Sufis' Contributions to the Socio-economic and Political Arena in Bengal: An Archaeological Analysis

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Abstract

The contributions of Sufis represent a significant facet of civilization in medieval Bengal. These individuals were not only esteemed Islamic scholars and mystics but also played pivotal roles as social reformers and political figures in Bengal's history. Sufis, as committed and sincere Islamic scholars (Ulema/Pir) and social activists, dedicated their efforts to the socio-economic and religious welfare of the people of Bengal. They worked to enhance socio-economic conditions while integrating revealed knowledge into the broader civilizational fabric of Bengal. Sufis offered reformative and inclusive ideas for the welfare of humanity, reaching across religious and cultural divides to include Hindus and Buddhists. This study employs qualitative and archaeological methodologies, incorporating data collected and analyzed from primary and secondary texts as well as archaeological exploration. It aims to investigate the socio-economic contributions of Bengal's Sufis to the development of Bengal civilization. The research explores the motivations behind their transformative vision and examines how they pursued socio-economic welfare while maintaining respect for the religious and cultural diversity of Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu communities in Bengal. Additionally, the study highlights the political and diplomatic impacts of Sufi activities during the Bengal Sultanate.

Introduction

Bengal has been characterized by religious diversity and a rich tapestry of faiths since ancient times, with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam as the region's primary religious traditions. The advent of Islam in Bengal was closely tied to the arrival of Sufism, which occurred between the seventh and mid-eleventh centuries. The influx of Muslim and Sufi preachers introduced Islamic values and traditions, profoundly influencing Bengal's civilization.

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Over the last six centuries, numerous Islamic scholars, *Ulema,* and *Sufis* arrived in Bengal from regions such as Arabia, Turkey, Yemen, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan (Khorasan), Central Asia, and northern India. Many of these individuals became significant figures in Bengal's history.[1] Initially, Muslim merchants came to Bengal for trade and subsequently established Muslim communities. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, prominent Sufis such as Shah Sultan Balkhi (Bogra), Shah Sultan Rumi (Mymensingh), Shah Niamatullah Butshikon (Dhaka), Shah Makhdum Ruposh (Rajshahi), Shaikh Fariduddin Shakkarganj (Faridpur), and Makhdum Shah Daulah Shahid (Pabna) made their mark in Bengal. Baba Adam Shahid, another influential Sufi saint, arrived in the twelfth century.

The political spread of Islam in Bengal gained momentum following Bakhtiyar Khalji's conquest of Bengal in 1204 CE. Many soldiers accompanying the conquerors devoted themselves to spreading Islam, and these individuals, later recognized as Sufis, played significant roles in Bengal's transformation. Among them were Shah Jalal Tabrizi, Ismail Khan Ghazi, and Shaikh Alaul Haq in Gaur Pandua; Shah Jalal Yemeni in Sylhet; and Ulugh Khan Jahan in Khulna. Other notable figures include Shah Daula in Bagha (Rajshahi), Shaikh Sharfuddin Abu Tawama in Sonargaon, Shah Fariduddin in Faridpur, Badruddin Shah Madar in Chittagong, and Jafar Khan in Hughli Pandua (West Bengal).

Sufis played a pivotal role in shaping Bengali civilization through their unwavering zeal, deep piety, and reputed miracles, which drew people to their teachings. They led ascetic lives, eschewing worldly attachments and comforts, dedicating themselves entirely to the cause of Islam and the service of humanity. Sufis propagated the liberal and universal aspects of Islam across Bengal, occasionally engaging in military activities to advance their mission.

Their arrival in Bengal coincided with a favorable socio-political climate. The people of Bengal were drawn to them in large numbers, often captivated by the miracles attributed to them. This admiration frequently led to conversions from older faiths to Islam. Additionally, the liberal patronage extended by Muslim rulers, along with the establishment of stable Muslim governance under the Sultans, their grandees, nobles, and officers, further facilitated the spread of Islam in Bengal. Bakhtiyar Khalji and subsequent Muslim rulers actively supported the propagation of Islam among the masses, with many of the Sultans and their officials devoting themselves to the teachings of specific Sufis.

The decline of Buddhism and the rise of Hinduism under the Brahminical Senas also contributed to this transformation. Buddhism, which had previously flourished as the state religion under the Palas, experienced moral and ethical decline during

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1.   Philip J. Adler and Randall L. Pouwels, *World Civilization*, Boston, Cengage Learning, USA, 2014, p. 213

this period. Many Buddhists converted to Hinduism or faced persecution under the caste-based hierarchy of Hindu revivalism. Against this backdrop, Sufis found fertile ground to propagate their teachings, offering an inclusive and egalitarian alternative that appealed to the oppressed. Consequently, Islam rapidly gained followers in Bengal.

