CHAPTER 2

Evolution of Sufism in Assam

2.1 Advent of Muslims to Assam: Pre-Bakhtiyar Khilji Era

Before embarking on Sufism in Assam, it is necessary to have sound knowledge regarding Muslim contact with Assam. Due to a dearth of written history and a paucity of authentic materials, reconstructing Assam's history with the Muslims before the 13th century A.D. is a challenging endeavour. The written history of the area began with the political entry of the Muslims in Bengal in 1204–05 A.D. and their subsequent interactions with Assam. Usually, the history of Muslims in Assam begins around 1204–05 A.D., the year of Mohammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji's Kamrupa campaign. However, because of its strategic location on a key trade route, it is known that the inhabitants of Kamrupa had to have interacted with the Muslim merchants from Arabia and Persia who had been visiting this region for decades before the Afghan invasion in the early thirteenth century A.D.[1] Iran, Afghanistan, and India were all stops along a major tributary of the legendary Silk Route. According to S. L. Baruah, "The southern Silk Road traversed the states of Kamrupa and Manipur en route to Yunan, connecting Iran, Afghanistan, and India."[2] N. N. Acharyya also says that Arab traders used Kamrupa as a trading route to reach China and Tibet.[3] *'Tabakat-i-Nasiri'* further states that horses were transported to Kamrupa and Lakhnauti via 35 passages that connected Assam and Tibet.[4]

Abul-Fazl Ezzati writes that Muhammad al-Hanafiya, the son of Hazrat Ali, the 4th Caliph of Islam, arrived at Arakan, a region located on the western coast of Burma in the Bay of Bengal, in 680 A.D.[5] G. E. Gerini is of the view that the Chinese documented the presence of a Syrian community known as *"Ta-ts'in"* at Sylhet between the years 785 A.D. and 805 A.D.[6] A. S. U'sha claims that between the eighth and tenth centuries, Arab explorers and travellers to India founded some noticeable colonies in the interior town of Shilahat (Sylhet) and the early medieval seaport of Sadjam (Chittagong).[7] Farooque Ahmed, in his book *'Manipuri Muslims: Historical Perspectives (615–2000 CE)',* has mentioned that before Sukapha, the first Ahom king, established the Tai Ahom colony in Upper Assam, Muslims known as *"Turushka"* lived in Assam.[8] The Persian work *'Hudud al-Alam'* by an unidentified author, written in 982 A.D., provides a detailed account of a

kingdom known as *"Qamrun,"* located in the eastern region of Hindustan.[9] This kingdom was characterised by the presence of rhinoceroses and a significant number of gold mines.[10] The *'Buranjis'* also make reference to the abundance of gold remnants along the banks of the Brahmaputra River. The early Arab geographers and merchants, during their eastward journey, frequently mentioned the port of 'Samandar'. Ibn Khordadhbeh, who died in 913 A.D., mentions that Samandar cultivated rice and imported aloe-wood from a distance of 15 to 20 days water-journey from "Qamrun" and other locations.[11] Al-Idrisi, an Arabian writer of the late eleventh century A.D., describes the amazing port of "Samandar" and the province of "Kamrut" in his well-known work *'Kitab Nuzhat Al-Mushtaq Fi'khtiraq Al-Afaq',* mentioning that getting there from the province of 'Kamrut' takes a total of fifteen days facilitated by the navigable river.[12] The terms "Kamrut" and "Qamrun" are the corrupted forms of Kamrup. A. H. Dani says that a meticulous analysis of the depictions of 'Samandar', as provided by Arab geographers, unequivocally establishes its location as a port situated on the eastern coast of Bengal.[13] Being a landlocked country, Kamrup could only reach the sea via the ports of Bengal. Therefore, the exportation of aloe-wood was only possible if it was transported by the Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers to a seaport located at their estuaries. Muhammad Abdur Rahim claims that "the eastern trade of the Arab merchants flourished so much that the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal turned into the Arab lakes."[14]

Arab geographer al-Masudi (d. 956 A.D.) made the first documented reference to Muslims in the Kamrupa-Bengal region, particularly in the old 'Samatata' of the southeast delta.[15] Samatata has been a component of legendary Kamrupa since the reign of King Bhutivarman of ancient Kamrupa.[16] Ibn Batuta talked about Sudkawan and stated that the travel from Sudkawan to the highlands of 'Kamaru' took one month.[17] Moreover, during the excavation conducted at Kutilamura of Mainamati, Kumilla district, Bangladesh, a gold coin belonging to Abbasid Caliph Al-Mustasim Billah (1242 A.D.–1248 A.D.) was unearthed.[18] According to Farooque Ahmed, a Manipuri historian, coins from the Abbasid Caliphate dynasty (750 A.D.–1258 A.D.) were discovered in the southern delta region near Sylhet.[19] The silver coin recovered in Paharpur, Bangladesh, however, is associated with Harun-al-Rashid, the Abbasid Caliph, who reigned from 786 A.D. to 809 A.D.[20] Thus, during the Abbasid period, the offshore Arab trading connection in the Indian Ocean, encompassing eastern India, the Bay of Bengal, and the Kamrupa

kingdom, experienced substantial growth and prosperity. Later on, the Persian traders, who were the forerunners of the Sufi traditions, replaced the Arab traders. Thus, it is apparent from the above discussion that prior to the Muslim invasion of eastern India, Arab traders had already established a presence in Bengal and Assam, thereby introducing a cultural impact that led to the incorporation of Arabic vocabulary into the Assamese and Bengali languages.

2.2 Advent of Muslims to Assam during Delhi and Bengal Sultanate

During the period spanning from the 13th to the 17th centuries, Assam experienced a series of destructive invasions, initially by the Turko-Afghan monarchs of Delhi and Bengal and later by the commanders of the Mughal empire. These invasions laid the groundwork for Muslim settlements in Assam. At the beginning of the thirteenth century, when the Muslims established their sovereignty over Bengal, they also had their first contact with the kingdom of Kamrupa. The kingdom of Kamrupa was the initial focus of the Muslim emperors in the area because of its proximity to the newly formed Muslim rule in Bengal. Fertile soil, deep forests teeming with valuable wild animals, particularly elephants, aromatic plants and syrups, silk, musk, ivory, gold, silver, etc. all added fuel to their political ambitions in the kingdom. Throughout the pre-Mughal era, the Muslim rulers of Bengal maintained a frosty relationship with the Koch, Kamata, and Kamrupa kingdoms. However, a change in this approach, resulting in the introduction of several stages of well-planned actions, did not become apparent until the Mughal era.

