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Conversions/Subversions: Sufi Subtexts of Bangladeshi Identity

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Introduction

Sufism as carrier and disseminator of Islamic culture in the Indian subcontinent, specifically in the region that is now Bangladesh, shares affinities and connections with the Indic culture of the region. Among Muslim and non-Muslim historians, it is widely accepted that Sufism was instrumental in converting the indigenous people to Islam following the Turkish Muslim invasion of India in the eleventh century.1

Paradoxically, however, the Sufis, disseminators of Islam in the Indian Subcontinent, are largely regarded as unorthodox, if not heretical, practitioners of Islam in contemporary Bangladesh, as well as in Pakistan and India. This attitude towards them is due, in part, to the spirit of synthesis and diversity that is an integral characteristic of this sect.

Sufism in its contemporary expression in Bangladesh, through the arts and its sensibility, manifests an essentially subversive trait that connects contemporary Bangladeshi Muslims to their pre-Muslim Indic heritage. Centuries later, the very qualities of flexibility and accommodation at the root of Sufism’s appeal in medieval Bengal render it subversive and non-conformist.

The discussion of the role of Sufism in the conversion of Indic peoples to Islam has always been problematic, but in the postmodern era when civilizations, groups, and identities are no longer perceived as fixed and unchanging but as fluid and porous, it gives rise to different kinds of controversies.
More recent scholarship on the subject is "skeptical," for example, of the notion of bounded civilizational entities, which previous scholarly generations had taken for granted.⁴ Sufism's role in the transmission of Islam should be of particular interest to the comparative study of religion and culture, as it cuts across most conventional civilizational lines.

In the works of medieval Muslim chroniclers, 19th-century Orientalists, colonial historians (both British and Indian, Hindu and Muslim alike), and post-Partition historians writing up until the 1980s, the religious change in India following the arrival of Arabs and Turks was attributed to either conversion or coercion. The discourse on the topic of India's religious change ascribed it either to Muslims, violently subjugating the vanquished, or to the indigenous peoples passively accepting and converting to a foreign religion.

But these views are changing; in the introductory essay to India's Islamic Traditions, Richard M. Eaton explores the question of an Islamic intrusion into India, reconsidering the view of a large-scale conversion. The contributors to this recent collection all

...challenge the image, found in many textbooks on pre-colonial India, of a monolithic and alien Islam colliding with an equally monolithic Hinduism, construed as indigenous, and after ca. 1000 AD, as politically suppressed.³

Other scholars, such as Joya Chatterji, refute the idea that Indic populations passively underwent conversion at the hands of exogenous preachers and missionaries; she maintains that local populaces played an active part in accepting the new religion.⁴
In my discussion of the role of the Sufis in converting Indic peoples to Islam, I take note of these objections and shifts in perceptions of civilizational encounters. When I speak about conversion, it is more in terms of mediation and interaction rather than “insemination and implantation,” to borrow a biological analogy from Chatterji, of Islam in India.

The Origins of Sufism

Even though the presence of Sufi mystics can be traced back to the time of the Prophet Muhammad in the 7th century, there are few historic sources that record the early Sufis, therefore their origins are somewhat obscure. The term sufi itself was used for the first time in a Persian written text in the 11th century. Different scholars have traced the etymology of this term to different roots. For example, the medieval Persian philosopher and scholar, Al-Biruni, traces its etymology to the Greek word sophos: wise man.

Another school has maintained that the term derives from the phrase “at the door” or “at the threshold,” signaling that Sufis, by their renunciation of the material world, were outside the mainstream of society. Louis Massignon, one of the earliest Sufi scholars in the West, links the origins of Sufism to the Qur’an as being “constantly recited, meditated, and experienced.”

A more widely accepted view, however, is that it is linked to the Arabic word for wool, which was the preferred garment of ascetics, and of most of the prophets as well.

In popular practice, Sufism is the mystical branch of Islam, and stands in juxtaposition to clerical and legalistic Islam. The early Sufis distanced themselves from mainstream Muslims, primarily through their rejection of all outward manifestations of such religious commandments as ritual
prayers, fasting, and other ordinances, in affirmation of their mystical quest of their Creator.

