. The Sufis emphasised equality and social justice, thereby questioning the existing caste system and helping construct a more equalitarian social order. This significantly contributed to Bengal, and its effects are still felt across the region. The Sufi tradition in Bengal today has roots firmly attached to the Islamic Mysticism of North India. This proximity meant a great deal of interchange, which almost tied the North Indians and the Bengali Sufis together in beliefs, philosophy, and learning.<sup>17</sup>

While Muhammed Enamul-Haq dates this migration of Sufis from North India to Bengal from the late twelfth century up to the end of the fourteenth century, there was a gradual immigration which contributed immensely to the moulding and development of Sufism in Bengal. The migrated Sufis came with their prevailing traditions that resulted in an evolution which can be neatly divided into three historical periods in Sufism within Bengal.<sup>18</sup>

#### **4.1.1. The first phase, which lasted from the 12th to the 14th century**

It was the early period, roughly from the 12th to the 14th century, characterised by the migration of Sufis from Northern India into Bengal. The outcome was the establishment of madrasas and khanqahs in the region. Spread and penetration of Islam throughout Northern India were typical features of the first phase of Sufism in Bengal. An important feature of this period was the arrival of Sufis from North India, particularly representatives of the Suhrawardiyya and Chishtiya Sufi orders. The Sufis during this period, therefore, made it a point to amalgamate the essentials of the local culture into their religious discourse. They opted for contemplation, harmony, and confrontation of the soul as the invitation method<sup>19</sup> to Islam. This method of approach helped the people of Bengal positively approach Islamic Mysticism. From the eleventh to the end of the fifteenth century, scores of famous Sufi figures arrived in Bengal.<sup>20</sup>

These Sufis played a crucial role in spreading Islam in the region, and their teachings and practices continue to be intrinsic to Bengali culture today. Some of the most well-known Sufis visited



Bengal, such as Sheikh Sultan Rumi (d.1126), Sheikh Sharfuddin Abu Tawama (d. 1210), Sheikh Jalal Tabrizi (d. 1244)<sup>21</sup>, Shaikh Fariduddin Shakkarganj (d.1266), Makhdum Shah (d. 1291), Jafar Khan (d.1295), Shah Makhdum Ruposh (d. 1313), Sheikh Sultan Balkhi (d. 1343), Shah Jalal (d. 1347), Sheikh Alaul Haq (d. 1382), Khan Jahan Ali (d. 1459) and Ismail Khan Gazi (d. 1474).<sup>22</sup>

#### **4.1.2. The Middle Period of Sufi History in Bengal, which encompasses the period from the 15th to the 17th century**

The rise and growth of Sufism in Bengal from the 15th to the 17th century mark a significant historical period. During this period, the Sufi ideology spread on a large scale, leading to several new Sufi orders. In the intermediate history of Sufism in Bengal, political power at the local level also showed some remarkable development by the Muslims and the Sufis. The Sultans of Bengal played a significant role in promoting the growth of Sufi groups across the vast expanse of their empire, whereby these communities could provide counsel and teachings to the populace. Indeed, several Sultans who governed the independent Bengal state were said to have immense respect for Sufi emissaries to the degree that they integrated themselves as disciples of these spiritual leaders. Some Sultans had a few persons in their family who were bestowed with the title of Pir and Sheikh.<sup>23</sup> The existence of such persons signifies that the Sufis achieved much political power in that period.<sup>24</sup>

#### **4.1.3 The concluding period of Sufi history in Bengal, encompassing the 18th and 19th centuries**

The last period of Sufi history in Bengal, covering the 18th to the 19th century, was a period of the actual decline of Sufism. The reasons for such decline are many: increased detachment of the Sufis from their traditional doctrines and low educational standards eroded the quality of teachings and practice; erosion in the murshid-disciple relationship, the strong link in Sufism, snapped the already weakened ties between the Sufis and the people. Another debilitating factor was the growing dependence on khanqahs and shrines for revenue, which turned people away from spiritual ends and made such institutions less appealingly spiritual. Notably hostile to Sufism, the British colonial government was another rising influence that contributed to the decline in the influence of Sufism, as did other religious movements such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj. Despite the hardship, certain Sufi groups prospered by adapting to and addressing this altered religious environment to maintain their popularity among the younger Muslim population. These profoundly impacted the culture and spiritual life of Bengali People.

