
Sufism And Folk-songs: A Case Study of Undivided Goalpara District of Assam

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INTRODUCTION

The undivided Goalpara district, presently comprising the districts of Goalpara, Dhubri, Kokrajhar, Bongaigaon, Chirang, and South Salmara-Mankachar, bore the brunt of the tensions between Assam and Bengal because it lies on their shared border. This area is also known as western or lower Assam. It was the first district in the entire Brahmaputra valley of Assam to witness the invasion of Muslim outsiders. Therefore, it is very likely that Islam and Sufism had a more secure foothold in this area far earlier than they had elsewhere in Assam. At various points in history, a multitude of Sufi saints from all over the world arrived in this region. The advent of Sufi saints and their activities in Assam are important historical facts. Evidence indicates that the Sufi saints played a significant role in the dissemination of Islam and folk songs in this region of Assam. The arrival of Sufism helped the area flourish culturally, as evidenced by the proliferation of historic mosques, *khanqahs*, and *mazaars* across the erstwhile Goalpara district.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Although the literature on Sufism in Assam is not as extensive as in other regions, there are still some resources that provide insights into the presence and influence of Sufism in the region. Currently, Sufism in Assam has received attention from authors and researchers, and a few writings on Sufism in Assam have been produced. The works of different scholars on the Sufi practices in Assam have been consulted to prepare this article. Western Assam is adjacent to undivided Bengal, so Sufi literature from both undivided Bengal and Assam has been consulted in order to get a holistic picture of the topic. However, the academics have never adequately explained the lives and activities of the Sufis in the undivided Goalpara district of Assam. There has been no systematic and cohesive attempt to provide a full account of the Sufi saints' contribution to the local folk songs in this region of Assam. Considering these aspects, the proposed article has tried to address all facets of Sufism in connection with the evolution and spread of folk songs in the undivided Goalpara district of Assam.

METHODOLOGY

So far as the methodology is concerned, the historical method has been applied here. The work is based on primary and secondary sources. Data have also been collected through personal interviews with knowledgeable persons, field studies, etc. Oral histories pertaining to Sufi institutions have also been consulted for the composition of the study.

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DISCUSSION AND RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Sufism has found resonance in a variety of cultural situations due to its esoteric teachings and emphasis on mystical love and harmony. It is possible that the teachings and practices of the Sufi saints have blended with local beliefs and traditions, adding to the already diverse religious and social makeup of the study area. The contribution of the Sufi saints in the field of folk songs is immense. The undivided Goalpara district of Assam, located in the western portion of the state, has long-standing borders with undivided Bengal and thus, is home to the largest population of migrant Muslims from Bangladesh. These people had a stronger affinity for Bengali traditional culture, and they subsequently introduced the same to this region. Consequently, this area witnessed the emergence and progression of Bengali Sufi musical culture. Tania Begum, in this context, mentions in her article that the region witnessed the emergence of three distinct genres of Bengali Sufi and folk songs over time, namely *Murshidi*, *Marifati*, and *Baul* songs (Begum, 2020). These are highlighted below:

a. *Murshidi* Songs

Murshidi songs are one of the components of the folk culture of *Char-chapori* (low-lying flood-prone riverbanks) in the study area. These songs may be traced back to their origins in East Bengal. Ashutosh Bhattacharya claims that this style of singing was introduced by the Sufi saints of medieval Bengal (Bhattacharya, 1977). However, these songs cannot be traced back to their original composers, and their authors are not known. They have simply been handed down from one generation of Bengali Muslims to the next in both Bengal and western Assam. A song that pays homage to a spiritual teacher is often referred to as '*murshidi geet*' (song). The *murshid* (spiritual mentor) is called by a variety of names in these songs, including *Pir-Sabeh*, *Pir-Keblajan*, *Rasul*, *Gosain*, *Dayal*, *Dayal Chan*, *Dayal Guru*, *Sona Bandhu*, and many more. *Murshidi* songs contain words of supreme devotion, love, dependence, and complete self-surrender to attain nearness to Allah. According to these songs, the disciple is the servant of the *pir*, regardless of gender. *Murshidi geets* hold significant popularity among both the East Bengali and Deshi Muslim communities in the study area. They are performed primarily by men, and they frequently do so in groups with one person leading and the others following. Normally, it takes place at night during a "*Boitbok*" (assembly) or "*Sabha*" (meeting) in the home of a *pir* or in the home of a follower, or during the celebration of '*urs*' (death anniversary of a Sufi) in a *dargah*. An example of a *murshidi* song is:

“মুর্শিদের চরণ সুধা
পান করিলে হবে ক্ষুধা
করো না দেলে দ্বিধা
যেহি মুর্শিদ সেই খোদা।।” (Ahmed, 2022).

Translation: The feet of the *murshid* are nectar. Drinking will make you hungry. Don't hesitate; that's what God is.

b. *Marifati* Songs

Marifati songs are the spiritual thematic songs of the Muslim community. According to Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *marifati* songs are a class of religious or spiritual

songs composed by medieval Bengali Sufisaints. These songs predominantly found their expression in the *dargahs* and *mazaars* situated in the regions of Bengal as well as lower and southern Assam. Rofiu Hussain Baruah mentions in his book “*Islamiya Aytijya Aru Asom*” that *marifati geets* were popular in western Assam, both among the Hindu and Muslim communities. He further asserts that Vaishnavism has influenced these songs (Baruah, 1989). The lyrical themes of these songs encompass several aspects, such as the existential nature of the creator, the underlying factors behind creation, the cosmic order, the human experience, and the intricate connection between humanity and divinity. Wisdom and poetry coexist with devotion in these songs. These songs are very popular among the elderly people of the *char-chaporis* of western Assam. People involved in the devotional activities also sing these songs. The following excerpt highlights a widely acclaimed *marifati* song within the Bengali Muslim minority residing in western Assam:

“কে তোৰা মুবিদ হবি আয়
এসেছে পীৰ সাহেব আজ আমাদেৰ
পাড়ায়া।” (Ahmed, 2022).

Translation: Those who shall take initiation, please come since the Pir has arrived in our neighbourhood today.

c. *Baul* Songs

In the Bengali tradition, the *baul* songs represent another kind of Sufi folk song. The *Bauls* were members of the lower social strata in both the Hindu and Muslim communities of Bengal. The majority of them were nomadic mendicants, although there were also some householders among them. Atis Dasgupta narrates that they shunned all forms of organized religion because they found its attendant rituals and ceremonies, as well as the pedantry and hypocrisy of its adherents, to be unnecessary and distracting from their innate sense of spirituality (Dasgupta, 1994). “The historical roots of these songs extend beyond the Bengal region, encompassing lower Assam and the Barak Valley as well. Those lacking formal education were the proponents of these songs. They did not always have precise mystic speculations due to a lack of formal training. This creed is believed to have adopted the guru-disciple relationship from the Sufi system. These songs mostly focus on topics like divine love, the enigma of the human body, introspection, enlightenment, and spiritual awakening. These songs were carried to the *char* (river island) regions of Assam by east-Bengal migrants and are still prevalent in the original Goalpara district of Assam. In some areas, women *bauls* are also to be found. Below is a sample of a *baul* song from this specific area:

“আত্মতত্ত্ব পৰমতত্ত্ব
গুৰু জানে অৰ্থ
অজ্ঞাতে তা জানে না
পঞ্চতত্ত্ব বেদৰ বিচাৰ
পণ্ডিতেৰা কৰেন প্রচাৰ
মানুষতত্ত্ব ভজনেৰ সাৰ
বেদছাড়া বৈবাগেৰ মানো।” (Ahmed, 2022).

Translation: The Guru knows what the Supreme Being means. Ignorance does not know the judgment of the five elements of the Vedas. The scholars preach that humanity is the essence of Bhajan, and asceticism without the Vedas is meaningless.