Beyond their religious influence, Sufis made significant contributions to the economic, political, and diplomatic landscapes of the Bengal Sultanate. Their efforts in promoting social and economic welfare had a lasting impact on Bengali civilization.[2]

Sufi Philosophy and Religious Thought

Sufism is a mystical tradition within Islam that emphasizes the direct, experiential love of Allah as the ultimate spiritual goal. Originating in the Middle East during the seventh century CE,[3] Sufism developed into various orders, known as *Tariqas*.[4] Sufis believe that excessive reliance on rational thinking can hinder the ability to grasp the intimate and loving nature of Allah. Consequently, they focus on ecstatic practices that foster direct encounters with the divine and help transcend the ego.

Throughout history, Sufis have faced persecution due to their unconventional and often controversial methods of worship, which some orthodox practitioners regarded as blasphemous. The term *'Sufi'* itself has several possible origins. One interpretation links it to the Arabic word *suf* (wool),[5] referencing the simple woolen cloaks worn by early ascetics. However, not all Sufis wore such garments. Another explanation derives the term from safa (purity), highlighting the importance of spiritual and moral purity in Sufi teachings.

A third theory connects the word to *'Ashab al-Suffa'* or *'Ahl al-Suffa'* (People of the Veranda), referring to a group of devout Muslims who spent their days in prayer

2. Akram Uddin and Mst Rownok Jahan, 'The Socio-Economic Welfare Contribution of Ulugh Khan Jahan to the Islamic Civilization in Bengal during the 15th Century CE', *European Journal of Science, Innovation and Technology* 3, No. 4, September 11, 2023, pp. 305-16.

3. Common Era (CE) is one of the notation systems for the world's most widely used calendar eras and the term Common Era can be found in English as early as 1708. In addition, it became more widely used in themid-19thcentury. Moreover it is also used by some authors and publishers who wish to show sensitivity to non-Christians by not using the abbreviation AD which stands for anno domini, or the year of the Lord (understood by Christians to be Jesus).For example, former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan has argued "The Christian calendar no longer belongs exclusively to Christians. People of all faiths have taken to using it simply as a matter of convenience. There is so much interaction between people of different faiths and cultures – different civilizations, if you like – that some shared way of reckoning time is a necessity. And so, the Christian era has become the Common Era".

4. Ayman Shihadeh, *Sufism and Theology*, Edinburgh University Press, 2007, pp. 15-55

5. *Sufism: Definition, History, Beliefs, Significance, & Facts | Britannica*, accessed July 30, 2024 https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sufism

on the veranda of the Prophet Muhammad's mosque in Medina.[6] While some historians consider this origin story more symbolic than factual, it reflects Sufism's roots as an ascetic movement within early Islam. This narrative also underscores the ethos of self-sacrifice, humility, and devotion that characterizes Sufism.

Ascetic living was regarded as the initial step toward seeking Allah by later Sufi philosophers, including Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d. 378/988). Al-Sarrāj asserted that a spiritual seeker should gradually renounce worldly possessions and even the desire for material goods. Similar views were espoused by several authors of Sufi texts during the fourth/tenth and fifth/eleventh centuries. Among these, Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (450-505/1058-1111) provides the most systematic exposition in his seminal work, *Iḥyāʾ ʿUlūm al-Dīn* (*The Revival of the Religious Sciences*). Al-Ghazālī, influenced by Neo-Platonist psychology, described the soul as a mirror tarnished by sin and worldly attachments. In the same period, the eleventh-century scholar Al-Biruni proposed an etymology linking the term *Sufiya* to the Greek word *Sophia*, meaning 'wisdom'.

With the exception of the Naqshbandi order, which traces its origins to the Caliph Abu Bakr, most traditional Sufi orders trace their spiritual lineages (*chains of transmission*) to the Prophet Muhammad through his cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib. Sufi orders emphasize that their teachings have been transmitted from teacher to disciple. Between 1200 and 1500 CE,[7] Sufism experienced a period of significant growth and activity across various Islamic regions, with the thirteenth century widely regarded as the 'Golden Age' of Sufism.[8] During this time, numerous Sufi scholars and poets produced monumental works of poetry and literature.