## **5. Sufi Sects in Bengal: A Scholarly Exploration of Their Influence and Legacy**

Most of the Sufi orders in Bengal have profoundly influenced Bengal's religious and cultural heritage. Historically, Sufi orders such as the Chishtiah, Qadiriyyah, and Naqshbandiyah have greatly influenced Buddhist and Hindu thought by emphasising love, compassion, spiritual discipline, and meditation.<sup>25</sup>

Bengal's most prominent Sufi orders are the Qadiriyyah, Naqshbandiyah, Chishtiah, Suhrawardyya and Shadili. Despite differences in their prayer, zikir and meditation techniques, these orders have brought the beauty of Islam to the ordinary people and non-Muslims. As a result, the influence of these Sufi orders has contributed significantly to religious practice, social stability, tolerance and cultural heritage.

Sect-e Muhammadiyah reflects the unifying thread between various Sufi groups, accommodating different practices while underscoring their shared heritage. The Sufi order plays a significant role in Bengal's socio-cultural and economic development by fostering a sense of community and promoting values of peace and understanding.<sup>26</sup>

### **5.1. The Chishti Order: Its Origins and Influence**

The Chishti order originated from Central Asia and Persia.<sup>27</sup> Abu Ishaq Shami (d. 940) founded the Chishti order in Afghanistan. However, Mu'in al-Din Chishti (d. 633/1235) brought this order to India and made it one of the most extraordinary orders in India today. Scholars also note that he was a disciple of Abu al-Najib Suhrawardi (d.1168).<sup>28</sup> Mu'in al-Din Chishti was originally from Sistan (eastern Iran, southwest Afghanistan) and was known as a sheikh who was well known in South Asia. He reached Delhi in 1193 during the end of the Ghurid rule and later settled in Ajmer-Rajasthan during the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate.<sup>29</sup>

Mu'in al-Din Chishti's Sufism and social welfare activities called Ajmer "the nucleus for the Islamization of Central and Southern India". Mu'in al-Din established *khanqahs* to reach local communities and spread Islam through charity. Islam is famous not for bloodshed or forced conversions but for establishing Chishti *khanqahs* and for its simple teachings on humanity, peace and generosity. The Chishti group established unprecedented contacts with Hindus and tried to counteract the caste system's adverse effects somewhat. As a result, Muslims and non-Muslims visit Mu'in al-Din Chishti's tomb, and it has become a popular tourist destination and

pilgrimage site in India. Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar (d. 1605) The 3rd Mughal ruler is the man who initiated Ajmer to become a traditional place of pilgrimage for the people.<sup>30</sup>

The leading Sufis of the Chishti order in India and Bengal are Nudruddin Chishti (d. 1233), Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki (d. 1236), Nizamuddin Awliya (d. 1335), Nasiruddin Chiragh Dehlavi Bande Nawaz (d. 1422), Sayyid Baqaullah Sheikh Kareemi Safipur (d. 1362/1269); Alaul Haq Pandavi and Ashraf Jehangir Semnani (d. 1386). Akhi Siraj Ainae Hind (d. 1357) established different dargahs and religious institutions in Bengal and India.<sup>31</sup>

### 5.2. The Naqshbandiyyah Order: Origins and Influence

The origin of this order is based on Khwaja Yusuf al-Hamadani (d. 1390), who lived in Central Asia. Later, it was systematised by Baha' al-Din Naqshband (1318-1389) as a Tajik and Turkish origin. Therefore, Baha' al-Din Naqshband is known as the founder of the Naqshbandi order.<sup>32</sup> Kaja Muhammad al-Baqi Billah (d. 1603) introduced the Naqshbandi order to Bengal.<sup>33</sup> This order, especially with the support of Kaja al-Hamadani, who became the leader of the Mughal empire in 1526 and was loyal to his ancestors, started the Naqshbandi order before the Mughal conquered Bengal.<sup>34</sup> The empire's support gave significant momentum to the order.<sup>35</sup> This order is considered the most important Quran and Sunnah priorities of all the Sufi orders. It strictly prohibits music, *samā'* dance and other liberal contents of Sufism.<sup>36</sup> Now, many followers in Bengal are introducing this order in their region.

