

Rethinking Sufism and Baulism in Bangladesh: A Post Colonial Perspective

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Abstract

Historically, it is believed that first Sufi priests entered North India and subsequently their thoughts spread over all parts of India and Bangladesh. Common people were engaged in Sufi cults in different ways. In course of time, they took Sufism as their devotion and culture. Different types of thoughts are included in Sufism and Sufis are settled in the *Mazar*¹ or Shrine. Though all Sufis are Muslims in a broader sense, their ways of practice show distinct features and clear distinctions are noticed. Sufi communities (different orders) consider socio-cultural and religious matters in a generous way, and they tend to be more secular and rational. Here, in Bangladesh, Sufism encountered a new world of diverse religious cultures. The culture that prevailed in Sufism is often called Islamic syncretism. From Mughal and British periods, Sufism attained its own characteristics in connection with other religions. It did not even hesitate to take rituals from the Hindu community. In the post-colonial period, some new features were also added. The hidden devotional practices prevailed there was also impact in mass culture as well. The fair is common now with songs and dances along with different types of cultural events in a shrine. In this article, the transformation of Sufi culture will be taken into consideration to analyze in terms of post-colonial approaches. For in-depth study, the great Baul poet-singer Lalon Shah's works are considered as primary data for thematic exposition. Lalon had an *akhra*² or academy for the study of the Baul sect among his disciples in Cheuria, Kustia. This is qualitative research based on secondary sources. Areas were selected from the South-West part of Bangladesh. Secondary sources played an important role when analyzing these topics critically. This article aims to analyze postcolonial discourse and find out its connection to Baulism³ and Sufism.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, Diaspora, Baulism, Folk-scholars, Folk-epistemology.

1. Introduction

Sufism and Baulism are obscure religious practice systems, and they do not belong to academic disciplines. They belong to hidden practice systems among particular religious groups. Scholars from all over the world are very much involved and interested in them. New research approaches on these issues have mounted since Sufism's inception. From the beginning, it was a matter of curiosity to members of many religious systems, though Sufism is supposed to be involved primarily with Islam. However, a lot of works have been completed in various disciplines including History, Critical Theory, Hagiology, and Devotional Studies. Some notably works are seen in the recent Bangladeshi content written by European and American scholars. It is evident that at present, Bangladeshi Islam has displayed an authoritarian and militant face. Nevertheless, the recent high-profile visibility of literalist and political Islam in Bangladesh tends to obscure deeply rooted, alternative manifestations of Muslim belief and practice that are in fact more

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widespread. The phenomenon has almost gone unnoticed by academic persons of Bangladeshi society and is regarded by some among the Bangladeshi elite, both religious and secular, as an embarrassing anachronism (Roy 1983). Disapproval of Pir or Sufi blandishment was reinforced during the colonial period, in order to marginalize and subordinate indigenous traditions of spiritual belief and conduct which the then rulers had found threatening to the society, as Ewing (1997: 41.90) has shown at some length (Bertocci 2006). However, despite such disdain, a large majority of Bangladeshi Muslims from across the entire urban-rural and socio-economic spectrum accept the legitimacy of some holy men, if not as workers of miracles and purveyors of magical cures, then at least as sources of spiritual wisdom and guidance. Many visit the graveside shrines (*mazar*) of Pirs, some at least occasionally, many often, and many rather regularly, throughout their lives (Banu 1992; Begum and Ahmed 1990). So popular is this phenomenon that, in contrast to their colonial pioneers, post-colonial leaders had found it convenient to accommodate Pirs and their followers.