Here, it is necessary to discuss the incidents of Mohammadan invasions of Assam that took place during different eras in order to make the study relevant. According to the accounts of *'Tabakat-i-Nasiri',* Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji, a Turkish general, embarked upon his Kamrupa expedition in 1205 A.D.[21] The same source states that Ali Mech, the leader of the indigenous Mech tribe, converted to Islam during this expedition and joined Bakhtiyar Khilji in his invasion.[22] The conquest of Bakhtiyar Khilji ultimately ended in failure.[23] The rock inscription in north Guwahati is the sole indigenous evidence that offers information regarding this unsuccessful mission.[24] As per the accounts of *'Riazu-s-Salatin',* the rule of Bakhtiyar Khilji over Bengal lasted for twelve years.[25] But the invasion of Bakhtiyar Khilji had far-reaching consequences for the region. Bakhtiyar Khilji and his commanders established mosques, seminaries, and *khanqahs* in Lakhnauti

and other areas of Bengal to transform the acquired territory into a prominent cultural hub in Muslim eastern India, according to Minhaz-us Siraj.[26] With reference to this, S. A. A. Rizvi states that the identities of the scholars and Sufis who oversaw the educational institutions and spiritual centres established by Bakhtiyar Khilji in Lakhnauti are not documented; however, it is established that the area attracted many renowned scholars and Sufis, some of whom settled in Bengal permanently.[27] Anowar Hussain states in his article *'Islam and Assam: A Socio-Cultural Study in Historical Perspective'* that it is likely that some Sufi saints came to lower Assam to propagate Islam during the period of Bakhtiyar Khilji's invasion.[28] Some of his soldiers never returned and stayed in this region, gradually adapting to the local culture. Subsequently, the Kamrupa king granted them settlements, marking the commencement of Muslim presence in Assam.[29] Regarding the impact of Bakhtiyar Khilji's invasion, J. N. Sarkar correctly remarked, "It inaugurated a new age for Bengal. Politically, it planted the seeds of Muslim rule there. Socially it opened her gates to immigrant foreigners from the entire Muslim world and thereby affected her society and culture."[30]

The next invasion of Kamrupa took place in 1227 A.D., under Ghiyasudin Iwaz Khilji.[31] This invasion was insignificant in medieval Assam history. In the year 1256–57 A.D., Malik Ikhtiyaruddin Uzbek Tughril Khan sent another expedition to Kamrupa and acquired control of the city of Kamrupa.[32] He initiated the Friday congregational prayers and the recitation of the *khutba* (sermon) in Kamrupa.[33] However, his victory did not last long, and ultimately, he met his demise at the hands of the Kamrupa ruler. The conquest holds considerable significance in terms of the dissemination and advancement of Islam within the region. The next campaign to Kamrupa was undertaken under the leadership of Sultan Ghiyasuddin during the period of 1321 A.D. to 1322 A.D.[34] Numerous coins struck by Sultan Ghiyasuddin in 1321 A.D. have been found in the Koch Behar region of North Bengal, the Rupaibari area of Nagaon in the Assam valley, the Mymensingh district of modern-day Bangladesh, and other locations.[35] According to *'Kamrupar Buranji',* Sultan Ghiyasuddin briefly ruled the Kamrupa region, and the headquarters of his government were situated on the Garudachal Hill in Hajo, which is situated on the northern bank of the Brahmaputra River.[36]

The Bengal Sultan Sikandar Shah (1357–89 A.D.) launched a new assault on Kamrupa in 1357 A.D.[37] The coins he struck from his base of operations in Kamrupa

appear to support this.[38] However, limited information is available concerning the operation owing to a dearth of sources. The subsequent Sultan of Bengal, Rukunuddin Barbak Shah (1459–74 A.D.), also sent forces to Kamrupa around the year 1460 A.D. Shah Ismail Ghazi, a military commander and a Sufi, led this operation.[39] The attack was led by Sufi Ismail Ghazi because the Sultan believed the sorcery in this area might cause failure. He defeated the Kamrupa ruler and forced him to pay tribute to the Sultan. Due to this victory, the Sufi concept spread throughout this area. In 1498 A.D., one of the most crucial expeditions in Bengal history was initiated by Sultan Alauddin Husain Shah (1493 A.D.–1519 A.D.). In the memorial inscriptions in English Bazar, Malda, and Ghoraghat, the Sultan himself detailed his victory over Kamata and Kamrupa.[40] The conclusive annexation of the Bhuyanship of Kamrupa up to Hajo took place around the year 1502 A.D., during which he minted coins proclaiming his conquest of 'Kamru' and 'Kamtah'.[41] According to numismatic evidence, Husain Shah maintained his authority over Kamrupa until the year 1518 A.D., as indicated by the inscription on the coins, which referred to Husain Shah as the "conqueror of Kamru and Kamtah."[42] It was the first time the Bengal Sultanate tried to annex the Kamrupa or Kamata Kingdom. During this era of Muslim colonisation, a substantial number of Muslims were finally able to find a permanent home in the Kamrupa and Goalpara districts.[43] Turbak, a Muslim general, led an expedition to Assam in April 1532 A.D. The armies of Turbak and the Ahoms clashed again and again, and ultimately, the conflicts resulted in the deaths of Turbak and Husain Khan, one of his generals.[44] On the hill of Charaideo, the severed heads of Turbak and Husain Khan were laid to rest.[45] Many Muslim soldiers were captured during the conflicts. Later, they were released and given various occupations, such as cultivating crops and providing grass for the royal elephants, under the Ahom dynasty.[46] Sulaiman Karrani, Sultan of Bengal, sent his commander Kalapahar to invade Assam in the mid-16th century A.D.; however, he failed to establish any permanent foothold.[47] Many Kamrupa temples and images, particularly the ones of Kamakhya and Hajo, are said to have been destroyed by him.[48] This was the final Muslim offensive before the Mughals.

2.3 Advent of Muslims to Assam during the Mughal Era

Akbar was the first Mughal emperor who occupied Bengal between 1574 A.D. and 1576 A.D. Daud Khan Karrani succumbed to the Mughals in the battle of Rajhmahal

in July 1576 A.D., and his downfall set the stage for the Mughal dominance in Bengal.[49] It was the first time the Mughals had come into direct and close contact with the kings of north-eastern India. After serving as a neutral intermediary for a while, the Koch kingdom eventually collapsed under its own internal woes. Then the Mughal aggressive ambition posed a direct danger to the frontier of the Ahoms. Mukarram Khan, the ruler of the eastern Koch kingdom, dispatched Sayyid Abu Bakr, Sayyid Hakim, and Satrajit during the first Mughal invasion of Assam in 1614 AD.[50] They ultimately met with heavy losses in a battle near the Bharali River.[51] In the time of Mughal emperor Shah Jahan, the governor of Bengal, Islam Khan, sent Shaikh Mahiuddin, Muhammad Caliph Kambu, Sayyid Zainul Abidin, and a number of other imperial *mansabdars* to oust Satrajit, the *Thanadar* of Pandu, who had joined the forces of Darrang Raja Bali Narayan.[52] Following a severe defeat incurred by the invaders in 1636 A.D., Allah Yar Khan sent in additional reinforcements from Jahangir Nagar.[53] After being apprehended, Satrajit was brought to Dacca and put to death. After a protracted war, the invaders drove the Ahoms out of Koch-Hajo. In 1639 A.D., the frontiers of Assam and Bengal were determined pursuant to a treaty negotiated between Allah Yar Khan and Momai Tamuli Barbarua. Gauhati was given to the Mughals, and their administrative offices in Hajo were relocated to Gauhati.[54] It appears that the second wave of Muslim immigration into the western area of Assam reached its zenith under the Mughal administration of the Koch-Hajo region.