### 5.3. The Qadiriyya Order: Origins and Influence

This order, founded by Abdul Qadir Gilani (d. 1166), known as the "Qutb of the Sufis and al-Insān al-Kāmil", is an important mystical path widely followed in Bangladesh and other southern parts of India. Qadiriyyah, built on intense devotion to the foundations of Islam, journey to Allah and love for the Prophets and the Righteous, unlike the previously mentioned orders, was formed and nourished from Arab (Baghdadi) roots.

The Qadiriyyah order started in a province of Bengal through Sufis who came from Yemen, such as Sheikh Zainuddin Makhdoom and Sheikh Fariduddin. The Zainuddin Makhdoom, from the Yemeni nobility and a family of scholars, came to Bangladesh in the 12th century and settled in the Barishal region of central Bangladesh. Bangladesh became an Islamic centre by establishing madrasahs, mosques and high Islamic complexes by Zainuddin Makhdoom, and Barishal became known as the "religious centre in Bangladesh". He

wrote important works on Sufism, such as *Hidayat-ul-Edkiya* and *Tarik-il-Awliya*, and played a significant role in advancing Sufi literature and the Qadiriyyah order.<sup>37</sup>

It is stated that during the first period of the formation of Qadiriyya, Fariduddin bin Abdul Qadir Khurasani came from Yemen to Bengal and contributed to the spread of Qadiriyyah. The work “Muhiddin Mala”, written by Ghazi Muhammad and narrating the Karamat of Abdul Qadir Gilani, has become a book that all Muslims read with respect and benefit from.<sup>38</sup>

The Al Maberi order, followed in Bangladesh and southern India, is a branch of the Qadiriyyah. The Qadiriyyah, which is being kept alive with great effort by a few remaining sheikhs, is still the first order of Bangladesh.

#### 5.4. Furfura

Muhammad Abu Bakr Siddiqui Al Quraishi (d. 1939) was a famous *Pīr* of West Bengal, India.<sup>39</sup> He was the founding *Pīr* of Furfura Darbar Sharif, considered a religious pilgrimage site for Muslims of both Bengal and India.<sup>40</sup> He contributed significantly to the propagation of Islamic *Shari'ah* and *Tariqah*, preaching, establishing mosques and madrasas, publishing newspapers and magazines, and spreading education in remote areas of Bengal and India. He was a follower of Jahanian Jahangasht (d. 1384).<sup>41</sup>

#### 5.5. The Madariyyah Sufi Order: Origins and Popularity

Madariyyah is a Sufi order popular in North India, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, the Mewat region, Bihar and Bengal, Nepal and Bangladesh. Known for its syncretic aspects, lack of emphasis on external religious practice, and focus on internal *dhikr*, it was started by the Sufi saint “Sayad Badiuddin Zinda Shah Madar” (d. 1434), known as “Qutub-ul-Madar” and has its headquarters in Makanpur, Kanpur district of Uttar Pradesh.

#### 5.6. The Suhrawardiyyah Sufi Order: Origins and Contributions

The founder of this order was Abu al-Najib Suhrawardi (d. 1168). He was also Ahmad Ghazali's student, Abu Hamid Ghazali's younger brother (d.1111). In this context, Ahmad Ghazali's teachings significantly contributed to the formation of this order. This order existed in Iran before the people migrated to India and Bangladesh due to the Mongol invasion. As a result, Abu Najib, Suhrawardi's nephew, brought the Suhrawardiyyah to the mainstream

consciousness. Abu Hafs Shihab al-Din (d.1243) wrote extensively on the theories of Sufism.

The most important classical book is '*Awā'rif al-Ma'ārif*' by Shihab al-Din' Umar al-Suhrawardi (d. 1891). It was widely read and became an indispensable book in the madrassas of Bangladesh and India. It helps to understand the Sufi teachings of Suhrawardiyyah. Abu Hafs was a global ambassador of his time. From travelling from Baghdad to India to teach diplomacy between the Ayyubid rulers of Egypt and Syria, Abu Hafs was a Sufi leader who showed initiative in every field. Abu Hafs maintained cordial relations with the Islamic states and continued to approve their leadership and political participation in the Sufi orders.

### **5.7. The Presence of Sufi Orders in Bengal: Contributions and Challenges**

The Sufi community has played a pioneering role in the propagation of Islam through their tireless efforts and dedication in various parts of Kolkata and Assam in India and Bangladesh. Sufis are also making significant contributions to advancing religious and Islamic education in the region.