Central to Sufi thought are several core beliefs, including *tawakkul* (complete trust in Allah) and *wahdat* (unity), which affirm the oneness of Allah (*tawhid*). An earlier Sufi school posited that all existence is an expression of a singular reality, referred to as *wujud* (existence) or *al-Haq* (the Truth or God). While the essence of Being, Truth, or Allah is unmanifest and devoid of qualities or forms, it is intrinsically connected to all material and spiritual phenomena. This doctrine is commonly

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6. Saroosh Ahmad, *Sufism in Kashmir: Origin, Development and Contribution Dissertation Submitted for the Award of the Degree of Masters in Philosophy,* 2022, pp. 15-35
    https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.31838.51520

7. Ayman Shihadeh, *op.cit.*, 2007, pp. 15-55

8. Tasawwuf or Sufism is known as Islamic mysticism. It practices particular values, rituals, and Islamic orders. And Hazrat Shah Jalal was a guest of the Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi, and he was summoned by Firuz Shah in Bengal.Shamsuddin Firuz Shah (reign: 1301 CE-1322 CE) ruled over the Lakhnauti Kingdom (presently, this area is situated in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India). He became Sultan with the title of Al-Sultan Al-Azam Shams Al-Duniyawa Al-Din Abu Al-Muzaffar Firuz Shah Al-Sultan and inscribed the name of the Abbasid Caliph Musta'sim Billahin his coins. The most important event of the reign of Firuz Shah was the conquest of Sylhet. According to an inscription, Firuz Shah conquered Sylhet in 1303 CE. The conquest of Sylhet had connections to the Sufi saint Shah Jalal and the commander Syed Nasiruddin.

interpreted to mean that, while every phenomenon is a part of the Truth, attributing independent existence to these phenomena is erroneous. The ultimate goal of Sufism is to realize divine unity and transcend dualistic concepts, including the individual self, thereby facilitating a direct connection with the divine.

Early Sufi theorists, such as Junayd of Baghdad, emphasized key concepts like *fanāʾ* (annihilation of the self in the presence of the divine) and *baqāʾ* (eternal subsistence with clarity about earthly realities). Another fundamental aspect of Sufi practice is the recognition of *Lataif-e-Sitta* (The Six Subtleties), which represent spiritual centers of sensory awareness within an individual. These centers, named *nafs* (carnal self), *qalb* (spiritual heart), *ruh* (spirit), *sirr* (inner secret), *khafi* (hidden), and *akhfa* (most hidden), are believed to lie dormant and require awakening.

The Sufi spiritual journey involves several stages of purification and illumination. The first stage is the purification of the carnal self (*tazkiya-i-nafs*), followed by the purification of the spiritual heart (*tazkiya-i-qalb*), enabling it to reflect divine love with mirror-like clarity (*tazkiya-i-qalb*).[9] This process culminates in the illumination of the spirit (*tajjali-i-ruh*), the refinement of the ego (*taqliyya-i-sirr*), and the remembrance of Allah's attributes (*dhikr*). The final stages involve the purification of the remaining faculties, *khafi* and *akhfa*, completing the spiritual journey.

Sufism exerts a significant influence on the religious practices and cultural fabric of most Muslims in Bangladesh, albeit typically through occasional celebrations or consultations rather than formal affiliation. Historically, Sufism played a crucial role in the spread of Islam and the development of Muslim society in Bengal. The popularity of Sufis across the Indian subcontinent contributed to the emergence of Islam as a major religion in modern-day India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The mass conversion of the Bengali population to Islam began in the 13th century, often occurring on a communal basis rather than individually. Many lower-caste Hindus and Buddhists, marginalized or ostracized within their communities, were drawn to Islam by its principles of social equality, justice, and fraternity.

Sufi saints and preachers were instrumental in this process, attracting converts through their zealous missionary efforts, exemplary character, and humanitarian activities. The Sufi *khanqahs*[10] (spiritual retreats) established across Bengal served as vital centers of intellectual, spiritual, and humanitarian activity. These institutions significantly contributed to the growth of Muslim society in the region. Revered as saints, or *pirs* in the Bangladeshi context, many Sufi mystics and missionaries traveled extensively throughout towns and villages, catalyzing numerous conversions. The arrival of Sufis from North India and Islamic regions of western

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9.   Saroosh Ahmad, *op.cit.*, 2022, pp. 15-35
      https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.31838.51520
10.   Akram Uddin and Rownok Jahan, *op.cit.*, September 8, 2023, pp. 305-17

and central Asia increased after Bakhtiyar Khalji's conquest of Bengal in 1203 CE, which led to an expansion of the Muslim population.[11]

Contributions of Sufis to Social and Economic Welfare

The Sufis made significant contributions to the social and economic welfare of Bengal. Local communities often regarded them as endowed with spiritual power, referring to them as "superhuman". They established *khanqahs* open to the poor, destitute, and travelers, regardless of their religious affiliations. These centers served as bridges between Muslims and non-Muslim communities, fostering a spirit of humanism and equality. Sufis also played a crucial role in developing infrastructure, such as roads, cities, mosques, educational institutions, ponds, water systems, and charity houses. Charity, rooted in love and altruism, was central to their work, providing essential services such as food and shelter to the impoverished.