On January 4, 1662 A.D., Mir Jumla departed Koch Behar with a vast army and a huge flotilla of boats and sailed up the Brahmaputra River.[55] Contemporary scholars hold divergent views about the purpose of Mir Jumla's expedition to Assam. According to Francois Bernier, Mir Jumla was assigned the task of subjugating the kingdoms of Assam and Arakan, as well as apprehending the escaped prince Shah Shuja, who had sought sanctuary in the court of the Arakan king.[56] As per the narratives of Niccolao Manucci, Aurangzeb wanted to eliminate Mir Jumla with this proposed expedition. Manucci states, "It was the common belief that Aurangzeb ordered him into Assam that he might be got rid of, dreading that, as he had thrown the kingdom of Golkonda into confusion, and had known how to arrange for the conquest of Dara and the destruction of Shivaji, he might likewise attempt to his devices to place someone else on the Mughal throne."[57] Mir Jumla overcame every opposition on land and sea put up by the Ahom king Jyadhwaj Singha, and finally Jyadhwaj Singha escaped to Namrup. Mir Jumla then

entered Ghargaon, the Ahom capital, uncontested. He gained an infinite treasure. But, due to adverse circumstances, Mir Jumla was finally compelled to forge a pact, and thus the treaty of Ghilazharighat was signed on January 23, 1663 A.D., declaring that the Ahom and Mughal domains were to be separated by the Bharali and Kalang rivers, among other provisions.[58] The conquest of Mir Jumla has significant ramifications for the Muslim settlement in medieval Assam. A few Sufi saints are also reported to have accompanied the invasion of Mir Jumla, who did not go back and eventually stayed here permanently, spreading their ideology here. The *Buranjis* also record testimony of conversions committed during this voyage. John Peter Wade states in his book *'An Account of Assam'* that Mir Jumla compelled the priest of the Dergaon temple to adopt the Islamic faith.[59] Durga Prasad Sanyal states that Mir Jumla was the Mughal leader who compelled the *Rajbangsis* to embrace Islam.[60]

Again, early in 1668 A.D., Aurangzeb gave Raja Ram Singha the task of recapturing the lost territory in Assam. The Ahom-Mughal frontier was once again embroiled in conflict, which lasted until 1671 A.D. with differing outcomes for both sides. In the famous 'Battle of Saraighat', Lachit Barphukan, an Ahom general, ultimately defeated Ram Singha, and the river Manas was fixed as the boundary between the Mughals and the Ahoms.[61] The 'Battle of Saraighat' holds significant historical importance in the context of medieval Assam. The Ahoms achieved a significant milestone by successfully ousting the Mughals from western Assam. The five *pirs* of Dhubri are known to have accompanied the forces of Ram Singha during this invasion.[62] Again, in 1679 A.D., Nawab Mansur Khan was sent by Azamtara to take over Kamrupa and Gauhati, and for over three years, he served as *Fauzadar* there. Mansur Khan and his soldiers were ultimately vanquished by the end of 1682 A.D., following multiple conflicts at Itakhuli and Gauhati.[63] The Battle of Itakhuli marked the final confrontation between the Ahoms and the Mughals. Since then, the river Manas had served as the western boundary of Assam,[64] a status that remained unchanged until the end of the Ahom rule in 1826 A.D. An apparent outcome of the Muslim incursions and recurrent conflicts, lasting for around 479 years between the Muslim forces and the monarchs of Assam was the progressive increase of the Muslim community and gradual development of Sufi doctrines in Assam.

2.4 Import of Muslim Artisans and Learned Men by the Ahom Rulers

Due to its political isolation from the mainland of India, the Ahom monarchs imported a vast number of Muslim artisans and expert men and recruited them to positions across the government during the medieval period. This may be termed as the state-sponsored migration of certain specialised Muslims. For instance, the Ahom ruler Suhungmung (1497 A.D.–1539 A.D.) brought the manufacturers of golden thread *(gunakar/gunakotia)* and tailors *(beji siya)* here.[65] They were offered the opportunity to permanently settle in the country and given all the necessary facilities. In the words of W. W. Hunter, "The Muhammadans are said to have been originally introduced into Assam by one of the native Rajas, who imported a colony of them from Bengal in order to teach his people their arts and industries. They are now called by the people Garias, on account of their having been originally brought from Gaur or Bengal."[66] The officials, known as *"Khaunds"* and *"Bairagis,"* were established by Ahom monarch Rudra Singha with the mission of travelling to significant locations in mainstream India and returning with novel ideas that were subsequently implemented in Assam.[67] Under the rule of Rudra Singha, who reigned from 1696 A.D. to 1714 A.D., it is said that eight Muslim families migrated to Assam, each bringing their own vocations and skills. They were subsequently employed in various roles. They included: a) *Parsi Parhiya* (Persian transcribers); b) *Akharkatiya* (royal engravers); c) *Khanikar* (masons and artisans); d) *Silakutiya* (stone engraver); e) *Gunakatiya* (makers of gold and silver thread); f) *Negeriya* (player of negeri); g) *Dorji* (tailor); and h) *Jolah* (weaver).[68] In addition to the aforesaid Muslim families, there were many Muslim professional groups who were hired and employed by the Ahom monarchs based on their abilities and expertise. The organisations in which they were employed included *Kharghariya, Senchoya, Jalmbata, Rajmistri Khel,* and others. The Muslims associated with these organisations worked mostly in occupations, such as wood-carving, needle-work, engraving, cannon-casting, sword-forging, and other fine arts. Persian legends were imprinted on the coins minted by several Ahom rulers and queens, which were typically overseen by Muslim officers.[69] A. J. M. Mills states that by the mid-nineteenth century A.D., the Ahom court employed 12 *dewans,* 2 Persian readers, 1 *nawab dekah,* and 1 engraver.[70] In addition to becoming scribes, erudite Muslims worked as interpreters and decoders of Persian texts in the Ahom court. M. Martin, in his accounts *'The History, Antiquities, Topography, and Statistics of Eastern India',* states

that “On the whole, however, the Mohammedans seem to be more fitted for the business of the courts than the Hindus, whose views are more directed to the management of the landed estates, which, indeed, in the present state of affairs, is more profitable.”[71]

2.5 Muslim Exodus to Assam during the Colonial Period

The final wave of Muslim immigration to pre-British Assam occurred during the tumultuous period caused by the Moamaria rebellions and Burmese invasions at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries. Most of these immigrants came here as raiders and attackers.[72] Moreover, during the colonial period, the British administration actively promoted immigration to Assam. It was quite probable that there were more arable lands per person in Assam, and the government needed to ensure sustained revenue from these areas.[73] With respect to the wastelands that were available in the Goalpara district, W. W. Hunter noted, “There is great deal of spare land in Goalpara district; and in order to encourage the extension of cultivation, wasteland tenures are easily granted. The lands are leased out to new settlers, and a remission of rent is allowed for two or three years, in order to enable them to make a fair start and to settle conveniently.”[74] Hunter further states that a significant influx of individuals from the adjacent districts of Rangpur and Mymensingh occurred on a regular basis. These people came to collect the plentiful canes and reeds that thrived on the sandbanks, riversides, and various marshes and swamps within the Goalpara district.[75] So, in the early twentieth century A.D., a substantial number of Muslim migrants began moving into Assam, settling first in the undivided district of Goalpara. Based on the census of 1901 A.D., B. C. Allen reported that approximately 28 percent of the overall population in Goalpara district identified themselves as adherents of the Islamic faith.[76] The 1911 A.D. census enumeration marked the first documented record of Muslim farmer-migrants arriving in Goalpara in considerable numbers from eastern Bengal, particularly from the neighbouring Muslim-dominated district of Mymensingh.[77] Regarding the colonization scheme of the British Government in Assam, D. D. Mali says, “The Colonization Scheme for opening out the remote tracts of the province encouraged people from other parts of India to come to Assam. Immigrants came in substantial numbers from Mymensingh and Pabna to Goalpara and Nowgaon.”[78] By 1931 A.D., they had settled much of the unproductive territories of the Brahmaputra valley, resulting in increased agricultural revenue for the

British government. The extension of British control to the north-eastern part of India necessitated a population influx for effective governance during the British era. Under the "Grow More Food" initiative, the Assam government imported skilled Muslim farmers from the East Bengal (now Bangladesh) districts of Mymensingh, Pabna, Bagura, and Rangpur and extended an opportunity for them to permanently relocate to Assam for cultivation purposes.[79] At present, they constitute one-fourth of the region's population due to their extensive distribution and historical roots. It should be noted here that during the colonial period, many Sufi saints from Bengal came to Assam, particularly western Assam, as well.