The historical importance of Sufism as well as Baulism in Bengal has been well noted (Haq 1975; Latif 1993) and the role of Sufi saints in the construction and propagation of Bengali Islam has been the subject of important studies by Richard Eaton (1994) and Asim Roy (1983). But only a few recent and highly welcome studies by social scientists have documented the present-day ubiquity and vitality of saint veneration and its centrality to Bangladeshi culture. Notably, these include the study by Begum and Ahmed of a Dhaka shrine (1990), Gardner's extended discussion of saint veneration in Sylhet (1995), Mill's studies of the Atrosi Pir (1992), to all of which Ellickson (2004) has recently added some important details. There has also emerged some scholarly interest in the presence of a well-established school of Islamic mysticism in Bangladesh that is of relatively recent origin and has attained a large, far-flung following, and whose spiritual centre is located in the Chittagong District village of Maijbhandar. Selim Jahangir (1999) has provided a major, non-hagiographical contribution to the study of the movement and Bertocci as an Indologist with a special interest in Bengali religion (Bertocci 2006). Hans Harder (2011) has done an extensive field study of the *Maijbhandari*⁴ movement, along with its history, hagiography, practice systems and musical traditions. New approaches have been taken to do research on recent issues especially on shrine based Pir-culture by some scholars as Petter J Bertocci (2006) stated in his research on the Maizbhandari *tariqa* (*order*). He described the whole process from beginning to end with its significance and influence on present society. It is very clear that the works or ritual and performance of Sufis and Bauls are of great interest among the scholars and a lot of research works are being prepared for the last half a century. However, they did not follow the socio-cultural effect and contribution of these mystic religious groups and no initiative has been taken to rethink this discourse to be analyzed as content linked to post-colonial theories.

As all Sufis and Bauls were active in colonial period and they produced all literary matters in this period so it can be connected to postcolonial theory. In the last three decades of the twentieth century, scholars paid attention to postcolonial approaches and revealed it as a theory related to social and cultural studies. Postcolonial thinkers address all colonial

issues linking the deep-rooted aggression of the colonial rulers. Hence, the captive mentality of common people along with the reflection of their mentality is very much concerned. The oriental knowledge (especially spiritual wisdom and mystic song) of Sufi and Baul represents the great scholarship of this land. This article, basically, tried to focus on this particular issue that is being discussed here with examples. The great folk mystics and spiritual poets in the colonial period had written lots of songs that were signs of oriental scholarship. This writing had an intention to accommodate Fakir Lalon Shah as a great poet and social reformer with a critical analysis of his songs.

The rest of the paper is presented as follows: Section 2 describes the research methods followed in this study. Section 3 provides the features of Post-colonialism, Sufism and Baulism. Discussions based on the Post-colonialism, Sufism and Baulism philosophies are provided in Section 4, and concluding remarks are given in Section 5.

2. Methods

This is a qualitative research project based on secondary sources. Besides, primary sources were also useful for necessary data. Three shrines were selected from the South-West part of Bangladesh that were near to the Kustia District. Selection of sampling was purposive. For collecting data, a set of questionnaires was made. The researcher also arranged focused group discussions with some senior Bauls and Sufis along with their disciples. In most cases, the respondents were the disciples of the Pir or Sufi or Baul Guru. The ritual based (hidden) practices, their thinking and songs performed by the disciples were the primary data. Though they do not have any idea regarding postcolonial issues, from the discussion, the researcher got some ideas that were helpful to connect the issues. A Content analysis method of analysis was used. It took three weeks to collect the data from three *Mazars* or *Akhras*. The songs of Fakir Lalon Shah were one of the primary elements of this research.

2. Post-colonialism, Sufism and Baulism

Basically, Post-colonialism is a theory or literary discourse that cannot be defined briefly or easily because of its vast areas as well as its association with other related discourses. Primarily, it seems to be understood that it is an analysis and criticism of the ways in which western knowledge systems have a dominant position. It also seeks to recover alternative ways of knowing and understanding often talked of in terms of 'other voices' in order to present alternatives to dominate western constructs (Sharp 2009). Besides, it is believed that post-colonialism endeavors to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day (Ashcroft et al 1989). They also explained the term in different ways which depicts that post-colonialism has its original connections to post-structuralism. Some important thinkers involved with post-colonialism, such as, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Buchi Emecheta, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler and Jacques Lacan have done good works on this issue. Post-colonialism is also linked with deconstruction theory. Deconstruction denies the possibility of an essential meaning. Post-structuralism has a strong opposition to structuralism. Structuralism was an intellectual movement which was developed in Europe from the beginning to mid 20th century.