For them, faith is the essence of their tenet, not the blind adherence to rites and rituals. Original Sufism was a brotherhood primarily known for its asceticism. Sufis sought mystic union with God, espousing a stark simple way of life, and promoting brotherly love.

By the 11th century when Muslim influence had spread beyond the Middle East into India and Central Asia, “Islam had changed in many ways, transformed since… when it was ruled from Baghdad…” This transformation was two-fold. When Sufi “saints” first arrived in India, on the one hand, Islam had evolved from its original state, and on the other, the status of Sufi mystics in Muslim communities and societies had become ambiguous and complex. Sufis were considered heretics because of the Islamic canon, and their cult-like tendencies are still regarded with deep suspicion both by orthodox and mainstream Muslims.

Over the centuries, they have been persecuted in many parts of the Middle East, especially in modern-day Saudi Arabia, and in Turkey, under the leadership of Kemal Ataturk.

Following descriptions of colonial bureaucrats and Orientalists, the term Sufism, in the Western popular imagination, usually evokes images of whirling dervishes and chanting fakirs. But within the Sufi tradition, there are differences in orientation, ideology and practice which range across a broad spectrum. In its original expression, Sufism distinguished itself from conventional Islam through its asceticism and renunciation of worldly pursuits in favor of the divine and the mystical.

However, under European colonialism in various parts of the world such as Algeria, Libya, and Senegal, it started to
assume a nationalist and militant role, rejecting the Sufi ideal of mysticism and non-violence. Adopting divisiveness and conflict as their motto, certain Sufi orders in Turkey, Iran, and the Caucasus have been instrumental in inciting political violence among their followers.\(^7\) One case of direct political engagement of a Sufi sect is that these Sufi leaders played a major role in the creation of Pakistan as a separate state.\(^8\)

Notwithstanding the political aspect that Sufism has acquired over the centuries, Sufis are ordinarily associated with mysticism and not political power. One British colonial officer in India notes the disengagement of the Sufis from the rest of society:

With regard to the religion (if it can be so termed in the general acceptance of the word) or rather doctrine and tenets of the sect of Sufis, it is requisite to observe, first, that any person ... of any religion or sect may be a Šūfī: the mystery lies in this; a total disengagement of the mind from all temporal concerns and worldly pursuits; an entire throwing off not only of every superstition, doubt, or the like, but of the practical mode of worship, ceremonies, &c. laid down in every religion, which the Mahomedans term Sheryat, being the law, or canonical law; and entertaining solely mental abstraction, the contemplation of the soul, the Deity....\(^9\)

**The Sufi Arrival in India: Conversions**

Conventional wisdom has it that conversion to Islam was achieved “by the sword,” and ascribed for the most part to the coercion and violence of the conquering army. Undoubtedly, the Muslim invasion of India was bloody and violent. The invaders, both Arabs and Turks, were intolerant of the Hindus, perceiving them as non-believers and infidels (kaffirs) and forced them into conversion.
The indigenous populations, under the leadership of the aristocratic Rajputs, the warrior princes of the Rajasthan region, waged a prolonged and bitter war against the invading armies; innumerable lives were lost during the bloody "clash of civilization," not only on the battlefield but also as punishment for not converting to the new religion.

But conversion is a much more complex process than just subjugating an invaded people forcefully. Following the invasion of India by Turkish warriors in the late 10th century, Sufi saints (pirs) arrived in India from various parts of the Middle East in the 12th century. Sufis, who had earned a name for going against the establishment, and whose spiritual orientation was in sharp contrast to the un-Islamic excesses of kings and sultans, nonetheless played a crucial role in the dissemination of Islam in India. It was in Bengal that they were most successful in connecting with the local inhabitants and were credited with having converting the locals to Islam.

According to the Bangladeshi Sufi scholar, S. Khalilullah, one reason why the Sufis may have had such success in spreading Islam in East-central India (today's Bangladesh), and the Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, was that the Brahmanic religion was not firmly established in this area.

Since before the arrival of the Aryans and after the Aryan invasion, Bengal and the surrounding areas had been settled by diverse ethnic and religious groups. The local population was not homogeneous racially, ethnically, or religiously. This region had witnessed the rise and fall of mighty Buddhist and Hindu empires. Even though in the 11th century Buddhism was the major established religion of this area, the Gupta dynasty kings who ruled this region were followers of the Hindu Baidya religion.
When Muslim invaders conquered this part of India, ethnic and religious tension and strife were not uncommon; the Arab influx of the Sind region as early as the 8th century had exacerbated the situation. The region was economically self-sufficient and made up of separate communities that kept themselves separate from other ethnic and religious groups.