The famous Sufi Abu Bakr Siddique (d. 1939) established a dargah in Furfura, Hooghly district of Kolkata, India, in 1900 and propagated Islam and Sufism. This dargah is still active today. The successors of Abu Bakr Siddique and his disciples are still working to propagate Islam here. In different parts of Bangladesh, especially in Dhaka, the sons and grandsons of Abu Bakr Siddique are spreading Islam by establishing various khanqahs, dargahs, mosques and madrasas. Among Abu Bakr's family members, Muhammad Abdul Hai Siddique, Abul Ansar Muhammad Abdul Kahhar Siddique and Abu Bakr Abdul Hai Mishkat Siddique are notable.<sup>42</sup> Nesaruddin Ahmad, a disciple and disciple of Abu Bakr Siddique, established a Kamil Masters Madrasa called Sarsina Darussunnat Kamil Madrasah in the Pirojpur district of Barisal in 1890 and a khanqah with him. He also significantly spread Islamic education throughout Bengal by establishing thousands of mosques, madrasas and khanqahs across Bangladesh.<sup>43</sup> His grandson, Shah Mohammad Mohebullah, continues this legacy as the chief Pir of Sarsina Darbar Sharif and plays an important role in the propagation of Islam.<sup>44</sup>

Charmonai Pir, especially Syed Muhammad Ishaq (d. 1977), played an immense role in the propagation of Islam in Bengal. Their influence spread further when they established Charmonai Darbar Sharif in Barisal and Jamia Rashidiya Ahsanabad Kamil Masters Madrasa in 1924. His children, Syed Rezaul Karim and Syed Faizul

Karim, established the political party Islami Andolan Bangladesh. Today, the party is one of the country's most well-known Islamic political parties.<sup>45</sup> The uniqueness of the party lies in the fact that while, on the one hand, it urges all people to become good through Sufism, on the other hand, the party tries to develop this country toward Islamic governance through political activity. However, the establishment of the Maizbhandari Darbar Sharif in Patiya, Chittagong, by Syed Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari (d. 1906) significantly contributed to the country's Islamic atmosphere.<sup>46</sup>

Other important Sufis like Abdullah Hil Kafi, Maulana Shamsul Haque Faridpuri, Muhammad Ullah Hafezzi Huzur, Maulana Atahar Ali of Kishoreganj, Siddiq Ahmad of Chittagong, Tajul Islam of Brahmanbaria, and Syed Abdul Karim Shaikh-e-Kawriya of Sylhet too played a critical role in spreading Islam by establishing their respective tariqas. It should be noted that the activities and influence of the Sufi leaders did not pertain only to religious teachings but also contributed to Bengal's social and educational development. The mosques, madrasas, and khanqahs they built served as centres of learning and spiritual guidance and helped develop a strong Islamic tradition in the region. The role of the Sufis needs to be viewed in assessing the influence of Sufism on the cultural and religious life of Bengal. This historical narration gives enough evidence regarding how the Sufi traditions have shaped the spiritual topography of Bengal and provided the ground on which its Islamic identity came to rest.

Sufism, along with many spiritual leaders and *Pīrs*, has contributed a great deal to the dissemination of Islam and the socio-economic development of Bengal. However, some groups have adulterated true Sufism, leading to the spreading of misleading practices.<sup>47</sup> A group of unscrupulous false *Pīrs* take advantage of the simplicity and innate religiosity of the Muslim masses to establish their khanqahs and dargahs with the express purpose of destroying the beliefs and practices of Bengali Muslims for their economic benefit.<sup>48</sup>

Among the most prominent false Sufi groups in Bengal are the followers of Dewanbaghi, Sureshwari, Enayetpuri, Atroshi, Chandrapuri, Rajarbaghi, Beshra and various Baul groups.<sup>49</sup>

Analysing their websites and the books published by their *khānqahs* reveals that they encourage people to believe that following the Pirs alone, without adhering to the Quran and Sunnah, is sufficient for attaining paradise.<sup>50</sup> These groups are also known to organise mixed-gender *dhikr* sessions, engage in practices such as lighting candles and performing prostrations at graveyards, deny the

obligation of Hajj, and propagate the idea that worship is unnecessary for *Pīrs*, who they claim will secure the salvation of their followers in the afterlife. These beliefs and practices are clearly outside the bounds of Islam.<sup>51</sup>