The theory related to post-colonial discourse invites many terms and contexts which basically, however, are types of musings that emerged after the colonial era with immense existential crisis among the colonial people; they got it frequently as a sign of mental agony or social injustice or cultural and political malpractices through the written literature produced by the affected or mentally disturbed and creative person. The colonial or imperial aggression of that time is not seen today, but it remains in the memory of the people who were uprooted from their birth places. It is actually a matter of rethinking by some writers or scholars (Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Edward Said and Mitchell Foucault) which enables common man to remember the destiny of their predecessor. A good number of creative writings helped the thinkers to establish the theory. At the same time, global communication helps to spread out this movement to every corner of the world. The diasporic tyranny of Jews adds a new dimension to this post-colonial concept. Though, in post-colonial context people do not cross the borderland, but the effectiveness of uncertainty or existence seems to be the same.

Like subaltern, post-colonial discourse underlines the crisis of the masses with a view to rearranging latent troublesome life-sketch of the ancestors. On the other hand, it also focuses the enlightened portion of the nation that represents the significant achievement as Edward Said mentioned as the oriental scholarship and its significance to other parts of the world. The post-colonial scholars are very much concerned with that part of post-colonial issues that are mostly influential. The battle of scholarship between oxidant and orient always favors the western scholars that make the Eastern thinker to be enthusiastic; the folk epistemology including oral literature or philosophy or indigenous knowledge can limit the gap between two groups. It is also the time to rethink to use the theory of post-colonialism exploring the existed wisdom and knowledge in the Indian sub-continent. Now, post-colonial thinking addresses many things related to culture, politics, society and beyond the history related to colonial perspective. It not only deals with the literature of the colonial people, but it embraces many other issues. It is true that much of what post-colonialism deals with happens to be in the English language; its canvas currently does not cover the linguistics, creative and cultural plurality and vitality of former colonies. In its present form, post-colonialism appears incapable of accommodating anything more than 'English fraction' of postcolonial reality, and is, therefore, not useful enough for our larger purposes. It seems to have equated works of a few, mainly diasporic writers, with the entirety of post-colonial literature, as if literature in other languages is not worth considering. (Akter 2012: 32)

Sufism is an ascetic and mystical religious practice tradition in Islam. Sufi followers believed that they can become closer to Allah through devotional practices. They try to make a good relationship to Allah through love. It is believed that Sufism introduced in Persia after the death of (632 A.D) Prophet Mohamamd(s). It entered in Subcontinent in 11th Century. Baul is a folk religion community in undivided Bengal and it is believed that Fakir Lalon Shah (1774-18900 was the founder of it. The theory and practice system of Baul is called Baulism. Bauls are very much indebted to other religious communities and borrowed many things (thinking and practice) from Sufi and other traditional religious culture. Baulism is influenced by the mystic and spiritual characteristics of Sufism.

The consideration of utilizing local knowledge and literature into global knowledge is one of the main aims of post-colonial approaches as it justifies itself as a standard one. Though colonies are no more in our midst, the act and reaction of colonial legacy prevails in different modes. The Pir or Sufi or Baul were in British rule and they were basically out of the colonial connection. Their works or activities were confined to a spiritual world. But, in a real sense, they were involved in secular and religious diversification that led to a good number of people generating positive attitudes. The secular way of religious practices and social reformation (though for limited people) by Bauls in Bengal (especially by Fakir Lalon Shah) was a unique intellectual movement that may be considered as individualism of religious or social phenomena. It clearly embraces post-colonial theory as part of an intellectual discourse. What Lalon did in the British Period avoiding the British Ruler for his own sake is simply the work of a rebel and in this way, he produced a new way of thinking and a way of life. This strong sense of individualism is, no doubt, akin to independence. He explained everything from his points of view. The Baul or Sufi song is an amalgamation of many religious thoughts that is attracted by the people and they were free from Islamic fanaticism. This ascetic form of revelation seems to be calm and quiet what performed in a shrine or Akhra, but the Jikir or Sama⁵ or song produces light among the participant. It, actually, means that the Baba or Fakir is very much aware of the situation and the spiritual way of devotion that carries new insights to the followers. Besides, the song itself is an outstanding piece of literature covering the strong cultural-religious legacy of this land especially mending the traditional tantric practices. The eternal meaning of this song is a part of human appreciation ever being discovered by the other. From the post-colonial point of view, it would be a new dimension of exploring Eastern epistemology that is distinct from the other.