When Turkish warriors arrived in the east-central part of India, religious strife and competition among the ruling dynasties had left the region divided and vulnerable, paving the path for the establishment of Muslim rule that later would unify India. Identifying the appeal of the Sufis to their innate facility to synthesize, Khalilullah points out that the Sufis who arrived in Bengal were of Aryan ethnicity, bringing a natural affinity and accommodation in many areas of Sufi and Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain thoughts and beliefs.

In his discussion of the spread of Islam in India, Tara Chand presents the Hindu view on the matter—not dissimilar to the Muslim one cited above. He ascribes the solidification of the Turkish rule in medieval India to the lack of cohesion among the indigenous Rajput rulers:

The period of Rajput ascendancy was one of division and conflict. Society was enfeebled by feudal anarchy and clannish pretensions on the one side and by religious dissentions and priestly selfishness on the other. ... Upon this scene of petty Rajput feuds and glorious Rajput art the avalanche of the Muslim conquest burst. ... India on the eve of Muslim conquest resembled Greece before the rise of Macedonia into power. There was the same incapacity in both regions to create a political union, and there was the same keenness and brilliance in the pursuit of science, literature and art. The analogy went further, for if the Macedonian was the semi-Hellenized Greek, the Turk, who swept over India, was the non-Hinduized Rajput.
Although Chand’s monograph was written in 1922 (it was published more than 50 years later) his treatment of Hindu-Muslim relations and interactions, surprisingly, bear elements of postmodern thinking. Before introducing the chapter “Advent of the Muslims in the North,” Chand offers a chapter on Sufism entitled “Mysticism in Islam” in which he demonstrates that Sufism and the mystical Hindu religious branch of Bhakti share a number of similar ideas and principles.  

Chand sees the Turkish-Muslim presence in India as one of adoption and assimilation between “neighbors”. He observes:

The Muslims who came into India made it their home. They lived surrounded by the Hindu people and a state of perennial hostility with them was impossible. Mutual intercourse led to mutual understanding. ... Thus after the first shock of conquest was over, the Hindus and the Muslims prepared to find a via media whereby to live as neighbors. The effort to seek a new life led to the development of a new culture which was neither exclusively Hindu nor purely Muslim. It was indeed a Muslim-Hindu culture. Not only did Hindu religion, Hindu art, Hindu literature and Hindu science absorb Muslim elements, but the very spirit of the Hindu culture and the very stuff of Hindu mind was altered, and the Muslim reciprocated by responding to the change in every department of life.

Chand expresses the view, like the postmodernists, that cultures, religions, and civilizations are not immutable and absolute entities, but are phenomena open to change, integration, and accommodation. This position helps to understand how a significant number of Indians under Muslim rule might have come to convert to the religion of their “neighbors” and not of their “rulers.”
During the Turkish-Mongol occupation of India, many locals converted to Islam. Medieval Muslim and modern pro-Muslim accounts attribute the conversion of the local Hindu, Buddhist, and Tantric populations to Islam’s mass appeal. In simplistic terms, apologists of the Muslim invasion of India ascribe the conversion of lower caste Hindus and women solely to the power of Islam’s message of equality and brotherhood. But this essentially Muslim view is hotly debated.

Historians and scholars have objected to the notion of Islam’s egalitarian message as being responsible for the conversion. Eaton points out that this theory is flawed. First of all, he notes that Bengal, like Kashmir and Punjab—regions with the largest numbers of Muslims in India—was situated on the periphery of Brahmanic religion. Not having a strong Hindu/Brahmanic presence, the population would not have suffered discrimination as a result of the caste system. Secondly, Eaton maintains that this argument is judgmental of the Hindu religion.