The *musafirkhana* (guest house)[12] is a notable example of Sufi welfare initiatives in medieval Bengal. These guest houses offered sanctuary to the needy, providing food and temporary accommodation without discrimination.[13] Archaeologists recently discovered a *musafirkhana* in the Sonatala village of Sadar Upazila, Bagerhat district. Known locally as the Baroajina site, it was one of the guest houses established by Sufi Khan Jahan. Stone pillar fragments found at the site lack decorative patterns, suggesting their utilitarian purpose. However, Islamic calligraphy and floral designs adorned the mosques and shrines constructed by Khan Jahan, highlighting the dual focus on aesthetics and functionality in his architectural endeavors.[14]

Humanitarian Initiatives and Religious Influence

Sufi charitable activities significantly impacted the socio-economic development of Bengal and influenced non-Muslims to embrace Islam. In the 15th century, Sufi representatives often assumed social welfare and administrative responsibilities. Their contributions can still be observed in the southwestern regions of Bengal, where they established Islamic complexes, medical centers (*dawakhanas*), roads, ponds, schools (*madrasahs*), and mosques. Sufi *darbars* (spiritual complexes) continue to offer amulets, herbal remedies, and other forms of primary care to local communities, demonstrating the enduring legacy of their humanitarian efforts.[15]

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11. Akram Uddin, 'The Identity Crisis of Bengali Muslims in Indian Subcontinent (1000 CE -2000 CE): A Critical Approach to Bengali Ethnicity', *International Journal of Advanced Research in Islamic and Humanities*, September 1, 2022, pp. 35-45
https://doi.org/10.55057/ijarih.2022.4.3.4

12. Satish Chandra Mitra, *Jashore-Khulnar Itihas [History of Jashore-Khulna]*, Calcutta: Dish Publication, 1914, pp. 400-445

13. *Ibid.*

14. Akram Uddin and Rownok Jahan, *op.cit.*, September 8, 2023, pp. 305-17

15. Satish Chandra Mitra, *op.cit.*, 1914, pp. 403-440

This study identifies thirty *mazars* (shrines) as significant representations of Bengali Sufis. These shrines, along with the altruistic activities of Sufis and their followers, highlight their commitment to social welfare. By addressing the needs of the underprivileged, Sufis not only enhanced the socio-economic well-being of Bengal but also inspired many non-Muslims to adopt Islam, drawn by its principles of compassion, justice, and equality.[16]

Sufi Economic Contributions

Economic prosperity is a key indicator of socio-economic welfare. Sufis played a pivotal role in fostering economic development across regions, as they believed that socio-economic well-being was inseparable from economic stability. Their contributions are evident in the construction of expensive mosques, roads, bridges, ponds, and other public welfare infrastructure, which serve as markers of regional economic wealth.[17] Through various public welfare projects, the Sufis catalyzed significant economic growth in Bengal.

First, Sufis and their descendants made substantial investments in the region, introducing a considerable influx of foreign wealth. This capital injection stimulated the local economy, generating employment opportunities and enabling the population to achieve economic prosperity. Second, the Sufis constructed numerous roadways, facilitating inter-city and intra-city connectivity. These routes revolutionized local and international trade, significantly contributing to economic growth.

Third, Sufi initiatives included the excavation of ponds and lakes to provide freshwater for agricultural purposes. This innovation allowed local farmers to cultivate previously uncultivable lands due to saltwater intrusion, successfully growing crops such as vegetables and paddy. Fourth, evidence from the Khan Jahan Ali Museum in Bagerhat reveals ornate porcelain items imported from China or other regions, as Southern Bengal lacked local porcelain production.[18] This indicates the establishment of international trade networks, further bolstering the local economy. Fifth, the establishment of institutions like *Takshal*, a minting organization, exemplifies the economic advancements under Sufi patronage. Sixth, the Sufi-built structures across Bengal, often adorned with fine stones and intricate craftsmanship, highlight economic sophistication. The stones, sourced from the hilly regions of Bihar, India, were transported via rivers, reflecting the integration of regional economies.