4. Discussions

From the basics of Sufi and Baul Philosophy, it is not easy to make some flat comments like that they preach the same type of directions to its disciples; their primary motto is to search the inner man or to make a deep relationship to the Creator. The way of devotion varies and deviates sometimes; nevertheless, there is a unique similarity between these two religious sects. Searching the ultimate inner man (it is called *Sonar manush*⁶) by the Baul is, actually, a sign of individualism. Great Folk poet Lalon Shah always desired to give priority to human beings. He clearly depicted his opinions in many songs from a humanitarian point of view. He mentioned many times in his songs that the human being is above all. The prevailed social and religious injustice, he noticed and faced compelled him to find out the ways helpful to the common people. All his approaches were also important from a humanitarian point of view. He declared that man is equal considering cast and religion. It was, in a real sense, his rebellion against the orthodox religious groups. On the other hand, a Sufi needs to make himself important as he or she can directly communicate with the Almighty. The performance through their song or *jikir* is likely an effort to be considered as a means of communication and it draws them to the center of interest – the relationship between Almighty and men. They were far behind from social and religious chaos and confined themselves in a shrine with their followers. Lalon is very much indebted to Sufism because he is inspired by Sufi theories and practices.

Lalon emphasizes the importance of humanity. It is believed that Lalon was unlettered and he had no scope to read any type of written things; nevertheless, he achieved deep knowledge from his Guru (Shiraj Shai) or from other sources and it was really an outstanding thinking related to man, nature and cosmology. The middle aged Bengali Poet Chandidas opines, Oh man, listen to me, Man is above to all (*Shuno hey Manush bhai, Sabar opar manush shahtya tahar opar nai*). Possibly, Lalon took this line as his Mantra and said in his song:

*Manush Bhajile shonar Manush Habi
manush chhara khya pare tui mul harabi
ai manushe manush gantha
gache jemon aloklata⁷
jene shune muraao matha
o mon jate tarabi--- ai manush chhara manke amar
parbi re tui shunno kar
Lalon bale manush akar
bhajile tare pabi. (Chowdhury2008:57)*

Translation: if you pray for man, you will be a great man (*sonar manush*). Otherwise, you will lose the root. Allah is rooted in this man as *aloklata* in a tree and you should take the right decision knowing the matter and that will be your real boat to go. (My translation)

Lalon, as a secular mystic poet or mendicant, believed that there is no difference between men; man is free from all types of superstitions and earthly cannons. He declared that man should be considered on the basis of humanity, nothing else; even the religion or caste or classes need not to be considered. He also said that he does not belong to any caste, any religion. This declaration is universal where all men are equal in all respect. He sings- *Sab loke koi lalon ki jat sangsare/ Lalon koi jater ki rup deklam na ai najore/ sunnat dile hoi mussalman/ nari loker ki hai bidhan/ bamun chini paite⁸ praman/bamni chini kishre re/ keu mala keu tasbi gale/ tai te ki jat bhunno bale/ asha kinba jabar kale jater chinha roy kar re---jagat jure jeter katha/ loke galpo kare jatataha/ lalon bale jeter fata / dubaiche shadhajare. (Chowdhury 2008:657)*

Meaning: Everybody asks that what caste Lalon belongs to. Lalon says, I do not find any sign of caste in my eyes. A male is made into Muslim by *sunnat*, but there is no rule for women; we can identify a *brahmin* by the Paita he wears but how can we identify a woman. Somebody wears a *mala⁹*, somebody *tasbe¹⁰* and is it the sign of different caste/in time of entrance and departure in this earth there is no sign-caste to be seen. In every part of the world we are listening about caste, man is making story on it. Lalon said, I have sold my caste in the bazaar of desire. (My translation)