OTHER DEVOTIONAL FOLK SONGS

In addition to the above-mentioned devotional folk songs, Assam continues to benefit spiritually from some other folk songs such as *Manai Zatra*, *Ghazi Gaan*, *Bhari Gaan*, *Moishali Geet*, *Nao Khelowa Geet*, *Satyapirar Gaan*, *Sonapirer Gaan*, etc. These songs are spiritual in nature and instrumental in maintaining communal harmony and integrity in western Assam. They are common among both the Hindu and Muslim communities in the study area. Their literary value is also immense. Another kind of song that was until recently popular among the Hindus as well as the Muslims in the study area is "*Geet of Gorakhnath*." The song places special emphasis on the Sufis and faqirs. An example of this song is:

“পীৰেৰ মগণৰে ভাই পীৰেৰ মগণ
ভাটি হৈতে আসিল পীৰ, হাতত কাঞ্চন,
হাতত কাঞ্চন পীৰেৰ মুখে ছাপ দাড়াি”(Baruah, 1989).

Translation: O brother, engrossed in Pir's thoughts. The Pir, having the rounded bear, has come from downstream, carrying valuables in his hand.

a. *Dhuan Gaan*

Dhuan gaan, also known as '*dhuan geet*', is a well-known folk song among the Bengali-speaking Muslims of the *char* regions in the study area. The '*dhuan gaan*' tradition also has its roots in East Bengal. During the periods of jute and rice cultivation, farmers involved in the dressing or de-weeding of jute and paddy in the field engaged in collective singing, maintaining a rhythmic cadence with their work. So, they can also be referred to as 'labour songs'. They don't have a central subject. In academic discourse, a wide range of themes are explored, including the enigma of creation, spirituality, the historical event of Karbala, many theological narratives such as the story of Adam and Hawa, the legend of Kalu Ghazi, and even elements from Hindu mythology. From the lyrical themes of the songs, it can be assumed that they were also influenced by the Islamic mysticism of medieval period. An example of *dhuan gaan* with Islamic influence is:

“একদিন জিয়াদ মোৰে ফাঁকি দিয়া নিছে
নবীৰ বৌছা ছাইৰে কাৰবালাতে অ'ৰে;
কাৰবালাতে যাইয়া দেখিৰে অ'সব কাফেৰ
ঘিৰাইছেৰে
ফোৰাৎ নদীৰ কুলে বইসা আছে।
পানী খাওৱা বন্ধ কৰছেৰে
অ' হায় হাহান-হুছেনৰো”(Hossain, 2012).

Translation: One day, Ziad cheated me to see the graveyard of the Prophet at Karbala; by reaching Karbala, I saw that the infidels surrounded the area, sitting along the bank of the river Forat. They prevented me from drinking water, O Hassan, O Hussain.

b. *Bissbed* Songs

The mystical or religious genre also includes bissbed songs. The term '*bissbed*' refers to the act of separating or disengaging, and in this context, it refers to the separation of the soul from the mind, or more specifically, the detachment of the human soul from the supreme soul. *Bissbed* songs are regarded as a sub-type of *murshidi geet*. Muhammad Abdul Hai claims that though their approaches to life differ, *bissbed* and *murshidi* songs have some similarities. The composers of the *bissbed* songs use the relationship between Radha and Krishna as a metaphor, whereas the *murshidis* want to create a personal connection with God. It is still common to hear '*bissbed geet*' being sung in the *char* areas of old Goalpara and Kamrup districts. One example of *bissbed geet*, supposedly sung by Krishna, is:

“How long shall I be playing on my flute
Waiting for Radha to come;
All shepherds go out to the pasture
And I stay back here and keep on piping,
Radha comes and goes this way
Reclining against the branch of the Kadamba tree
Radha comes and goes this way
Drawing water from the rivers, but she
Never raises her eyes to look at me,
Tell me brother Subal, how long
Shall I keep piping (Khan, 2014).”