Dewanbagi *Pīr* has been widely criticised for spreading discord related to Islam. According to Dewanbagi *Pir*, Allah appointed him to spread Islam worldwide. His real name is Mahbub Khuda, commonly known as Dewanbagi.<sup>52</sup> Dewanbagi has become a controversial figure who claims to be the husband of Hazrat Fatima, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad, and proclaims himself a Sufi emperor. He also asserts that Prophet *Ḥaḍrat Muhammad Rasūlullah Khātām un Nabīyyīn Ṣallallahu ‘alaihi wa ‘alā ‘Ālihi wa Aṣḥābihi wa Ṣallam* bestowed upon him the “Reviver of Islam” title in a dream.<sup>53</sup>

The *Pīr* of Sureshwar continues to engage in activities that oppose Islam under the guise of promoting the religion. According to the tradition of the Sureshwar Dargah, followers and devotees are expected to prostrate before the *Pīrs*. Furthermore, adherents of the Sureshwar Dargah tradition are required to prostrate before shrines. Such practices lead people into acts of disbelief and shirk.<sup>54</sup> The followers of the Sureshwar Dargah also misinterpret the Holy Qur’ān and Hadith by determining the dates of Ramadan and Eid based on the lunar calendar as observed in Saudi Arabia rather than according to the local lunar observations in Bangladesh, thus opposing the practices of Muslims in the country. Following this, *Pīrs* leads their disciples towards shirk. According to the *Pīr* of Sureshwar, worshipping anyone who does not pledge allegiance (*bai’at*) to the *Pīr* is not accepted. Furthermore, he believes that neither the *Pīr* nor the Murshid requires worship.

According to the Enayetpuri tradition, it is obligatory to follow the *Pīr*. The power of good and evil is believed to be in the hands of the *Pīr*, enabling the *Pīr* to determine the well-being or misfortune of individuals. According to the Atroshi tradition, it is believed that the *Pīr* will save his followers from Hell in the afterlife and that the *Pīr* can protect his disciples from all worldly dangers. According to *Pīr* Abul Fazal of Chandrapuri, worshipping the *Pīr* is unnecessary. On page 29 of the book “*Haqqa’l-Yaqīn*”, written by Abul Fazal, it is stated that once a person has attained the state of fana maqam, there is no further need for worship.<sup>55</sup>

Rajarbagi *Pīr* has added approximately fifty-two prestigious titles before or after his name. He claims that many of these titles were granted to him by Allah, some by last Prophet (*Ṣal Allah-u-‘alaihi wa ṣallam*), and the rest by the leaders of various Sufi orders.<sup>56</sup> According to the Beshra community, men and women are encouraged

to sing together and reject the concept of modesty between genders. They consider the consumption of alcohol and drugs to be permissible and practice prostration at the *Pir*'s grave.<sup>57</sup> The goal of the Baul community is to harmonise the essence of all religions. The fundamental purpose of all religions is the salvation of the soul. Bauls have emphasised the harmony between Islam and Hinduism.<sup>58</sup>

The Sufi orders have contributed substantially to Islam's spread and Bengal's socio-economic development. Their impact is evident in the numerous institutions they established and the spiritual guidance they provided. However, the rise of deviant groups that distort Sufi teachings presents significant challenges. Addressing these challenges is crucial for maintaining the integrity of Sufism and ensuring the accurate practice of Islam in Bengal.

Understanding the dual nature of Sufi influence—both positive and problematic—provides valuable insights into the spiritual landscape of Bengal. It underscores the importance of preserving genuine Sufi traditions while addressing and correcting deviations.

## **6. The Impact of Sufism on the Religious and Cultural Landscape of Bengal**

The influence of Islamic Mysticism on Bangladesh's religious and cultural landscape became evident as early as the thirteenth century when Sufis hailing from northern India and adjacent areas focused their efforts on Bengal. There was a Sufi presence everywhere, and no single town in Bengal was untouched by their influence. Their actions were significant in the propagation of Islam because of the specific populations and social groups they targeted as potential adherents.<sup>59</sup>

Two primary causes may be attributed to the extensive influence and popularity of the Sufi movement in Bengal, which can be categorised as factors.