2.6 Conversion to Islam in Assam

Regarding the conversion of Bengali Muslims, Edward Gait, in his *'Census Report of 1901',* comments, "In spite, however, of the fact that cases of forcible conversion were by no means rare, it seems probable that very many of the ancestors of the Bengal Muhammadans voluntarily gave in their adhesion to Islam."[80] The Muslim-invading army did not engage very much in forcible conversion to Islam in Assam, since their military invasions were characterised by their recurrent setbacks. So far as the conversion of weaker segments of the Hindu society of western Assam is concerned, Francis Buchanan says, "To its poorer votaries, the Mohammedan religion is more favourable, than that of the Brahmanas."[81] Actually, the conversions accomplished by the Sufi saints are responsible for the growth and development of the Muslim communities in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys of Assam. Given that there are a significant number of *dargahs* belonging to Sufi preachers in regions where the presence of Muslims is clearly discernible in both valleys, this indicates that the Sufi saints were responsible for bringing about conversions on several occasions. The process of conversion in Assam was inconspicuous. Contrary to Bengal, there was no widespread adoption of Islam in Assam at any given time, although there were occurrences of substantial conversion in lower Assam. A massive conversion of the Koch people occurred in the eighteenth century A.D., especially in the present-day Dhubri district of western Assam. According to W. W. Hunter, this has significantly decreased the population of Koch.[82] Nevertheless, this was not accomplished through the exertion of forceful coercion. A significant number of today's Muslims in the area are the progeny of indigenous converts who have not

completely forsaken their historical legacy and customs. Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed claims that the conversion seems to have been extensive in lower Assam, which explains why there is a huge concentration of Muslim populations there.[83] According to him, although there were some isolated cases of conversion in Upper Assam, it was never extensive or widespread. Mohammad Taher, a renowned specialist on Muslims in Assam and a former Professor of Geography at Gauhati University, discusses the scenario of conversion to Islam in Assam in the following way:[84]

> "The conversion to Islam did not massively take place in Assam owing to several factors. Mass conversions took place in Bengal and other places where the social divisions were pronounced, where the lower strata of the socially divided and oppressed were exposed to conversion through the initiations by Sufi-saints who had offered an egalitarian alternative, and consequently, sidelined communities accepted Islam to escape from the oppression of the then existing social order. In Assam, there was no such caste division in a severe form capable of playing a decisive role in the process of conversion to Islam. Further, Assam was not ruled by Muslim monarchs, and Nawabs indulged in induced and forced conversion. Whatever conversion had taken place in different parts of Assam could be attributed to the peaceful missionary activities of the Sufi-saints and preachers."

2.7 Advent of Sufism to the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam

The infiltration of Sufism in the medieval Assam was influenced by the constantly changing geo-political and socio-cultural landscapes of India and Bengal. The emergence and diffusion of Sufism in Assam were primarily influenced by the rise of Turko-Afghan and Mughal rule in Bengal during medieval period. The beginning of Sufism in Assam was marked by the Bengal border. The Sufis came to Assam via Bengal. It is a well-established fact that the influx of Sufis from northern India to Bengal commenced in the late 11th century A.D. and continued unabated until the 20th century A.D. Sufism in Bengal was an extension of the tradition prevalent in north India. A tight bond existed between the Sufi saints of Bengal and the north Indian Sufis. Muhammad Enamul Haq states that the Sufi saints from various Sufi hubs in north India dispatched their apprentices to Bengal and the north-eastern region of India.[85] These disciples played a crucial role in diffusing Islam and Sufi mystical teachings in these areas. Mir Sayyid Ashraf Jahangir Simnani, a Sufi scholar, elucidates the influence of Sufis on Bengal in his correspondence with Sultan Ibrahim Sharqi of Jaunpur in the following words: "God

be praised! What a good land is that of Bengal, where numerous saints and ascetics came from many directions and made it their habitation and home."[86]

Shah Sultan Rumi, who settled in Mymensingh and died in 1053 A.D., was the earliest known Sufi saint to come to the region of Bengal.[87] Little is known about his life and times due to a lack of evidence. Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khilji conquered the Bengal region in the year 1204–05 A.D., and he later included it as a province within the Delhi Sultanate.[88] According to Minhaj-us-Siraj, he recognised the Sufis as an informal intellectual group and the *ulama* as the official intellectual group during his reign, and he commissioned the erection of monuments dedicated to them.[89] His support and sponsorship of constructing mosques, madrassas, and *khanqahs* indicate an endorsement of both orthodox Islam and Sufism. Stabilisation of the Bengal Sultanate made Bengal a hub for Islamic missionary work and Sufi activity. The spread of Bengali culture into adjoining areas of Assam coincided with the rise of Sufism there. Consequently, the eastern border of Bengal with the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys of Assam became an important conduit for the spread of Islam and Sufism. Throughout the medieval period, the concentration of Sufis in Assam can be attributed to two distinct places, both of which were adjacent to Bengal. One is Hajo, near Guwahati, while the other is Sylhet. Each of these locations served as prominent commercial hubs and emerged as early epicentres of Sufism in the region of Assam. Mostly the Sufi saints of the *Hanafi* order of Islamic Jurisprudence came to Assam.

In various historical eras, numerous Sufis travelled from all over the world to the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. Some of them returned home, while others remained and wed local women. The Sufis, who made this place their permanent home, began their laudable goal of preaching and promoting Islam. The majority of them arrived here as part of the Muslim invading army, while a small number travelled to the valley with traders, and a few came due to their personal zeal. However, a large number of others were sent here by their spiritual mentors with the explicit purpose of promoting Islam and its teachings. There is a wealth of historical evidence supporting the deeds of the Sufi saints in the valley during the post-Bakhtiyar Khilji period, as well as folklore and traditions that highlight their sageness and supernatural abilities. Hundreds of pilgrims of all faiths continue to visit the tombs of these Sufi saints in Assam, testifying to the existence of genuine missionary activities on the part of these holy people. S. K. Bhuyan

states, "Muslim *maqams* or *dargahs* are scattered in the Assam valley and their maintenance was encouraged by the state as we know from the assignment of the perquisites of a number of *maqams* in Kamrup to Anwar Hazi Faqir, and the custom of despatching annual presents from the court to the Poa-Macca shrine at Hazo."[90] Prominent Sufis of the Brahmaputra valley who settled in this region during the medieval and colonial periods are Hazrat Jalaluddin Tabrezi, Ghiyasuddin Awliya, Khwaja Khizr, Pir Shah Madar, Satya Pir, Deg Dhowa Pir, Panch Pir of Dhubri, Pagal Pir, Hazrat Azan Faqir, Chand Khan, Hazrat Saleh Pir, Hazrat Khandakar Pir, Hazrat Sawal Pir, Nabi Pir, Hazrat Zulqad Ali, Muqaddam Shah, Shah Noor Dewan, Hazrat Abul Qasim Khurasani, Syed Nasiruddin Baghdadi, Syed Asad-ud Daula Shiraji, Maulana Mirza Abdur Rahman Beg, and many more.