Another scholar points out that there is no evidence that Islam was more socially egalitarian. Questioning the egalitarian quality of Islam, and questioning the issue of the conversion of the local population, Annemarie Schimmel offers an interesting insight by pointing out that the Islam that spread in India was an urban, not rural phenomenon. In her view:

The major changes took place in the cities which the Muslims founded or enlarged, and it was here the Hindu workers and artisans were exposed to caste-free Islam and were in part attracted by the ideal of ‘social oneness;’ for the Islamic shari’a gave them more possibilities for development than the Hindu tradition. ... Islamization may be regarded in the beginning largely as a matter of
social change in the urban centres, and only later did the rural areas begin to feel the impact of the new order.¹⁶

Other scholars and historians of Muslim origin, such as Muzaffar Alam, appreciate the complexity of the question and credited the Sufis, and not the message of Islam, for the spread of Islam in India. Alam maintains that Hindus converted to Islam because of what he calls, "the Sufi intervention."

In the 11th and 12th centuries, according to Alam, "Sufi orders (silsilas) began to expand, encouraging and promoting many beliefs held in common by Hindus and Muslims. Even among those Sufis who were puritanical in their attitude and uncompromising on questions of adherence to the shari'a, in purely juridical terms, there were examples of general charity and tolerance."

Alam maintains that Sufis had a political impact on the Delhi sultanate when, "as against the theologians, the Sufis made a plea for avenues of power through interaction and persuasion."

Stanley Wolpert’s analysis of the conversion of the Bengali population to Islam, similar to Alam’s position, ascribes it to the tempering influence that the Sufis were able to exert on the ruling elite, as well as on the laymen. Muslim Bengal, having asserted its independence from the Delhi Sultanate in 1338, further distinguished itself from the rest of Muslim India, not by linguistic and political independence alone, but

...even in the form of Islam predominantly practiced there (which) was peculiarly attuned to its cultural character and ancient heritage. Sufism, Islam’s mystic thread, which evolved primarily as a legacy of Persian influence upon Islamic orthodoxy, struck a responsive chord in the mass of Bengal’s population, especially
among the lowest caste of the Hindu outcastes and former Buddhists, who were left without a priesthood to turn to for spiritual guidance after 1202; it appealed as well to many Muslims, for whom it revitalized the message of Islam.19

The conversion in India to Islam was simultaneously the result of both coercion and of free acceptance. The conquering army, led by militant and intolerant generals, had a very definite part to play in the conversion process through threats, intimidation, and force. Nonetheless, the message of Islam promoting equality, that had been very successful in spreading Islam among other indigenous societies with a rigid social hierarchy, when spread by Sufi mystics, found a receptive audience. Political instability, a population that was not homogeneous, and a large number of inhabitants in the untouchable Hindu castes of dome and charal, facilitated the transmission of Islam in this region.

The claim that the egalitarian principles of Islam were at the root of its success in spreading it is flawed. Even though Islam’s essence and message are deeply egalitarian, in practice, Islam as it had evolved by the 11th century was not socially as egalitarian as some Muslim thinkers and historians would suggest.

Indisputably, there is no caste system in Islam and individuals are not bound by rigid customs that confine and limit them to the social background into which they were born. Muslims can advance socially through merit, ingenuity, and resourcefulness, as well as through familial or tribal background and connections. The slave-king Iltutmish who ruled with great success from his Delhi Sultanate for a quarter of a century (1211-1236) is a good example of upward mobility, i.e., of equality in the Muslim court of India.
Notwithstanding the example of Iltutmish, Muslim rulers and leaders, only a few centuries after the inception of Islam, deviated from the fundamental Islamic tenets of equality and freedom, creating societies based on class. Contemporary Muslim societies around the world do not have a caste system but are organized on a class system that privileges the wealthy and members of certain families with political, and sometimes, religious power. Egalitarianism is more an ideal in present-day Islamic societies than a reality.

Nonetheless, as a symbol, Islam’s message of brotherhood and love was powerful and had a strong appeal among the dispossessed and the disenfranchised in medieval India. The role of the Sufi saints as transmitters of Islam and carriers of culture is crucial at this stage of the Muslim occupation of India.

The Sufis, with their message of universal love, their openness to and adoption of local customs and practices, and their reputation of being able to perform miracles, were able to capture the hearts and minds of the locals, especially of those who belonged to the lower castes.