In another song, Lalon said in different mood and he seemed very angry and ill-tempered. His comments are open or free without any hesitation just like a social reformer played role for his society. He said; *jat galo jat galo bale aki ajab karkhana/ satya kaje keo noi raji shabi dekhi ta na na na/ jakhan tumi vabe ale/ takhan tumi ki jat chhile/ jabar belai ki jat nile/ akatha amai balo na./ brahmin-chandal chamar muchi¹¹/ aki jale shab hai go shuchi/ dekhe shune hai na ruchi/ jame ta kaoko chharbe na./*

gopane je beshshar bhat khai/ tate dharmer ki khati hai/ Lalon bale jat kare koi/ ai vrama to galo na. (Chowdhury 2008: 354)

Translation: I'll be excommunicated. I'll lose my caste, / cries everybody; what a strange affair is that;/But no one wants to follow/ the path of truth/ I see everybody dillydallies. / when you first come to this earth/ and when you finally depart/ what is your caste or creed? Why don't you say it? The Brahmin and the Chandal, the high caste and the low/ the same water cleanses everybody/what I hear and see/ disgusts me, and Death. I know, / will spare none. / what harm does it do to religion/ when one secretly breaks (check bread/ with a fallen woman? / what do you call caste or community/ alas, says, Lalon, this illusion persists still. (Kabir Chowdhury).

The question arose in Lalon's song many times that whether Lalon was Muslim or Hindu. He answered with simple reason and no ambiguity is expressed here. It is believed that Lalon had good knowledge and attraction to Hindu and Muslim religion. At the same time, he clearly mentioned several times that he didn't belong to any religious community rather he developed new religion in which he could remain safe. He has taken all unbiased things from all religions with an individual explanation that were suitable for free thinking and not anomalous to his new *Manabdharma*.¹² However, he never claimed himself to be Muslim or Hindu; on the other hand, he believed that he is a man without any connection to any caste or religion. He had a realization that all types of social unrest always occurred for religious dogmas. He himself faced it several times and suffered many times at the hands of religious men. Sometimes, he answered dubiously. In a song Lalon said—everybody asks him whether Lalon is a Jaban (Muslim) or a Hindu? He said, I do not know the destination. Beyond the religious controversy, Lalon has chosen a true path to become a good man uttering the line, *Satya bal shupate chal ore amar mana* (Chowdhury 2008 :653) that means do good works and speak truth. His philosophical theme 'know thyself' denotes the way to keep oneself calm and quiet and in deep meditation and provokes one to get tranquility in life and be involved in good thinking. This man must be a secular one who does not bother with any religious contradictions. Here lies the basis of a syncretistic tradition of religion. The ideas or thinking mingled here in Baulism is a synthesis of all existing religions that is derived from folk-forms that may unite Bengalis under the same umbrella. In fact, this conception or idea of synthesis paved a way for religious reconciliation in Bengal. This is the first step of secular thinking in this sub-continent (Mahatma Gandhi has taken it as his political philosophy in India). The Sufis also preached Islam in this land in a most generous manner and all types of men from every religion and caste got shelter in Islam. In fact, Sufis introduced Islamic law in a subtle way as all can cope up with it without any hindrance.

Post-colonial discourse addresses the man behind the scenario where one is oppressed or neglected by a colonial ruler. A Baul or a Sufi looks for the man underneath that simply connects the theory of post-colonialism to Baulism or Sufism. It is a matter of fact that Lalon was very much ahead of his time and practically a rebel against social and religious injustice. He fought for the man who will be equal in all senses. Post-colonial theory also includes feminism which is also seen in Lalon's songs and his religious system. In these songs hidden practices of female people also play a vital role. Devotion

or revelation in Baulism is female based. In every *Akhra*, it is very common that a female person is dictating the male person in their hidden practices. As a Baul or a Sufi, Lalon has introduced a unique system of religious practice for his disciples in Bengal that was manifested in a secular way. He took religion in a generous way giving priority to all types of men in a society in order to be freed from all sorts of religious hazards. A Sufi in his *darga* introduced the same practices with some exceptions. Along with devotional exercises (Jikir or Sama) a Sufi *dargah* arranges many cultural functions such as birth or death anniversary celebrations. In a fair, song and dance are very common items. It is real that this tradition is not supported by Islamic Law, but common people enjoy it very much and generally, the organizer does not face any hindrance from orthodox Muslim. In a real sense, Sufism embraced common people and they felt at ease to be connected with this secular culture. They achieved different types of thinking and practices which helped them to be united. At the same time, they had a humanitarian approach which invited common people to be united.