In addition, Assam, particularly the Brahmaputra valley, has historically been recognised as a region associated with the esoteric practices of local yogis. Sufism is known to have visited this area in order to acquire knowledge and skills related to mystical rituals. Sufi literature makes mention of *yogic* activities, and Muslim holy persons are said to have travelled to Kamrupa to study *yogic* methods. R. M. Eaton claims that contemporary Muslims saw northern Bengal in general and Kamrupa in particular, which was situated between the Brahmaputra River and the Bhutanese highlands, as a magical and enigmatic region populated by skilled practitioners of yoga, magic, and the occult.[91] Given their particular focus on directly perceiving the ultimate reality without the involvement of religious authorities or secular establishments, it is natural that Sufis were particularly drawn to the *yogi* traditions of Kamrupa. During the initial ten years of the Turkish invasion, Arabic and Persian versions of a Sanskrit text on tantric yoga called *"Amrita Kunda"* (the Pool of Nectar) of Kamrupa started to circulate throughout the delta region. The news of Ali Mardan Khilji's conquest of Bengal and establishment of Muslim authority (1210–13 A.D.) caught the ears of a respected educated gentleman in Kamrupa, which led to the popularisation of this book among the Muslims.

The work *"Amrita Kunda"* had a profound influence on the efficacy of *yogic* spiritual techniques. The authorship of this Sanskrit work can be attributed to Makama, a Brahmin Yogi from Kamrupa.[92] This gentleman was an expert in the practice of yoga.[93] The man eventually visited Rukunuddin Samarqandi, the Qazi of Lakhnauti, and thereafter converted to Islam. It is believed that the Qazi translated the book into Arabic

and Persian for the first time. While the original manuscript of the Sanskrit text has vanished, there are translations in Persian and Arabic with the titles *"Hawd al-Hayat"* (Pool of Nectar) and *"Bahr al-Hayat"* (Ocean of Life). It is not just a book about *yogic* techniques but also a genuine synthesis of *yogic* and Sufi thought. One of the early Sufi figures from northern India who acquired knowledge of *'Amrita Kunda'* was Shaykh Abdul Quddus of Gangoh (d. 1537 A.D.), who subsequently imparted this knowledge to his pupils.[94] Afterwards, *'Amrita Kunda'* gained widespread circulation throughout mystic communities in India and beyond. The profound interest in the esoteric traditions of Kamrupa facilitated a convergence between the Sufi saints and the erudite individuals of pre-colonial Assam, thus initiating an age characterised by reciprocal comprehension and admiration. Regarding the dwelling place of the Muslim saints in Kamrupa at that time, F. A. Qadri says it is quite probable that they chose a site along a creek at the bottom of the south-eastern incline of the Nilachal Hills, also known as the Kamakhya Hills.[95] In both Sufi groups of north India and Southeast Asia, it is widely believed that Kamrupa contained a clandestine site of worship that was frequented by medieval Muslim Sufi saints who ventured to the region. In the Indian context, the *Sattari silsilah* was largely impacted by *yogic* influences. The strong interest of the *Sattari* community in the *yogic* rituals of Kamrupa is evident from the widespread popularity of the book among their circles. R. M. Eaton has mentioned that Shaykh Muhammad Ghaus, a biographer of the *Sattari* Sufi saints of the early seventeenth century A.D., travelled from Gwalior to Kamrupa, further highlighting their obsession with the *yogic* practices of this place.[96]

2.8 Emergence of Sufism in the Barak Valley and Sylhet

The Barak valley, characterised by its geographical isolation from the Brahmaputra valley or mainland Assam, comprises the present districts of Cachar, Hailakandi, and Karimganj. The Sufi saints had access to the territory of Barak valley as well. Historically, a considerable number of Sufis arrived in this region and dedicated themselves to their pursuits. Several local historians, including Sayed Murtaza Ali, have come to the assumption that the arrival of small-scale Arabian and Persian merchants in Sylhet during the eighth and twelfth centuries may have marked the beginning of Muslim communities in the area. E. A. Gait, in his *'Report on the Census of Assam, 1891',* states that Sylhet was a constituent of Assam throughout the medieval era and held the position

of the second-biggest town in Assam, following Gauhati.[97] It served as the capital of the country with the same name during the reign of the Hindu monarchs, the last of whom was Gaur Govind. Gaur Govind was overthrown in the fourteenth century A.D. by Hazrat Shah Jalal and his *darveshes.*[98] The Muslim conquest of Sylhet in the early 14th century A.D. is attributed to two individuals: Sikandar Khan, who was dispatched by Bengal Sultan Shamsuddin Firuz Shah, and Shah Jalal, a warrior-saint. The work, titled *'Suhail-i-Yaman',* describes the events leading up to the conquest of Sylhet. An inscription once affixed to a building in Sylhet and currently preserved at Dhaka University further substantiates the occupation of Sylhet.[99] According to Sayed Murtaza Ali, it wasn't until Shah Jalal arrived in Sylhet that the act of Islamization and universal conversion began.[100] In the words of Ali Haidar Laskar, both Hazrat Shah Jalal and his disciples arrived in the Barak valley around the 14th century A.D., resulting in a significant surge in religious conversions.[101] Both Sylhet and Bengal at that point had a class-based society where those at the bottom were targets of abuse and humiliation. Many people in Sylhet and the Barak valley converted to Islam after hearing Hazrat Shah Jalal's preaching about a more just and egalitarian Islamic society. The Gazetteer Report states that the tombs of the 360 companions of Shah Jalal are scattered throughout Sylhet and its surrounding regions.[102] B. C. Allen noted:[103]

> "The town of Sylhet is full of memorials of its Muhammadan conquerors. On every side are to be seen mosques, the majority of which are still in excellent repair, and are attended by a concourse of devout worshippers. But, even more numerous than the mosques, are the large brick tombs of the Muhammadan saints, each with a little masonry receptacle for a native lamp, or else with a bamboo lamp post of the most modern pattern, standing at its side. These tombs are to be seen in every quarter of the town. There is hardly a road which has nor one or more along it, hardly a hill which has not the bones of saints upon its summit."

