CHAPTER 4

Influence and Impact of Sufism on the Society of Undivided Goalpara District

Sufism is a well-known spiritual tradition in Islam. It has greatly aided in the spiritual development of countless people, both inside and outside of the Muslim world. In the modern era, Sufism is a topic of extensive discussion and contention due to its wide range of cultural practices. In India, Sufi saints played a major role in advancing secular society through the integration of culture and religion. In the sphere of religion and culture, Sufis were inclined to reject the pervasive orthodoxy and its customs. Sufi culture left its imprint on the land of Assam as well. The societal and cultural fabric of Assam was profoundly impacted by the Islamic culture introduced by the Sufi saints. Regarding the importance of Sufism in Assam, Mohd. Assad Uz Zaman mentions in his doctoral thesis, "The presence of Sufism in Assam holds significant importance in the religious history of Islam, with its profound impact on the religious, socio-political, and cultural aspects of this region."[1] Sufism, thus, exerted a profound impact on both rural and urban areas, shaping the political, cultural, and social landscape of the general population of Assam. Being an integral part of Assam, the undivided Goalpara district has had profound effects from Sufism, which have contributed to spiritual progression, cultural amalgamation, philanthropic endeavours, and communal cohesion. The influence and impact of Sufism on the society of the undivided Goalpara district of Assam have been highlighted under the following headings:

4.1 Sufism and Islamization

The majority of Muslims in the Indian subcontinent turned to Islam due to the influence of the Sufis. The Sufi saints achieved significant success in converting a considerable number of people from many tribes and communities to the Islamic faith. Prior to the arrival of the Sufis, nearly all the local populace in Bengal was Hindu and, to a lesser extent, Buddhist, but their ethical and moral decay was at its height. There was a great deal of inequality in society. The low-caste Hindus, who were reviled and condemned by a handful of upper castes and a large population of aborigines who had not fully embraced Hinduism, welcomed the Muslim missionaries enthusiastically.[2] Jagadish

Narayan Sarkar claims that when the Buddhists of the Pala period were persecuted by the Brahmanical renaissance of the Sena period, they viewed the Muslim conquerors as gods sent to safeguard them.[3] The universal brotherhood preached by Sufis in both theory and practice was able to satiate the spiritual needs of the oppressed masses. The Islamic doctrine of monotheism and social equality was a revelation to the poor aboriginals of eastern and deltaic Bengal, such as fishermen, hunters, peasants, and the untouchables, who had been rejected and abandoned by the caste-bound Brahmanical Hindu society. As a result, they were enamoured with the moral teachings and lives of learned and spiritually enlightened Sufi saints. Despite the fact that many Sufis might not be operating with a definite objective of conversion, their closeness to non-Muslim traditions allowed them to play an essential role in conversion and Islamization. In eastern Bengal, Sufism contributed to the massive expansion of Islam by introducing a more elevated conception of God and a more virtuous ideal of human brotherhood. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee says, "The masses who are the descendants of the Bodos pure or mixed in North Bengal and East Bengal- in Rangpur, Bogra, Maimansingh, Comilla and Sylhet- are now largely Mohammadan in religious affiliation. This preponderance of the adherents of Islam over those of Hinduism is not very old- it is rather recent; yet it started with the 13th century."[4]

The same is also true for Bengal's neighbouring areas of western Assam. In his account of *'Census of India, 1891 (Assam)',* Edward A. Gait noted that the native converts of western Assam also descended from lower caste and indigenous tribes, just like those of eastern Bengal.[5] Although the caste system in the study area was somewhat less severe compared to other regions during medieval times, it is important to acknowledge the historical reality of hierarchical oppression in society. According to Amalendu De, the migration of Sufis to Assam was made possible by the presence of numerous Sufi centres in Bengal.[6] Conversion and Islamization in this area of Assam are connected to the proselytising activities of some Sufis, such as Jalaluddin Tabrezi, Hazrat Shah Jalal, Shah Ismail Ghazi, Panch Pir of Dhubri, Keramat Ali Jaunpuri, Abu Bakr Siddiqui, Abul Qasim Khurasani, Nasiruddin Baghdadi, Syed Asad-ud Daula Shiraji, and many more. Today, several *khanqahs* and *dargahs* bearing the name of Jalaluddin Tabrezi have been discovered in undivided Bengal and north-eastern India. One is at Deg Dhowa in Goalpara, and the other is at Garigaon in Guwahati (Plate-24), both of which are in western Assam. This evidence suggests that he devoted his life to carrying out missionary

work to spread Islam in the nearby areas. Moreover, the missionary work of the Sufis in the area was bolstered by the supportive stance of local authorities, who provided donations in the form of revenue-free lands, incentives, and grants for the upkeep of their sanctuaries and other associated entities. Therefore, in the undivided Goalpara area of Assam, Sufism has played a vital role in the propagation of Islam and the growth of Muslim society.