16. Hans Harder, *Sufism and Saint Veneration in Contemporary Bangladesh | The Maijbhand*, Routledge, March 8, 2011, p. 392
     https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203831809/sufism-saint-veneration-contemporary-bangladesh-hans-harder.
17. Satish Chandra Mitra, *op.cit.*, 1914, pp. 403-440
18. Akram Uddin and Rownok Jahan, *op.cit.*, September 8, 2023, pp. 305-17

Seventh, the agricultural sector thrived under Sufi influence, becoming a cornerstone of Bengal's economy during the 15th century. Agriculture accounted for the majority of employment and was critical in alleviating poverty, ensuring food security, and creating jobs. The Sufis constructed dams and other infrastructure to protect coastal agricultural lands from saltwater intrusion, enabling the large-scale cultivation of crops such as paddy.

Eighth, Sufis, notably Ulugh Khan Jahan and his followers, promoted fish farming by excavating ponds.[19] This initiative not only addressed unemployment but also significantly contributed to the rural economy of 15th century Bengal. Ninth, the presence of Sufi shrines provided additional economic benefits. Shrines served as hubs for various occupations, including garment shops, catering services, and transportation, boosting both local and national economies. Cultural festivals such as *Urs* and *Meela* attracted visitors, fostering social cohesion and spiritual satisfaction while promoting economic activity. Furthermore, medical camps and literacy programs associated with these shrines played vital roles in supporting marginalized communities.[20]

Ulugh Khan Jahan's contributions to economic welfare were particularly noteworthy. His efforts were instrumental in the Islamization of South Bengal's society. He established a robust Muslim army to ensure peace and security, laying the groundwork for socio-economic development. Key initiatives included the construction of new cities, roads to enhance regional connectivity, and hundreds of ponds and *dighis* to supply drinking water. Residential areas were developed to provide safety and stability for local inhabitants.

Khan Jahan's direct and indirect contributions facilitated the expansion of international trade and fostered significant economic prosperity. His efforts in spreading Islamic art and architecture through the construction of mosques and madrasas also played a crucial role in promoting education. Additionally, his provision of free food to the underprivileged and his military campaigns against local non-Muslim rulers established a foundation for Islamic civilization in the region.

In summary, the economic contributions of Sufis, particularly Ulugh Khan Jahan, were transformative for 15th-century Bengal. Their initiatives not only addressed immediate socio-economic challenges but also laid the groundwork for long-term prosperity and cultural integration.

The Political Contributions of Sufis in Bengal
The political contributions of Sufis played a transformative role in shaping the political and social landscape of Bengal. This discussion examines the significant

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19. *Ibid.*
20. *Ibid.*

steps and missions undertaken by Sufis that altered local power dynamics and facilitated the spread of Islam in the region.

Shah Sultan Mahisawar

Shah Sultan Mahisawar was a notable figure buried in the Bogra district, now part of Bangladesh.[21] His history is shrouded in obscurity, as it has been transmitted primarily through oral tradition. Known also as Balkhi, he is believed to have been the son of a ruler from Balkh. Renouncing his royal inheritance, Shah Sultan embraced an ascetic life under the guidance of Shaikh Taufiq of Damascus. He was instructed by his mentor to propagate Islam in Bengal.

Shah Sultan initially arrived by sea at Sandwip near the mouth of the Ganges and later traveled to Hariramnagar, possibly a coastal region ruled by the Kali-worshipper Raja Balaram. After a conflict in which the Raja was killed, his minister converted to Islam. Shah Sultan then moved to Mahasthan, where he faced resistance from the local ruler Parasuram and his sister Siladevi. In the ensuing battle, Parasuram was killed, and Siladevi drowned in the Karatoya River. Shah Sultan's efforts in these regions significantly contributed to the Islamization of society.