A considerable number of prominent Muslims from Sylhet and its environs, especially Cachar Plain, assert their ancestry from the disciples of Hazrat Shah Jalal.[104] Legend has it that Hazrat Shah Jalal traversed the Barak valley accompanied by no less than 360 trusted associates,[105] including Shah Badar Uddin, Shah Sikandar, Shah Adam Khaki, Shah Abdul Malik, Shah Zia Uddin, Mirul Arifin, Shah Natawan, Shah Paran, and others. A list of 42 disciples of Hazrat Shah Jalal has been provided in the work *'Sufi*

Movements in Eastern India'.[106] Hazrat Shah Jalal assigned his close companions and disciples to different areas of the Barak valley with the purpose of spreading Islam and the doctrine of Sufism. This is historically substantiated by the unearthing of several *dargahs* belonging to these renowned saints in different places of the Barak valley and the Sylhet region. Moreover, in this valley, numerous places, schools, and madrassas have been named in honour of Hazrat Shah Jalal and his disciples. This unequivocally demonstrates that the arrival of Shah Jalal and his adherents at the beginning of the fourteenth century A.D. gave Muslim colonisation and Sufism a fresh lease of life. Other prominent Sufi saints of the valley are Shah Muhammad Yaqub Badarpuri, Khwaja Shaykh Tamizuddin, Talib Hussain, Hazrat Alqum Shah, Shitalang Shah, Mahmud Ali Chishti, Baqar Shah, Shah Hatim Ali, Amjad Ali Naqshbandi-Mujaddadi, Ashraf Shah, Khwaja Aftabuddin, Maulana Mohsin Ali Mujaddadi-Naqshbandi, Maulana Mahmud Ali, Syed Shah Musharraf Ali Qudumi, Syed Ahmed Shahid, etc. Moreover, Maulana Abdul Jalil Choudhury and Maulana Ahmad Ali were renowned Sufi saints of the Barak valley in the recent past. As a result of their enlightened bearing, many locals are believed to have embraced Islam. Even today, their *dargahs*, which are dispersed throughout the Barak valley, are well-known as spiritual centres. Numerous people of all faiths and creeds visit these *dargahs* in search of spiritual consolation.

2.9 Different Stages of Sufism in Assam

Throughout the long history of Sufism, spanning from the 13th to the 20th centuries, many changes occurred in the evolution and character of Sufism in Assam. Tania Begum, in her doctoral thesis titled *'Sufism in Medieval Assam',* has divided the development of Sufism in Assam into three phases, and according to her, the initial phase continued from the 12th century A.D. to the 14th century A.D.[107] She is of the opinion that western Assam, including Koch Behar, Gauhati, and Hajo, as well as Goalpara and southern Assam, covering Sylhet, Cachar, Hailakandi, and Karimganj, were the only areas in the state where the Sufi movement was active during this period. In this stage, the prevalence of north Indian intellectual discourse overshadowed the Sufi theological perspectives of Bengal and Assam. Their arrival in Assam is barely documented during this stage, and their missionary activities are almost unknown. However, it can be presumed from the accounts of some hagiographies of north India that the early Sufi saints

of Assam were the disciples of prominent Sufis of north India, and they undoubtedly contributed to the dissemination of Sufism in Assam. The earlier Sufi saints of Assam did not possess a completely mystical nature. Several of them engaged in missionary initiatives with a military character. Saints such as Hazrat Shah Jalal, Ghiyasuddin Awliya, and Ismail Ghazi used military force to subjugate the area and establish their political dominance. They were preoccupied with political engagement and worked hard at the conversion, taking advantage of the caste system in Hindu society to further their objectives.

The second phase commenced upon the finalisation of the consolidation of Sufism in Bengal, which resulted in the replacement of its connection with north India. This phase spanned from the 14th to the 18th centuries. During this period, the recurrent incursions by the Bengal invaders into Assam led to the emergence of a group of Muslims as well as Sufi saints in this area. Rather than retreating, the Sufi saints chose to establish themselves here and strived to integrate their convictions with indigenous customs. Their strong association with the Assamese community resulted in the evolution of numerous adjustments in the Sufi doctrines and culture. A new indigenous identity emerged within the Sufi tradition, which also became closely associated with the Neo-Vaishnavite movement in the Assam and Bengal regions. They also developed relationships with the ruling Ahoms and Koches of the time, which laid the groundwork for their syncretic nature. As time progressed, the impact of the indigenous culture of the Bengali and Assamese communities began to gain prominence within the Sufi system. The Sufi movement was firmly established during this period throughout the entire state of Assam. At this time, a distinctly Assamese brand of Sufism emerged. Tania Begum has termed this brand of Sufism as the Assamese variant of "Popular Islam," which incorporated aspects of Hinduism, Buddhism, and tantric cults.[108] In this period, the aggressive attitude of the early Sufis transformed into a syncretic force and a missionary character. Their inclination towards embracing the native customs and traditions ensured their firm position within the Assamese community.

During the third phase, there was a noticeable decrease in the prominence of the Sufi heritage both in Assam and throughout India. This phase was a period of reformation within Sufism. In the 19th and 20th centuries, several Islamic reform movements emerged, such as the *Wahabi* movement, *Faraizi* movement, *Taiyuni* movement, *Ahl-e-Hadith*

movement, *Deobandi* movement, *Aligarh* movement, *Tabliqi Jamaat* movement, *Jamaat-i-Islami* movement, and others. These movements advocated for a more authentic expression of the religion by removing non-Islamic elements that were previously prevalent among Muslims. The influence of these puritan groups had a significant impact on Sufism in Assam. As a result, the *Naqshbandi-Mujaddadi* Sufi order, known for its somewhat orthodox stance, gained influence in Assam.

2.10 Spread of Different Sufi Orders in Assam

The study of the lives and deeds of the Sufi saints of Assam reveals that they belonged to different Sufi *silsilahs* or orders and promoted the ideology of their order in Assam. Although these *silsilahs* were mainly the offshoots of north Indian Sufism, yet numerous Sufi sub-orders also emerged as an interaction with local culture. Still, there were a large number of Sufis in Assam who could not be ascribed to any *silsilah* or order. It seems that they were wandering *faqirs* who eventually established themselves in Assam and spread Islamic mysticism. The notable Sufi orders in Assam are as follows:

2.10.1 *Suhrawardi* order

Suhrawardi silsilah was the maiden order established in Assam. The credit for introducing this Sufi order to eastern India, including Assam, goes to Shaykh Jalaluddin Tabrezi. He was a highly esteemed mystic of Bengal and western Assam in the 13th century A.D. According to the description in *'Memoirs of Gaur and Pandua',* Jalaluddin Tabrezi made his *astana* in the Malda district of West Bengal, close to Devotala, near Pandua.[109] Over time, his fame in Bengal grew to such an extent that Devotala was officially renamed Tabrizabad. From that location, he would dispatch missionary endeavours to the adjacent regions. He himself occasionally used to journey to these locations and construct *khanqahs* here and there. The *dargah* of Garigaon in Guwahati is thought by some people to be the burial place of Shaykh Jalaluddin Tabrezi. The second Sufi of this lineage to travel to Bengal was Sayyid Jalal-bin Ahmed Kabir, also referred to as *'Makhdum Jahaniya'*. Shah Jalal Mujarrad was the next important Sufi of the *Suhrawardi* order of Bengal. He had a pivotal role in the dissemination of Sufi ideology and the fostering of Islam in Bengal, as well as in significant portions of Assam that share a border with Bengal, particularly in the western and southern regions of Assam. His

profound impact on society is still seen through the enduring remembrance of his legacy by the people in various forms, such as prayer, ballads, and indigenous folk lyrics. He can rightly be regarded as the principal architect of the foundation of Sufism in eastern India and Assam. He and his disciples are considered to be the first Sufi saints of the region. In the subsequent centuries, numerous other Sufi saints belonging to the *Suhrawardi* order propagated Sufi principles in Assam.