Sufis made an effort to be inclusive of the culture of the indigenous people; “the popularity of Hindu themes in Hindi (or Hindavi) poetry (masnawis) written by Sufis”\(^\text{20}\) attest to the Sufi appreciation and enjoyment of Hindu poetry. Sufi writers working in Bengali created the “greatest hybrid literature of South Asian Islam,”\(^\text{21}\) as one Islamic Studies scholar notes. This early admiration of Hindu/Indic poetry and literature would later find similar expression in Bengal among the Bauls, who transcended Hindu/Muslim religious boundaries.

The Sufis did not convert the local population overnight. No matter what their appeal to the locals, the conversion of the indigenous people to Islam was a long and slow process. Commenting on the rise and spread of Islam in India, Stanley
Wolpert remarks “[w]hat was surprising, however, was how long it took Islam to spread beyond the narrow confines of Sind [the first region to be invaded] to other regions of the subcontinent.”

Since 1053, there had been an influx of Sufi missionaries in Bengal, and they played an active part in converting the local population to Islam over the course of several centuries. Four mystics of the Chistiyya order accompanied the Turkish invaders to India and their role as transmitters of Islam proved invaluable. The main tenets of Sufism—love, brotherhood and equality—appealed broadly to the indigenous populations.

Other Sufi concepts and practices resonated with local Hindu and Buddhist customs in Bengal, and so gained wide acceptance. Mystic Sufi aspirations to merge the self with the Creator bore a close resemblance to the Hindu ideal of unity with Brahman. Hindu and Buddhist renunciation of worldly life in favor of spiritual perfection found parallels in Sufi practice. Sufism too, unlike mainstream Islam, sought mystical expression through the arts, poetry, music, and dance.

Unlike the invading Turks, the Sufis were not so extremist and did not try to uproot the local culture and customs. On the contrary, certain members of the Chistiyya order even assimilated ideas from the Hindu Bhakti movement, thereby somewhat altering the expression of Sufism in India. Much of the success of Sufi saints in disseminating Islam lay in their attempts to find common threads between Islam and indigenous beliefs, through assimilation, and by melding Islam with the local culture and practices.

From its earliest days, the manifestation of Islam in the Bengal region has been a more fluid and open-minded variety of Islam than found elsewhere. This distinct brand of Islam, one that has earned Bengali Muslims the reputation
of renegades,\(^2\) is due both to the malleability of the Bengali spirit and the openness of the Sufi worldview. The tolerant side of Islam in Bangladesh can be attributed in part to its Sufi heritage.

Until the past decade or so, the face of Islam in Bangladesh had been more tolerant and less militant, Bengalis preferring the secular enjoyment of music and poetry to the seeking of and fanatically affirming their Islamic identity. Islam still largely continues to be tolerant in Bangladesh, but in the recent years, Bangladesh, too, has seen a disturbing rise in Islamic fundamentalism, resulting in communal intolerance.

The Sufi Legacy of Bangladesh: Subversions

In Bengali-Bangladeshi terms a good Muslim is one who dresses simply and modestly, says the five ritual prayers daily, observes religious observances such as Ramadan, and regularly attends *milad* gatherings—staid religious ceremonies to mark important life events—where the partaking of rich foods is the only exciting aspect of the gatherings.

In contrast, Bengali cultural observances, such as the indigenous Bengali new year celebrations, centers around the performing arts: singing, dancing, and such other arts as painting and pottery, also play a prominent role in expressing the festive and joyous mood of the occasion.

On Bengali new year, observed on or around April 14\(^{th}\), Bengali Muslims shed their habitual low-key reserve and celebrate the coming of spring through public festivities. Similar to the lively and colorful secular Bengali festivals, only a few other Bengali Muslim celebrations exhibit spirit and excess.

Muslim weddings, for example, are supposed to be modest simple affairs, but Muslims in the Indian subcontinent, perhaps responding to their Indic genetic ancestry, and

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1. Comparative Civilizations Review, Vol. 59 [2008], No. 59, Art. 8

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following the example of Hindu neighbors, frequently transform weddings into extravagant and lavish affairs. By Bengali Muslim standards weddings can still be excessive since they are not religious ceremonies but civic ones.