Shah Makhdum Rupos

In 687 AH (1289 CE), Shah Makhdum Rupos journeyed from Bagha to Rampur Bualia. His arrival is surrounded by numerous legends, including accounts of his supernatural deeds (*karamats*). He led a campaign against a tyrannical Tantric Raja who had previously killed Shah Turkan.[22] Shah Makhdum's victory liberated the populace from oppression, and he dispatched his disciples to nearby communities to propagate Islam. They established *khanqahs* (spiritual retreats) in various locations, and their tombs, including those of Sayyed Shah Abbas, Sayyed Dilal Bukhari, Shah Sultan, and Shah Karam Ali, remain significant sites in Rajshahi

Shah Jalal and the Conquest of Sylhet

During the reign of Sultan Shamsuddin Firuz Shah (1301–1322 CE), an army led by his nephew Sikandar Khan Ghazi initially failed to defeat the Hindu ruler Gaur Govinda.[23] Subsequently, the Sultan appointed Nasiruddin, the commander-in-chief, to lead the campaign. At this time, Shah Jalal and his 360 followers joined the Muslim army. Together, they successfully defeated Gaur Govinda, who fled the region.

Though aspects of Shah Jalal's involvement are steeped in folklore, historical records corroborate the broader narrative of the conquest of Sylhet under

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21. Abdul Karim *Shah Sultan Mahisawar (R) - Banglapedia*, 17 June 2021, accessed July 30, 2024
    https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Shah_Sultan_Mahisawar_(R)
22. Jadunath Sarkar (Ed.), *The History of Bengal: Muslim Period*, BR Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 2011, pp. 14-24
23. Akram Uddin, *op.cit.*, September 1, 2022, pp. 35-45

Sultan Firuz Shah's reign.[24] This victory facilitated the spread of Islam in northeastern Bengal, transforming Sylhet and parts of South Assam into Muslim-majority areas.

Baba Adam

Baba Adam also played a critical role in aiding local Muslims during conflicts with Hindu rulers. Leading an assembly of 6,000-7,000 followers, he provided significant support to the Muslim cause. Despite his eventual death at the hands of a local ruler, Baba Adam's actions and those of his followers were instrumental in promoting the Islamization of the region.

Ikhtiyar Uddin Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji

In 1204 CE, Ikhtiyar Uddin Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khilji, a general under Qutb-ud-din Aibak, established the first Muslim government in Bengal.[25] A devout Muslim of Turkic origin, Bakhtiyar Khilji achieved a decisive victory over Lakshmana Sena, the ruler of Bengal, by capturing Nadia without a fight. This conquest marked the beginning of Muslim political dominance in the region.[26]

Following a failed expedition to Tibet, he returned to Bengal with significantly diminished forces and succumbed to his injuries in Devkot, where he was later buried. His conquests marked a turning point in Bengal's history, leading to significant demographic changes and the establishment of a Muslim-majority population.[27] The contributions of Sufi leaders and Muslim generals in Bengal not only shaped the political dynamics of the region but also facilitated the spread of Islam through their religious, military, and socio-political endeavors. Figures like Shah Sultan Mahisawar, Shah Makhdum Rupos, Shah Jalal, Baba Adam, and Bakhtiyar Khilji were instrumental in transforming Bengal into a significant center of Islamic culture and governance.

Legacy of Sufi Diplomacy

Conflict Mediation: Sufis like Shaikh Nur Qutb Alam played critical roles in resolving conflicts between rulers and their subjects, protecting vulnerable communities.

Interfaith Harmony: Through their actions, Sufis fostered mutual respect and understanding between different religious groups, promoting peaceful coexistence.

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24. U. A. B. Razia Akter Banu, *Islam in Bangladesh*, 1992, p. 20
    https://books.google.com.bd/books?hl=en&lr=&id=XyzqATEDPSgC(1992)
    30 &ots=CDX95uymCy&sig=iAz_
25. Richard Maxwell Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*, University of California Press, 1993, pp. 15-85
26. *Ibid.*
27. Anil Kumar Sarkar, 'History of Bengal as Reflected in the Tabaqat-i-Nasiri of Minhaj Uddin Us Siraj,' *TAWARIKH* 5, No. 1, 2013, pp. 29-40
    https://doi.org/10.2121/tawarikh.v5i1.562

Institution Building: Establishing *khanqahs*, madrasas, and mosques, Sufis created spaces for education, dialogue, and spiritual growth, which contributed to societal stability.

Empowerment of the Marginalized: Sufi leaders championed the rights of oppressed groups, using their influence to advocate for justice and equality.

Cultural Integration: By incorporating local traditions into their teachings, Sufis bridged cultural divides and laid the groundwork for a syncretic Bengali identity.

In summary, Sufis' diplomatic efforts were instrumental in shaping the political, religious, and social dynamics of Bengal. Their ability to mediate disputes, influence rulers, and establish lasting institutions ensured their enduring legacy in the region.