2.10.2 *Chishti* order

The *Chishti* order also exhibited its presence over the entirety of Bengal, as well as the frontiers of Assam. Sayyid Shah Abdullah Kirmani, a *murid* and successor of Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti, established the *Chishti* order in the western part of Bengal.[110] The *Khustigiri Dargah Sharif* in Birbhum, West Bengal, known as his *khanqah*, is still a well-liked destination for tourism among Muslims and Hindus alike. Shaykh Fariduddin Shakrganj, the spiritual successor of Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki, who passed away in 1269 A.D., was another *Chishti* Sufi to visit the eastern part of Bengal.[111] He selected the Assam-bordering region of eastern Bengal as the focus of his operations during that time. There are various locations in eastern Bengal that claim to hold his antiquities, but no evidence has been found to substantiate this claim. However, local legends, songs, and landmarks all attest to his widespread fame.[112] The people of western Assam and eastern Bengal knew him as *"Shaykh Farid."* Shaykh Akhi Sirajuddin Uthman, a disciple and successor of Shaykh Nizamuddin Awliya, was a well-known Sufi of the *Chishti* order in Bengal. The renowned *Chishti* Sufi Nizamuddin Awliya dispatched some of his pupils to Assam to spread Islam, but we have no records of their presence, lives, or deeds. The liberal mindset of the later *Chishti* Sufis that evolved in Assam shared many traits with the early *Chishtis* of Delhi. These Sufi saints were able to attract a sizable following in Bengal and the western and southern regions of Assam. Another Sufi, namely Syed Raushan Ali Chishti, also known as *'Boga Baba'* of Dibrugarh, belonged to this *silsilah.* Moreover, Syed Asad-ud Daulah Shiraji of the Basbari area of Goalpara district, Hazrat Abdul Bari Chishti of Nichintapur, Noakhali, Bangladesh, his disciple Hazrat Abdur Rezzak al-Chishti of Dharmakam, Sherpur, formerly Bogura district of Bangladesh, and Hazrat Shah Mehboob Alom al-Chishti of Burdwan, West Bengal, are known to have

spread the *Chishti* ideology of Sufism in the western part of Assam during the colonial period. Mahmud Ali Chishti disseminated Sufi ideology in the Barak valley of Assam.[113]

2.10.3 *Madari* Order

Another significant order that made its way to Bengal and Assam is the *Madari* order. According to Ananda Bhattacharya, Bahauddin Shah-i-Madar (1315 A.D.–1436 A.D.), the progenitor of this spiritual lineage, migrated to India from Syria at the time of Sultan Firoz Shah Tughlaq.[114] After arriving in India, he first travelled to Ajmer, where presumably the soul of Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti gave him guidance on his future endeavours. From there, he proceeded to Makanpur, located near Kanpur, where he passed away in the year 1485 A.D. Muhammad Enamul Haq claims that the tradition that has survived in many local customs of Bengal is evidence that the saint possibly once travelled there.[115] The *Madari* order gained popularity in Bengal through the efforts of Shah Ala and Shah Sultan Hussain Muriyah, who were devotees of Shah-i-Madar. Places such as Rajshahi, Bogura, Sherpur, Paharpur, and Basta close to Dacca in Bangladesh all have numerous *khanqahs* or shrines dedicated to Shah Madar. The abundance of these memorials dedicated to him demonstrates his widespread recognition. Khan Chowdhury Amanatullah Ahmad is of the view that the Sufi Shah Madar might have also headed to the Kamrupa kingdom.[116] In modern-day Assam, the districts of Goalpara, Kamrup, and Cachar are home to a large number of devotees who practice the *Madari* order.[117] It was stipulated in the deeds of land granted to Anwar Faqir of Sivasagar that the revenues from the four *maqams* of Shah Madar be divided equally among the followers.[118] It demonstrates the influence of Shah Madar in Assam. This Sufi order has highly distinct features. Due to their unconventional viewpoint and rejection of *shariah* rules, they were associated with the *'be-shara'* factions of Sufis.[119] The impact of Hindu yogis is highly obvious in this particular segment of Sufism. They adopted the practice of smoking *bhang* (hemp), used to smear ashes all over their bodies, and wore chains with skeletons on them around their waists.[120]

2.10.4 *Qadiri* Order

The *Qadiri* sect was introduced to Bengal by Hazrat Shah Qamis, a descendent of Abdul Qadir Jilani, the founder of this order.[121] Shah Qamis established his residence in

Salar (Salurah), located in the Murshidabad district of West Bengal. He recruited several disciples and assigned them to various regions of the country, including Assam, to propagate their beliefs. According to *'Tadhkirah-i-Awliya-i-Hind',* the people who followed him were referred to as *"Qamisiya" darveshes.*[122] The disciples of Diwan Abdur Rashid of Jaunpur also founded *Qadiri* centres throughout Bengal.[123] While the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (1658 A.D.–1707 A.D.) was in power, the *Qadiri* order rose to prominence in Bengal and northern India. In the seventeenth century A.D., Mir Sayyid Muhammad of Rajmahal was the most prominent figure of the *Qadiri* Sufi order in Bengal. He was later succeeded by Shah Nimatullah, who died in 1666–67 A.D. His numerous disciples subsequently spread the *Qadiri* Sufi order throughout Bengal. Among the later *Qadiri* Sufis of Bengal are Hazrat Raushan Ali al-Qadiri, Hazrat Zakir Ali, Tufail Ali al-Qadiri, Sayyid Shah Meher Ali al-Qadiri, Hazrat Murshid Ali al-Qadiri, Sayyid Shah Ershad Ali al-Qadiri, etc. It is highly likely that the above-mentioned *Qadiri* Sufis of Bengal had their influence in Assam, particularly in the Assam-Bengal adjoining areas. One of the renowned Sufis belonging to this order was Syed Nasiruddin Baghdadi of the Goalpara district of Assam. He came to India from Baghdad, the origin of the *Qadiri silsilah*, at the end of the 19th century A.D.

2.10.5 *Naqshbandi* Order

The *Naqshbandi* school was brought to Bengal by Shaykh Hamid Danishmand, who was both a disciple and spiritual successor of Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi.[124] This order was a latecomer to the province of Assam. During the 20th century A.D., the *'Furfura Sharif'* of Hooghly, established by Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiqui, acted as the centre of the *Naqshbandi* order in eastern India. It is well known that numerous Sufis associated with *'Furfura Sharif'* visited the western portion of Assam to propagate their ideology at the time of British rule. During the later part of the Mughal rule and particularly during the colonial period, a large number of Sufi saints belonging to this order, such as Hazrat Abul Qasim Khurasani, Hazrat Amzad Ali, Hazrat Mohsin Ali, Maulana Ruhul Amin, Shah Muhammad Ekramul Haq, Hazrat Ezadullah Shah, etc., penetrated to Assam and propagated their Sufi doctrines. This *silsilah* was more orthodox in its nature and emphasised the purification of Islam and Sufism.