c. *Bhatiali* Songs

Bhatiali geet is one of the popular folk songs prevalent in the *char* areas of western Assam. *Bhatiali* is not a native song to Assam; rather, it was brought here by the immigrant Muslims from East Bengal during the colonial period. The term '*bhatiali*' refers to a genre of song that is associated with the inhabitants residing in the lower regions of a river. These songs bear some form of connection to the culture of the communities residing along the downstream regions of the river. According to Ashutosh Bhattacharya, the riverine areas of East Bengal are the birthplace of *bhatiali* songs. Regarding the nature of these songs, Ashutosh Bhattacharya says, “*Bhatiali* songs are mainly songs of pain and despair; just as the pain can be caused by romantic despair, it can also arise from a sense of incompleteness in spiritual life (Bhattacharya, 1977).” Wakil Ahmed has categorized the concepts of *bhatiali* songs into three distinct groups: spirituality, the heavenly romance shared between Radha and Krishna, and worldly love (Ahmed, 2009). The songs belonging to the spiritual category exhibit an indirect connection to the philosophical concepts of '*Debtattwa*' and Sufi philosophy. These songs indirectly express the words of spirit and body through the use of metaphors and symbols. They explore the theme of human supplication, wherein individuals express their desire for divine intervention from Allah and their spiritual mentor in order to alleviate the afflictions experienced in this earthly life. Below is an example of a well-known *bhatiali* song with Sufi overtones from western Assam:

“উনুৰ বুনুৰ বাজে নাও আমাৰ,
নিহাইল্যা বাতাসে বে।
মুৰ্শিদ, বইলাম তোৰ আশে।।
পশ্চিমে সাজিল ম্যাঘ বে,
দ্যাওয়ায় দিল বে ডাক।
আমাৰ ছিড়িল হাইলিৰ পানস
নৌকায় খাইল পাক।।
ও বে মুৰ্শিদ, বইলাম তোৰ আশে।।”(Uddin, 2012).

Translation: The boat rings like a small bell in the air. Oh, my teacher (Murshid), I am with you. A cloud has formed in the west, storming the rain. The scull is broken, and the boat has turned around. Oh, my teacher (Murshid), I am here with you.

d. *Bhawaiya* Songs

The *bhawaiya* song is a significant traditional song that originated in the northern region of Bengal and the undivided Goalpara district of Assam. Dwijendra Nath Bhakat and Pratima Neogi have identified the Koch Rajbanshi people of these areas as the speakers of this song (Bhakat & Neogi, 2015). These songs are largely popular among the ‘Deshi Muslims’ and the Rajbanshi people of the study area. The precise origins of *bhawaiya* songs remain uncertain. However, the rightful owners of this are the ‘Deshi Muslims’. Muslims from East Bengal who later migrated here embraced this as a local phenomenon. Depending on the location, these popular songs are referred to by different names, including *Goalpariya Lokageet*, *Desi Gaan*, *Mabuter Gaan*, *Maisaler Gaan*, *Gadial Gaan*, *Patharia Gaan*, *Dotarar Gaan*, *Bhasan Gaan*, etc. Although the main idea and theme of *bhawaiya* songs is love, they also span a wide range of themes, such as devotion, happiness and sadness, hope and desire, rivers, boats, sailors, *mabut-moishal*, and other popular aspects. This tradition also demonstrates a strong association with Bengali Sufi lyrics. *Bhaoayia* songs incorporate Sufi terminology, such as ‘*Dayal*’ ‘*Dayal Guru*’, etc., to denote a spiritual mentor or advisor. An example of a *bhaoayia* song is:

“দয়াল গুৰু বিনে এই সংসাৰে
কায় কৰিবে পাৰ
গুৰু মোৰ গোসাইয়া বে
এক গুৰু হইল পিতা মাতা
আৰ এক গুৰু হইল মন্ত্ৰদাতা ৰে।।”(Bhakat & Neogi, 2015).

Translation: ‘Who will assist me in traversing the metaphorical river of existence in the absence of a spiritual mentor? Oh, my mentor of spiritual wisdom! My parents, on the one hand, are the instructors of my life, while my spiritual mentor, on the other hand, serves that role’.

e. Songs of Ghazi Pir

According to legend, Ghazi Pir was the son of Sonarai, the king of the Sundarbans. He voluntarily abdicated the throne given to him by his father and became popular among the Hindus and Muslims of the medieval era. He was also popularly

known as “Zinda Pir.” Wakil Ahmed writes that the Muslims of south and east Bengal obeyed Ghazi Pir as the god of tigers (Ahmed, 1965). There prevailed some harmonious songs among the Hindu and Muslim communities in Bengal centring him. These songs contain numerous indications of combined Hindu-Muslim practices. These songs subsequently influenced the people of the *char-chaporis* in the study area. By organizing *sinni* (sweet offerings) and *prasad* (offering) in the name of Ghazi Pir, both the Hindus and Muslims sang:

“গাজীমিঞাৰ হাজেত সিনী সম্পূৰ্ণ হৈলো।
হিন্দুগণে বল হৰি মোমিনে আল্লা বলো।”(Ahmed, 1965).