The initial point of discussion pertains to the diligent endeavours undertaken by Sufis to establish their religious beliefs inside the societal framework. This, in conjunction with their unpretentious and uncomplicated ways of living, resulted in the acquisition of substantial support and safeguarding from the governing sultans, augmenting their overall influence.<sup>60</sup>

Second, Islam was more palatable in the nation due partly to its religious and social milieu. Because of the caste system, class disparities, and moral aberrations in society, people were more receptive to a faith that went beyond material standards of wealth,



race, and colour.<sup>61</sup> People were more receptive to a transcendent religion as a result. Society has responded favourably to the Islamic faith's emphasis on values like equality, coexistence in a multicultural setting, and the framework of tolerating other religious beliefs and practices.<sup>62</sup>

### **6.1. The Sufi Perspective on Equality and Brotherhood**

Sufis played a significant role in establishing social justice in various parts of Bengal. They beautifully presented the beauty of Islam to the public, and people from the caste system of Hinduism and Buddhism came under the shadow of Islam and became Muslims and started contributing to society in various fields. At this time, the enlightened path of Sufism appeared to society as a seductive force with the idea of egalitarianism and brotherhood.<sup>63</sup>

Through their various initiatives, moral intentions, and selfless actions in the propagation of Islam, the Sufis gifted Bengal with an idealistic society that people of all religions could deeply understand. Through their tireless efforts, crores of the people of Bengal sought the Islamic faith as a beacon of light and tried to lead their lives illuminated by the ideals of Islam.<sup>64</sup>

Across the lush expanse of Bengal, Sufi luminaries, like celestial artists, craft *khānqahs* in every corner. These sanctuaries transcend physical spaces, becoming sanctuaries for intellectual enlightenment and humanitarian acts of grace. Their influence extends far and wide, sculpting the contours of the Muslim community's evolution in this sacred land, endowing its people with an elevated social status.<sup>65</sup>

In Bengali Islam, preachers labour earnestly to embrace the most vulnerable and marginalised souls. In Bengal's embrace, Muslim preachers and Sufis find a warm welcome from locals and those trapped by the oppressive caste system's chains.<sup>66</sup> Here, the illustrious Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta crossed paths with the venerable Shah Jalal in 1345. He bore witness to the Sheikh's saintly aura, affirming his unique stature. Karamat, known to the realm, added lustre to the Sheikh's renown. The craggy denizens of these mystical mountains stood steadfast in their commitment to Islam, forging an unbreakable bond with their beloved Sheikh.<sup>67</sup>

Moreover, Sufi leaders who stood out as kind, modest, and honourable were Sheikh Sultan Rumi (d. 1075)<sup>68</sup>, Shah Makhdum Rupos (d. 1313), Mohammad Abu Bakr Siddique (d. 1939),<sup>69</sup> and Abdul Hai Siddiqi (d. 1977). Their noble and modest legacy was

ingrained in the collective consciousness and gave everyone a sense of warmth.<sup>70</sup>

## **6.2. The Legacy of Sufis in Promoting Welfare Society**

The Sufis tried establishing a welfare state in Bengal, where justice, equality, and human status were promoted.<sup>71</sup> The Sufis influenced the region's kings and soon converted them to Islam. Shah Jalal (d.1347) and his followers collaborated with the Muslim forces of Zimmer Ghazi in the war against the tyrant King Gaur Govinda to establish Muslim rule in this part of the country in 1303.<sup>72</sup> It is believed that Khan Jahan Ali (d. 1459) added the districts of Cessore, Khulna and Barisal to the Muslim sultanate and established a welfare state independent of religion, caste and class.<sup>73</sup> The Sufis advised the kings on religious matters and made many efforts to prevent policy shifting and direct them towards the religious path. They contributed to the consolidation and economy of the state in times of crisis and added moral strength.<sup>74</sup>

Hazrat Nur Qutb Alam (d. 1415) Raja Kans established the Muslim rule in Bengal when a policy of oppression against Muslims was attempted after the death of Sultan Ghiyathuddin Azam Sheikh (1390-1411).<sup>75</sup> Some Sufis also advocated Islamic policy in the administration of Muslim states.<sup>76</sup> Sheikh Abdul Haqq (d. 1384) advised Sultan Ghiyathuddin Azam Sheikh to implement Islamic policies in the affairs of the state.<sup>77</sup> Lakshmana Sena (1178-1206),<sup>78</sup> impressed by the humanitarian activities and karamah of Sheikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi, gave him some lands to construct a mosque.<sup>79</sup> The Sheikh later established a Khanka, which became a centre of learning. This played a pioneering role in transferring knowledge to Bangladesh.