5. Concluding Remarks

Lalon and Sufi priests have been involved in their works during Mughal and British rule. British rule in the Indian sub-continent had a negative and subtle impression on the common people; historians and scholars were of little interest to common people. Scholars of post-colonial theory reconsidered the common characters of mankind, especially the creative person's mentality and, of course, their creations. Bauls and Sufi were ahead of social and political turmoil and engaged themselves in a world of mysticism and spiritualism. In fact, they addressed their intellectual insight to the common people. The secular and spiritual ideology of Lalon Shah was a part of an intellectual renaissance in that time. The post-colonial thinkers may discover this truth recovering the whole thing from his works and songs. The man was treated by Lalon as a supreme authority in this universe that leads them to the world of individualism. The apparent worship or traditional rituals followed by song and dance made themselves different from general people, but the sense of humanity that was vigorously violated in colonial period may be recaptured today as major issues of post-colonialism. In that way, the folk epistemology of Lalon and Sufism might be linked easily to post-colonial thinking. Lalon was a social and religious reformer. Lalon's songs or Sufi songs are not comparable to post-colonial literature, but their thinking is, of course, a part of post-colonial discourse.

End Notes

- ¹ *Mazar* is a word frequently used in Bengali vocabulary meaning a holey grave yard of a Pir or Sufi. His disciples or *murid* or some attendants always keep themselves busy in different religious ritual activities. A big occasion is held on the birth or death anniversary of the Pir. In that time lots of people gather here as a festive mood and engaged in numerous social-cultural and religious activities.
- ² *Akhra* is place or house of the Guru or mentor who (basically a Baul) entertains his followers. He teaches them different types of internal practices along with songs and hidden rituals.
- ³ The term Baulism originates from the Bengali word Baul that means a type folksinger and disciple of Baul *guru*. Baul is a sect; they inherit their beliefs and rituals from old Indian religion-- Boudha, Hindu and Muslim. In Bangladesh and West Bengal there are numerous Bauls. It is believed that *Fakir* Lalon Shah was the founder of this sect.

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- ⁴ Syed Ahmed Ullah Maijvadari(1826-1906) was the founder of *Maijvadari* Sufi order. He was born in Chittagong and set up his school. It is believed that he is a descendant of Prophet Mohammad. As a saint he gained the title `Gausul Azam Maulana Myed Ahmed Ullah Maijvadari Kebla Kaba or Gause Azam. There is popular song called maijvadari after his name.
- ⁵ *Jikir* is a group practice held in shrine in a typical way sitting down in the basement. They disciples repeatedly utter loudly some selected words or line from holy books (the Quran). *Sama* is actually religious song seems to be closed to *Jikir*. It is associated to Sufi shrine.
- ⁶ The main motto of Baul is to search the Sonar manush(man made by gold) that denotes the supreme power—Allah, Rasul, Muhammad. Lalon shah said about *sonar manush* many times. He believed that if you pray for men you will get Allah- --the *sonar manush*. However, Lalon also thinks that Allah resides in Human body.
- ⁷ It's a rope-typed dependent plant which has no connection to earth. Lalon use this Bengali word allegorically to denote rootless or unimportant man.
- ⁸ The high caste Hindu man called Brahmin wears a special rope in his throat to identify himself as Bramin. This symbol is called *Paite*.
- ⁹ *Mala* is weared in neck or throat by Hindu community
- ¹⁰ *Tasbe* is very close to Mala but it belongs to Muslim community and it is connected to religious elements. They use it to count the praising words connected to Allah.
- ¹¹ *Bramin,Chandal, Chamar* and *Muchi* denotes the high caste and low caste. *Bramin* is the high caste and rest is the lower caste.
- ¹² In different song Lalon explained that he prefers to call his religion as *Manbdharma* where man is the main element.

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