Sufis and Communal Harmony in Bengal

The Sufis in Bengal played a transformative role in fostering communal harmony, bridging the religious and cultural divide, and introducing a more inclusive spiritual ethos that significantly impacted society. Through their spiritual teachings, cultural integration, and social practices, they nurtured a shared cultural identity and unity among Bengal's diverse communities.

Challenges of Pre-Islamic Bengal Society

Before the arrival of Islam, Bengal's society was stratified under the caste system dominated by Brahmins, with marginalized *Sudras*, Buddhists, and other lower-caste communities facing discrimination. The exclusivity of religious texts and places of worship perpetuated inequality.[28]

Islam as a Force of Equality: The monotheistic and egalitarian principles of Islam provided a counter-narrative to the caste hierarchy, attracting many marginalized groups seeking liberation from Brahminical dominance.

Social Transformation: By embracing Islam, these communities found avenues for social mobility, dignity, and a sense of unity that was previously denied.

Communal Harmony and the Sufi Approach

Islam encountered unique religious systems in Bengal that were distinct in their tenets, ideologies, social structures, and practices. The arrival of Islam brought profound changes to these systems. Before Islam's introduction, Bengali society was deeply influenced by the dominance of Brahmins, who maintained social and political superiority, often subjugating Sudras, lower-class Hindus, and Buddhists through the caste system and other discriminatory norms. Access to sacred texts and places of worship was restricted for these marginalized groups, and religious texts could only be written in Sanskrit, excluding the common populace.[29]

28. Jadunath, Sarkar (Ed.), *op.cit.*, 2011, pp. 14-24
29. *Ibid.*

Islam's arrival challenged these norms, offering an egalitarian alternative. Its emphasis on monotheism, equality, and human brotherhood undermined the caste-based hierarchy. The simplicity of Islamic teachings and its promise of salvation resonated with many locals, leading to widespread conversions. Muslims did not distinguish between Hindu castes, treating all individuals equally in terms of education and employment opportunities. Under Muslim rule, non-Brahmin Hindus gained access to education, employment, and literary pursuits, allowing them to achieve respectable social standing. For many, converting to Islam symbolized liberation from Brahminical oppression.

Interactions between Muslims and Hindus over centuries led to cultural exchanges that influenced both communities. Muslims adopted local dietary habits, culinary techniques, and clothing styles, while Hinduism absorbed elements of Islamic culture. Evidence suggests that Muslims and Hindus often celebrated each other's festivals, fostering communal harmony.

A significant driver of this harmony was the spiritual influence of Sufi saints. These saints propagated Islam while promoting spiritual principles that emphasized love, equality, and tolerance. Their efforts created a bridge between Hindu and Muslim communities, blending religious and cultural traditions. The Bengali language itself benefited from the integration of Arabic and Persian vocabulary, brought by the Sufi saints.

The death anniversaries of Sufi saints, celebrated as "Urs," became platforms for communal unity. These celebrations included Sufi songs, music, and "Qawalis," enjoyed by both Hindus and Muslims. Shrines of Sufi saints became symbols of interfaith goodwill, with Hindus often making offerings at these sites. Sufis' tolerance and advocacy for a harmonious society left a lasting impact on Bengali culture, influencing social, religious, and cultural practices.

Among the prominent Sufi saints in Bengal was Badr Auliya, whose mission embodied the ideals of communal harmony.[30] Arriving in Chittagong with eleven other saints, Badr Auliya became a revered figure, earning Chittagong the title 'Bara Auliyar Desh' (Land of Twelve Saints). While Muslims honored him as a saint, Buddhists, Hindus, and even Chinese communities viewed him as a divine or spiritual figure.

Badr Auliya's influence extended beyond religious boundaries. He was invoked by boatmen across eastern Bengal and down to the Malayan Peninsula as a patron saint of sailors. His tomb, located in Badarpatti near modern Bakshir Hat, remains a site of reverence for diverse communities. The tomb features a dome-topped square

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30. Shamsul Hossain, 'Badr Auliya', *Banglapedia,* June 17, 2021
      https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Badr_Auliya.

structure with thick walls and an inscription tablet in Arabic, reflecting his historical and spiritual legacy.[31]

Badr Auliya's life and work encapsulate the essence of communal harmony, reflecting the broader impact of Sufi saints on Bengal's religious and cultural fabric. Their teachings and practices not only bridged religious divides but also shaped a society rooted in shared values of love, tolerance, and unity.