However, there were good relations between the kings and the Sufis. The Sufis and the Sultans of Bengal were fatally linked by mutual bonds of attraction and attraction in the political formation of the state and especially in the initiation of new dynasties.<sup>80</sup>

## **6.3. The Role of Sufi Institutions in the Intellectual and Spiritual Development of Bengal**

Various institutions contributed to the intellectual development of Bengal, but the Sufi institutions made a significant contribution. The Sufis of Bengal established madrasas, khanqahs and dargahs throughout the region to teach the people the basic tenets of Islam.<sup>81</sup> These institutions, madrasas and khanqahs, served as the centres of learning and spiritual development of Bengal, where

Muslims were exposed to the depths of Islamic knowledge and were taught how to have a good relationship with Allah.<sup>82</sup>

Sufis encouraged people to engage in religious studies, emphasising ethical conduct, spiritual introspection, and the search for universal truth. During the reign of Nasir-ud-Din Mahmud Shah (1394-1413) of the Delhi Sultanate, the Sufi figure Khan Jahan Ali (d. 1459), who preached Islam at the Sixty Dome Mosque in what is now Khulna Division, Bangladesh, which is recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. He established various religious institutions in the Khulna region, including various dargahs, which played a considerable role in advancing Islamic education. All these religious institutions of Khan Jahan Ali ensured unity and coexistence among Muslims.<sup>83</sup> Shah Jalal and Shah Paran established numerous *dargāhs* and *khānqāhs* in the Sylhet region of Bangladesh, taught people the principles of Sufism, and made an important contribution to the spread of Islam among non-Muslims.

Sufi institutions in Bengal were able to integrate diverse intellectual and cultural traditions. Sufis facilitated the spread of Islam through the establishment of dargahs, khanqahs and religious institutions. They established an environment where cultural exchange flourished, contributing to the region's unique identity as a place of interfaith dialogue and understanding and ensuring Islam's unique place among the people of the region.<sup>84</sup>

#### **6.4. The Humanitarian Legacy of Bengal's Sufis: Compassion in Practice**

There are a lot of Sufis of Bengal who have attracted attention through their involvement in humanitarian activities.<sup>85</sup> Figures such as Shah Makhdum Rupos, Jalaluddin Tabrizi, and Akhi Sirajuddin Usman (d. 1357) were charismatic and influential figures who persuaded people through their compelling personalities. They established centres for humanitarian work, known as "*Langar Khānas*," where they provided aid to people experiencing poverty, beggars, and travellers. Muslims and non-Muslims respected the khanqahs as centres of "worldly and spiritual inspiration."<sup>86</sup>

The Sufi biography *Siyar'l 'Ārifīn* reveals that Jalaluddin Tabrizi left Baghdad around 1228 and travelled to India, where he did not receive a warm reception at the court of Delhi. Afterwards, he moved to Lakhnauti, the former capital of Bengal. Records show that when he arrived in Bengal, the entire population gathered around him and became his disciples.<sup>87</sup> There, he established a public hospice and a free kitchen and purchased several gardens and lands to donate for charitable purposes. He also owned a riverport called *Deva Mahal*.

Today, the sacred tomb of Tabrizi is in a shrine within the river port of *Deva Mahal*, and half of the port's income is dedicated to maintaining the hospice.<sup>88</sup>

Jalaluddin Tabrizi's discourses on forgiveness, sacrifice, justice towards humanity, unity, and love became a source of inspiration for the oppressed. Famous Sufi Shaikh Alaul Haq (d. 1398) spent considerable money to feed beggars and travellers and shelter them.