Translation: The *sinni* ceremony of Ghazi Miyan is completed; Hindus say ‘Hari’ and the believers say ‘Allah’.

Another example is:

“মুছলমানে বলোগো আল্লা হেন্দু বলে হৰি,
নিদান কালে যাবৰে ভাই একই পথে চলিৰো।”(Hossain, 2012).

Translation: Muslims say ‘Allah’ and Hindus say ‘Hari’; all will go to the same destination at the end of life.

f. Songs of Doriya Pir

It is a well-established fact that nearly all the ancestors of Muslims living in riverine areas of Assam converted from Hinduism to Islam. That is why there is an influence of the river god among the Hindu and Muslim communities in the *char* areas. During my interview with Shamsul Alom, aged 103, he let me know that many Muslims of the *char-chaporis* in the study area obeyed this god as “Doriya Pir.” While sailing across the river, the sailors left the boat with the name Doriya Pir (Alom, 2023). Even today, riverine Muslim communities in certain regions of Assam are seen to arrange *sinnin* order to prevent floods and erosion, publicly pray to the Doriya Pir, and sing songs for the control of rivers. The songs of Doriya Pir have musical and natural sweetness. For example:

“অ’ দৰিয়া, ছাৰিয়া দে আমায়
আমি পীৰেৰ দেশে যাইব’ৰে হয়
ছাৰিয়া দে আমায়।
দ্বাৰে দ্বাৰে ঘূৰিয়া বেড়াই আমি
কুল-কিনাৰা নাপাই,
আমাৰ পীৰেৰ সাথে হৈলে দেখা
যাইব’ মদিনায়।”(Hossain, 2012).

Translation: O sea, leave me and let me go to the land of my Pir. O sea, leave me. I wander door to door, finding no way. If I meet my pir, I will go to Madinah.

CONCLUSION

From the above discussion, it is apparent that numerous folk-songs with Islamic overtones were prevalent in the society of the undivided Goalpara district of Assam. The Sufi saints of contemporary society were largely responsible for these practices. Their interactions with the native population and adoption of numerous regional customs and traditions resulted in a syncretic culture. In the western part of medieval Assam and the eastern part of Bengal, the worship of Satya Pir, or Satyanarayan, Manik Pir, Madar Pir, etc. emerged. These cults exhibit characteristics of Vaishnava and Sufi traditions. Hindus and Muslims alike revered and worshipped these saints as spiritual mentors in this area. Moreover, the folk songs prevalent in this region, such as *baul* songs, *bisshed* songs, songs of Ghazi Pir, songs of Doriya Pir, etc., are the best examples of syncretic culture. The presence of Sufi poetry, characterised by its emphasis on devotion, mysticism, and dedication, has had a significant impact on both Bengali and Assamese literature and artistic production in this area of Assam. However, the above-mentioned folk-songs with Sufistic tones have become obsolete in contemporary society as a result of societal advancements and shifts in cultural practices over time. Their eventual elimination has been accelerated by the effects of modern living, the appeal of contemporary music, and the accessibility of inexpensive musical instruments like cell phones, etc. Moreover, the growth of modern education, the proliferation of religious education, and an increased religious consciousness among the people have led to their eventual decline. Consequently, the majority of Muslims in the study area no longer widely embrace these customs and practices. However, it is worth noting that these songs, belonging to many genres, have undergone a process of evolution and assimilation within the Muslim community of lower Assam over an extensive period of time, leading to peaceful coexistence between various religious and socio-cultural groups.

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