Recommendations

The religious history of Bengal reflects a tapestry of diversity, shaped by Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Sufi saints, with their selfless devotion, humanitarian values, and universal teachings, played a pivotal role in fostering spiritual, social, and cultural harmony. To build upon this legacy and ensure its relevance in contemporary society, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Promote Interfaith Dialogue**

Encourage ongoing discussions and interactions among different religious communities to enhance mutual understanding and respect.

Establish platforms where diverse faith leaders and community members canshare their perspectives, inspired by the Sufi principles of tolerance and inclusivity.

2. **Preserve Cultural Heritage**

Protect the physical and intangible heritage associated with Sufi saints, including khankahs, mosques, and other historical sites.

Promote the preservation of Sufi literature, music (e.g., Qawalis), and rituals, ensuring that future generations understand their role in communal harmony.

3. **Foster Education and Literacy**

Incorporate the contributions of Sufis into educational curricula, emphasizing their role in promoting equality, social justice, and intellectual pursuits.

Support initiatives that provide access to education for marginalized communities, continuing the Sufi tradition of uplifting the underprivileged.

4. **Encourage Community Engagement**

Organize cultural festivals and community events celebrating shared traditions across religious boundaries.

Use these events to promote unity, dialogue, and a collective sense of identity among diverse groups.

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31. Hans Harder, *Sufism and Saint Veneration in Contemporary Bangladesh | The Maijbhand,* Routledge, March 8, 2011, p. 392 https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9780203831809/sufism-saint-veneration-contemporary-bangladesh-hans-harder.

5. **Support Humanitarian Efforts**
    Uphold the Sufi tradition of charity by addressing social and economic disparities through targeted welfare programs.
    Initiatives such as building infrastructure, ensuring access to clean water, and supporting livelihoods can directly enhance socio-economic welfare.

6. **Highlight Economic Contributions**
    Recognize and emulate the Sufi approach to economic development by investing in infrastructure and community resources that benefit society at large.
    Encourage projects that combine spiritual, social, and economic growth, following the Sufi model of holistic development.

7. **Promote Sufi Principles in Governance and Leadership**
    Advocate for leadership that prioritizes equality, compassion, and diplomacy, reflecting the change-making approach of Sufis like Nur Qutb Alam.
    Encourage policy frameworks inspired by Sufi teachings to foster an inclusive and peaceful society.

8. **Strengthen Research and Documentation**
    Support academic research on the contributions of Sufis to Bengal's spiritual, social, and political history.
    Document oral histories and local traditions linked to Sufi saints to ensure the preservation of their legacy.

Recommendations for Modern Islamic Scholars and Sufis
Rekindling Original Responsibilities
Revisit the foundational principles of Sufism and Islamic scholarship, emphasizing personal spiritual growth, humility, and devotion.
Prioritize *Dawah* (spreading the message of Islam) by using modern platforms to reach a broader audience and promote ethical values.
Encourage continuous learning and reflection to serve as effective guides and mentors within the community.

Promoting Socio-Economic Welfare
Launch initiatives to address poverty, education, and healthcare in underserved communities.
Encourage followers to contribute actively to society, reflecting the Sufi tradition of service and socio-economic development.
Advocate for sustainable development projects, such as clean water systems, housing, and community centers, inspired by historical Sufi contributions.

Engagement in Politics and Policy
Actively participate in policy-making processes to ensure that societal development aligns with Islamic values of justice, equality, and compassion.

Provide ethical and spiritual guidance to political leaders, emphasizing integrity, accountability, and public welfare.

Promote policies that address contemporary challenges, including climate change, economic disparities, and global conflicts, from an Islamic perspective.

Strengthening Diplomatic Relations

Foster partnerships between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, emphasizing shared values like peace, tolerance, and cooperation.

Collaborate with international organizations to promote humanitarian efforts, interfaith dialogue, and global peace initiatives.

Serve as mediators in conflicts, drawing from Sufi traditions of reconciliation and bridge-building.

Fostering Communal Harmony

Organize events and initiatives that celebrate shared cultural and religious values among diverse communities.

Encourage interfaith collaborations to address societal issues and promote unity.

Revive traditional Sufi practices such as *Urs* celebrations as platforms for fostering goodwill and understanding among various religious groups.

Conclusion

Modern Islamic scholars and Sufis must embrace their roles as spiritual and societal leaders, reconnecting with their foundational responsibilities. By focusing on *Dawah*, socio-economic welfare, political engagement, diplomatic relations, and communal harmony, they can contribute to building an equitable, peaceful, and spiritually enriched society.

Through these efforts, the true legacy of Sufism and Islamic scholarship can inspire meaningful change and foster a harmonious coexistence in today's complex and diverse world.