Abu Bakr Siddiqui (d.1939) of Furfura Sharif founded numerous charitable institutions, orphanages, and free healthcare centres in Bengal. He was also a great educator who believed that only education could eliminate all evil, and thus, he established many madrassas, schools, and educational centres. According to Al Mannan, his work was not limited to intellectual endeavours; he also contributed materially to the well-being of people and countries.<sup>89</sup> He tirelessly carried out humanitarian aid for others. His son, Abdul Qahhar Siddiqui (d. 2006), was involved in many social activities and charitable works and patronised many educational institutions. He was also very generous and never ignored the suffering of others. In this context, he did much for the oppressed and the poor. He provided for servants and took care of them when they were ill. He showed great kindness towards animals and even tried to save an ant drowning in water. He demonstrated kindness to orphans and lived a very humble life.<sup>90</sup>

### **6.5. Sufism in Bengal: Fostering Interfaith Harmony and Social Inclusivity**

At the time of the emergence of Islam, Bengal was predominantly a Hindu-Buddhist region, where Brahmins had established a notable political and social dominance over others. Their influence, through caste governance and other discriminatory social rules, affected Buddhists, lower-caste Hindus, and even the Sudras, who were ranked below the Brahmins in the caste system.<sup>91</sup> Sudras and other lower-class people were denied access to religious texts and places of worship. When hostility between Hindus and Buddhists was rampant in society, the emergence of Islam, mainly through Sufis, had a profound impact on the political and social life of the region. The distinction between Brahmin, Sudra, Hindu, and Buddhist was no longer recognised. Muslims interacted with the local population for various reasons.<sup>92</sup>

Centuries of contact between Hindus and Muslims profoundly influenced both groups, with Muslim social and religious life being significantly impacted by Hinduism. During the time of Shah Jalal, Ibn Battuta mentioned the relationship between Hindus and Muslims,

noting the agricultural society of the Surma valleys beneath the Sumerian hills, which were distinctly defined by Hindu identity. Hindus were deeply influenced by the attitude of Muslims during Hindu festivals. Muslims shared their food, knowledge, and clothes with them.<sup>93</sup>

Sarsina Pir Nisaruddin Ahmed (d. 1952), Furfura Pir Abdul Qahhar Siddiqui (d. 2006), and Charmonai Pir Syed Fazlul Karim (d. 2006) were a prominent figure in the Indian subcontinent, especially in the southern part of Bengal, whom they spread Islam. Hindus mostly populated the region they served, yet there is no evidence of any conflict between Muslims and Hindus there. They dedicated their spare time to assisting new Muslims. Their character's open-hearted, humanitarian, sympathetic, and compassionate nature were distinctive. They treated all people equally.<sup>94</sup>

Furthermore, the principles of human equality and fraternity expressed by Islam represented a revolutionary force within the caste system and the Brahmin-dominated Hindu society. Since Muslims did not have a caste system like the Hindus, they were not required to strive for positions between high and low status; instead, all Muslims equally benefited from employment and education.<sup>95</sup> Non-Brahmin Hindus, supported by Muslim rulers, gained social respect through the education and employment they received. Put, freedom existed for Hindus, and Muslims had liberated them from Brahmin oppression.<sup>96</sup> Islam profoundly influenced local religious and social systems. The most significant impact of Islam in Bengal was the dismantling of Brahminical supremacy.<sup>97</sup>

## **7. Conclusion**

This article has examined the profound and nuanced contributions of Sufism to the religious, cultural, and socio-economic landscape of Bengal. Sufis played a pivotal role in fostering coexistence, interfaith harmony, and religious pluralism among Muslims and non-Muslims in Bengal.

This study examines the influence of Sufism in shaping the spiritual fabric of the region. It shows how Sufis have, over the centuries, fostered an environment of tolerance and pluralism in Bengali society through their tariqas, khanqahs, and charitable works. These issues have been brought to the fore through the activities of Sufis across Bangladesh and West Bengal, India.

This study has shown how some pseudo-Sufism emerged in Bengal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, excluding authentic Sufism. They used Sufism as a business interest. These groups built dargahs and shrines

in different places, made vows for worldly desires, offered money, flowers, candles, and incense sticks, prostrated themselves to graves and saints, considered it permissible for men and women to *dhikr* together, and encouraged ordinary people. Due to this, authentic Sufism is currently being damaged, and people are having a negative perception of Sufism. Among these groups, Vaishnavism, secular Mysticism, Baulism, Dewanbagi, Rajarbagi, Atrishi and other groups are involved in such activities.

Although this article has attempted to provide a comprehensive account of the impact of Sufism in Bengal, the reliance on secondary sources rather than primary sources has limited the depth of analysis. We believe that by making greater use of primary sources, future researchers will be able to further elucidate the nuanced role of Sufi traditions in Bengal, especially in their socio-political and contemporary contexts. Nevertheless, this study has laid the foundation for a rich and diverse history of Sufism in Bengal.

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