But when a religious event, celebrated by a small number of Bengalis, turns into a spectacle, it gives cause for unease and embarrassment in the mainstream Bengali Muslim consciousness. These religious events, subversive by Muslim standards, center around the tombs of Sufi saints. These celebrations are known as urs—anniversaries of Sufi saints, saints who have attained the status of cult figures. Writing on the subject of saints and tomb visitations, Schimmel notes the ubiquity of saints’ tombs:

The visitor to India and Pakistan is always amazed when he discovers the innumerable shrines, saints’ tombs, and places of pilgrimage, and some authors have rightly remarked that there seems to exist a certain mystical relationship between the people and the saints.24

The veneration of Sufi saints is a highly controversial topic among Muslims. The subversive element is two-fold: first and foremost, monotheistic Islam prohibits the cult of any individual, whether it be of saints or secular leaders. Praying at saints’ tombs and locating the divine at shrines is perceived as unorthodox and heretical. The worship of saints is too uncomfortably close to pagan worship, polytheism, and idolatry.

Secondly, these celebrations may be said to unleash the repressed pre-Islamic pagan spirit in Muslims. The pilgrims at the Sufi shrines express their devotion and fervor through uninhibited music and dance rituals, unparalleled by any other Muslim event in Bangladesh. The ultimate defiance shown towards the Islamic shari’ a law during these celebrations is the liberal use of ganja: cannabis.
Observers and novices who witness these celebrations are struck by the raw animality, vigor and vitality of the devotees. Bengali Muslims, modest by nature, are left feeling uncomfortable and embarrassed by the venting and show of excess energy by their fellow compatriots. As a matter of fact, most mainstream Muslims, Bengali or not, have a conflicted attitude towards the cult of Sufi saints.

On the one hand, these are holy men who are celebrated for their reputation as miracle makers; they have a mass following among common people who flock to their shrines in pursuit of worldly and otherworldly rewards. On the other hand, their disciples elevate them to a cult status only rivaled by rock and movie stars. According to Eaton this is a sign of the fact that Islam not only appropriated the Hindu religion but it also adopted freely from Hinduism.

Sufi saints, who played a key role in the spread of Islam in Bengal in the 11th century, in modern times are perceived to serve as the inspiration of subversive religious activities. The very way in which the Sufi saints have been put on pedestals and regarded as cult-like figures betrays the pagan Indic heritage of Bengali and Indian Muslims.

While a majority of Bengali Muslims truly believe in the healing and miraculous powers of Sufi saints, and earnestly seek the blessings of saints by praying at their shrines, they simultaneously feel contempt for the un-Islamic devotion that the more ardent Sufi followers display.

However, as a rule, non-Sufi Muslims, not wishing to bring attention to the “otherness” of the saints, neither mention nor acknowledge, even to themselves, that the saints belong to the Sufi order. Given the widespread popularity of the saints, this admission, in the mainstream Muslim mind, would lend credence to an order surrounded in controversy.

One aspect of the Bengali/Bangladeshi cultural life that has been profoundly influenced by Sufism is music and poetry.
The folk songs of rural Bengal, known as *baul sangeet*—devotional songs—of which *lalon geeti* is a sub-genre, are the product of the shared Sufi and Hindu heritages.

As the foremost Sufi scholar, Carl W. Ernst, so aptly puts it: “Of all the products of the Sufi tradition, by far the best known and the most appreciated is the legacy of Sufi poetry, together with the music and dance that have accompanied it for hundreds of years.”

In the context of Bangladeshi culture, it is no different: *baul* is a major genre of the rich tradition of Bengali/Bangladeshi music. There is some debate surrounding the origin of *baul geeti*. It is generally accepted among Muslim scholars that *Bauls*, wandering minstrels, who originated in the Indian subcontinent around the 15th century, are descendants of a Persian Sufi order known as *ba‘al*.

*Bauls*, akin to the members of the Sufi *ba‘al* order, reject worldly life and devote their lives to the search of their beloved: their guru, *murshid*, or mentor, singing and wandering like love-struck devotees. Many Hindu scholars maintain that *Bauls* are an ascetic Hindu sect that renounces the material world in search of Brahman. In fact, *Bauls* do not attach too much importance to organized religion.

Their purpose is not to spread a religious message identifiable with any religion, but to promote a worldview that privileges a non-denominational spiritual quest. Iconoclastic and humanist in their orientation, *Bauls* sing of their devotion to their “*moner manush*”: the beloved. *Baul geeti*, reflecting this pursuit for the ideal, tries to free people from the confines of the mundane and the quotidian. *Baul* devotional songs give expression to the quest for the spiritual and the transcendent.