2.11 Prominent *Dargahs* of Assam

The Sufi saints who stayed here permanently ultimately died in this holy land of Assam. Their disciples subsequently erected tombs over their graves, which are known as *dargahs* or *mazaars.* These places are considered sacred locations and are believed to have spiritual blessings by the common populace. They are scattered throughout the whole Brahmaputra and Barak valleys of Assam. Abu Nasar Saied Ahmed, in his recently published book *'Islamic Heritage in India's Northeast: Assam and Manipur',* claims that Assam has more than one hundred *dargahs*, which are located in all the districts except the hilly districts of Karbi Anglong and Dima Hasao.[125] People belonging to different castes, creeds, religions, etc. frequently visit these holy shrines. The impact of such Islamic shrines on society is immense. Ibrahim Ali, in his doctoral thesis titled *'Perso-Arab Relations with Assam and Their Impact on Assamese Language',* has provided the following list of the prominent *dargahs* of Assam:[126]

Sl. No.	Name of Dargah	Place	District
1	Powa Makkah Dargah of Ghiyasuddin Awliya	Hajo	Kamrup Rural
2	Garigaon Dargah	Garigaon, Guwahati	Kamrup Metro
3	Sijubari Dargah	Sijubari, Guwahati	Kamrup Metro
4	Dargah of Zahir Shah Awliya	Ulubari, Guwahati	Kamrup Metro
5	Dargah of Shahnur Dewan	Bhella	Barpeta
6	Pirpara Than	Mirza Pahar	Kamrup Rural
7	Hasimabad Dargah	Hasimabad	Kamrup Rural
8	Dargah of Minauddin Pir	Dhamdhama	Kamrup Rural
9	Dargah of Panjatan or Dakaidal	Dakaidal	Goalpara
10	Dargah of Deg Dhowa	Deg Dhowa	Goalpara

11	Dargah of Pagal Pir	Patpara	Goalpara
12	Pagla Babar Mazaar	Dohela	Goalpara
13	Dargah of Abul Qasim Khurasani	Goalpara town	Goalpara
14	Dargah of Nasiruddin Baghdadi	Jaleshwar	Goalpara
15	Dargah of Panch Pir	Dhubri Town	Dhubri
16	Mazaar of Boga Baba	Dibrugarh Railway Station	Dibrugarh
17	Japi Sajia Mazaar	Japi Sajia	Lakhimpur
18	Mazaar of Khandokar Pir	Khandokar Para	Sivasagar
19	Dargah of Azan Pir	Saraghuri Chapori	Sivasagar
20	Dargah of Nabi or Saleh Pir	Simaluguri	Sivasagar
21	Dargah of Bandor Pir	Ririya	Sivasagar
22	Dargah of Lashkar Shah	Golaghat town	Golaghat
23	Dargah of Lai Faqir	Golaghat town	Golaghat
24	Dargah of Kala Faqir	Kachari Hat	Golaghat
25	Dargah of Panch Pir	Katlichara	Hailakandi
26	Dargah of Mirar Shringar	Hailakandi	Hailakandi
27	Dargah of Shah Kamal	Mahendraganj, West Garo Hills	West Garo Hills, Meghalaya
28	Dargah of Shah Sarpin	Gomaghat	Khasi-Jayantia Hills

The existence of numerous *dargahs* in Assam is evidence of explicit missionary initiatives. Saying that Sufi saints had settled in every town and village would hardly be considered an overstatement. One cannot downplay the importance of the *dargahs* in the spread of Islam in Assam. Of all the *dargahs* mentioned above, the ones that attract the greatest number of visitors and worshippers are: the *dargah* of Azan Pir in Sivasagar; the Powa Makkah or the *dargah* of Ghiyasuddin Awliya in Hajo; the *dargah* of Boga Baba in Dibrugarh; and the *dargah* of Panch Pir in Dhubri. The Ahom rulers granted territory to the *dargahs* and *mazaars* because they held the Muslim saints in great respect. Over time, rapid urbanisation and a variety of other factors have resulted in the destruction of a great number of smaller *dargahs*. They have either been abandoned or marginalised, to the point that the present generation is unaware of their existence. Further, many of the *dargahs* that have stood for generations are crumbling, and the powerful currents of rivers like the Brahmaputra and the Barak have slowly washed away many of them.

2.12 Other Muslim Theologians

In a few instances, the Sufi saints were also associated with the royal court. In addition to the Hindu priests, the Ahom court also had numerous Muslim religious scholars. Their job was to offer prayers for the well-being of their sponsor. During his stay in Assam from 1792 A.D. to 1794 A.D., John Peter Wade made the following comments:[127]

> "A Mussleman of the name of Newas was gooroo-general of his persuasion in Assam, from about the time of Roodur Singha. He had numerous attendants dressed in the high Mussleman dress. He resided at or near the capital and frequented the durbar; and the Swargeedeos used to dispatch him to pray at Hadjoo after the Mussleman fashion for their prosperity. He was usually succeeded by his nearest relations… He was indulged with the privilege of riding on horseback, but not in a palki-dollah. Three or four priests always remained in attendance at the place. The moment the king came forth to take the air, they called down the blessing of God on him with elevated hands. Whenever the Surgee sent this man to perform pooja for him at Mokam Hadjoo, he always sent considerable presents to the temple, but they had no regular establishment from the kings."

Moreover, a select group of Muslim *Gosains* were known to have lived in the Jorhat sub-division of the Sivasagar district at the close of the Ahom era. Similar to the

heads of Vaishnava monasteries in medieval Assam, these people were responsible for a wide range of tasks. *"Dewan"* was one name for them, but their local names were either derived from where they lived or from the name of the saint whose descendants were called *"Deka."*[128] Some of the Muslim spiritual leaders who were known as *"Gariya Gosains"* were Akan Deka of the Holonga Pariya line; Aol Deka of the Bakir Pariya Gosain family; and Dewan Deka of the Sakhhoa Dewan family. It is thought that the people known as *"Holonga Pariya"* were descendants of one of Azan Faqir's three sons. Regarding the social status of these personages, E. A. Gait writes:[129]

> "These Musalman Goseins have their own Satras or establishments of resident disciples (Bhagat), who, however, are not bound to celibacy. They collect their tribute from non-resident disciples by means of village officers of their own, called gaonburas, each of whom is assisted by a barik, or peon. The gaonbura is appointed by investiture with a turban at the hands of the Gosein. He receives no direct emoluments, but is entitled to the highest place at village entertainments on the occasion of religious festivals, weddings, funerals, etc."

From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that the Muslims migrated to Assam in different historical periods for various reasons. This resulted in the gradual establishment and growth of the Muslim community in Assam. It is also evident that numerous Sufi saints thrived in both the Brahmaputra and Barak basins of Assam during the entire period under investigation. They played a pivotal role in spreading Islam all over Assam, and because of their crucial endeavours, the religion became deeply ingrained in the hearts and minds of the people of Assam. Religion was spread, mysticism and divine love were encouraged, and the intellectual and moral growth of the natives was aided by the spiritual personalities of these Sufis. The Sufi saints were the primary conduits through which Islam exerted its cultural or religious impact on Assam. The areas of western and southern Assam, which were conquered and governed by the Muslims for a few years, became the bastions of the Muslim people and growth of Sufism. Thus, the appearance of Sufism was the one that had the biggest impact on the dissemination of Islam and Sufism in the far-flung regions of Assam.

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