Even though Bangladesh has borne no Sufi poet of the caliber of the Persian Sufi poets Rumi and Hafiz, the name of Lalon Shah (1774-1890), also known as Lalon Fokir
(mystic), resonates deeply with the poetic Bengali sensibility. Lalon was a powerful voice of secularism and nationalism in colonial India who openly opposed the British rule. His opposition to the colonial power and his attempts to unite Hindus and Muslims in a common cause earned him the respect of Bengalis on both sides of the religious divide.

A wandering bard in the tradition of the Bauls, Lalon Shah is the national baul and an enormous presence in rural Bangladesh. Lalon Shah’s mystical songs of love and devotion, while paradoxical, have a simple and direct language. This melding of mysticism and simplicity has made it popular among the uneducated Bengali rural folk.

Today there is a genre in Bengali music that is called lalon geeti: songs of Lalon. Lalon geeti is more philosophical than baul geeti. The appeal of lalon geeti can be ascribed to its promotion of brotherly love, irrespective of one’s religious and ethnic background, or of one’s caste, creed, or gender. In rural Bangladesh, in many villages where Hindus and Muslims live side by side, these songs of Sufi origin help bridge the gap between diverse, and often mutually hostile, religious groups.

In the critically acclaimed film, Matir Moina (The Clay Bird, dir. Tariq Masud, 2005), there are a few scenes where Sufi teachings and philosophy find expression in the songs and poems of simple uneducated village folk. These scenes depict itinerant performers, both male and female, singing Lalon songs and speaking words of love, acceptance of diversity, and of gender equality. These singers of the Sufi inclination seek spiritual freedom.

The imagery of the clay bird (the soul) trapped in its body or a cage (social limitations) is a recurrent theme of lalon and baul songs sung by the wandering minstrels. While challenging other forms of bigotry, baul songs likewise subvert the traditional role of women.
Unlike most other Muslim sects where the role of women is limited, Bauls admit women into their ranks and accept them as their equals. Indeed many baul events, such as melas—traditional fairs—in rural Bangladesh feature women artists whose song and drama routines reflect their progressive outlook on life and self-identity.

Women baul performers, who typically hail from the lower uneducated classes, and who would normally be compelled to accept a traditional gender role, show little regard for religious canon and social norms. Both the female and the male Baul, in the words of Jeanne Openshaw, an anthropologist, “assumed the guise of the bearers of an authentic indigenous heritage, albeit construed in startlingly different ways, as Bengali, Indian, Hindu, Muslim, materialist or secular.” This characterization of Bauls offered by Openshaw speaks to the multifacetedness of the Bengali identity of which Sufism is one significant part.

In modern times, Sufism has been playing a more subversive role in Bangladeshi (Bengali) cultural identity, especially in the arts. Sufi saints, who had once facilitated the dissemination of Islam in Bengal and had helped change the course of history of the region, have left behind a legacy that has now acquired a problematic and dissident quality.

Paradoxically, Sufism affirms Bangladesh’s pre-Islamic roots; the Sufi subtext of present-day Bangladeshi identity and culture, with its very un-Islamic music, dance, and free thinking, celebrates the indigenous Bengali spirit and reaffirms its ties with the Indic past. In its contemporary Bangladeshi manifestations, it has served as an alternative lifestyle, reviving its original role as carrier of Islamic culture and civilization.

Melding indigenous Indic and exogenous Islamic sensibilities, the Sufi influence has helped foster tolerance, cultural diversity, and vitality, infusing the Bangladeshi
brand of Islam with a profoundly celebratory spirit quite unlike the restrained and repressive character more often associated with the Islamic tradition.

This article was originally presented at the 35th World Congress of the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, held in Paris, on July 7, 2006.

NOTES:
3. Ibid., 9.
7. Certain Sufi orders in Turkey and Iran represent a divisive and dark side of Sufism. Driven by fundamentalist fervor, these orders incite violence and aggression instead of promoting mysticism and brotherhood, ideals associated with Sufism. In the Caucasus Sufi orders have long played a militant role against the Russians. On this topic see Moshe Gammer, The Lone Wolf and the Bear: Three Centuries of Chechen Defiance of Russian Rule, (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006).

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