4.2 Sufism and Religious Syncretism

With the spread of Islam outside the Arab countries, the rigid and meticulously defined faith of the Semitic Arabs underwent significant alteration. Like every other missionary belief system, Islam was also compelled to adapt its beliefs and practices to the local cultural milieu in order to survive. According to Aziz Ahmad, in addition to the generally prescribed Islamic laws, Sufism incorporated aspects that had been picked up from the local surroundings.[7] Local customs and circumstances heavily impacted and fused the Sufis as well as the neo-converts. Aziz Ahmad says that the converts, who brought these cultural norms with them into their new faith, were among the primary forces behind the growth of these ideals.[8] At some point, Muslim communities began to emerge whose members legally proclaimed Islam but nonetheless upheld many of their own regional traditions and customs, drawing the wrath of Islamic puritanical reformists in subsequent periods. According to R. M. Eaton, the Bengali villagers who converted to Islam did not drastically depart from the past. There was no unique "conversion" event, and it would seem incorrect to refer to Hindus as having been converted to Islam.[9] Jagadish Narayan Sarkar also echoes the same when he says that the Hindus and Muslims in Bengal had extensive and protracted interactions during Muslim rule, leading to the development of shared objects of worship. Many times, when people from one community were sick, hungry, or going through personal problems, they would make a visit to the saints and gods of the opposite community.[10] As per the accounts of James Wise:[11]

> "In no other country have the Muhammadans embodied so many infidel rites and customs with their own creed as in India, ... perhaps, the causes that corrupted the Hindu religion, namely, contact with alien and despised races, each having a peculiar culture of its own, isolation from the cradle and centre of its authority, and the paucity of numbers as compared with the millions of unbelievers around them,

> also tended in the case of the Muhammadans to produce greater liberality of feeling and more sympathy for the sentiments and religious observances of the aboriginal races. The local gods, the gods whom men sought after in times of trouble and sickness, were too near and dear to the in most heart of the Hindu convert to be abolished without substitutes. It was much easier to give them an anthropomorphous form and to replace them by saints endowed with equal powers and with spirits of as easy access to the worshipers."

The Muslims in the study area were no exception to this. The social activity of Sufi mystics in the study area served as a conduit for the conversion and adoption of indigenous customs. It is highly possible that the thoughts, beliefs, and practices of the Muslim people of western Assam came to find a home in Sufism. Indeed, the societal past of the Muslims of all categories in the area provides an example of how Islam has been formulated locally. In Assam, the tendency towards Muslim conversion is closely related to the idea of the vernacularisation of Islam. Shihabuddin Talish, who traversed the area in the mid-seventeenth century A.D., claims that the early Muslim settlers of Assam were so influenced by the locals that they stopped practising Islam altogether, except for their names.[12] Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that their immediate surroundings had a significant impact on these Muslims of Assam. Within the social sphere, Islam and Muslims adjusted to one another on different levels with the surrounding community, leading to syncretistic practices and beliefs. The social structure, life-cycle ceremonies, celebrations, beliefs, and behavioural patterns, collectively referred to as practical religion, reflected many of these regional features. These encompassed a wide range of beliefs, such as the practice of sorcery and magic to treat phenomena like evil eye and spirit possession, the belief in the curative powers of Muslim saints as demonstrated by the veneration of *dargahs*, and so on. A great deal of this kind of practice persists to this day. The Muslims in general and the Sufi saints in particular brought their cuisine, arts, and practices with them, but they had to adapt these to the local environment.[13] As a direct consequence of all these, a kind of syncretic culture has developed in this region. Thus, a new version of Islam, commonly referred to as 'popular Islam', has emerged here.

4.3 Sufism and the Expansion of Muslim Power

Several Sufi saints collaborated with the Muslim monarchs and generals to extend their political frontiers in Bengal and Assam. By banding together with Sultan

Shamsuddin Firoz Shah, Hazrat Shah Jalal and his allies defeated the Hindu monarch of Sylhet and established Muslim dominance in the area. The importance of Shah Ismail Ghazi to the growth of Sultan Rukunuddin Barbak Shah's authority is widely recognised. He effectively waged war against the Hindu kingdoms of Orissa and Kamrupa. There are numerous other accounts about how Sufi saints contributed to the spread of Muslim influence in western Assam and Bengal. These early Sufis were recognised as martial saints. It is probable that some Sufis collaborated with the Sultans to strengthen Muslim power because they thought that fighting for Islam amounted to *'jihad',* or holy war. The inclusion of Sufi saints in the Muslim army resulted in a significant boost to the morale and spiritual well-being of the soldiers. Without the discreet efforts of the Sufi saints, the ability of Muslim rulers to manage a diverse population of several religions with few military forces would have been challenging. The Sufi saints enhanced the moral authority of Islam by enlisting followers, thereby providing the Muslim state with a sense of duty and influence within a non-Muslim country. However, there are examples of a substantial number of Sufi saints who had nothing to do with contemporary politics, and thus they provide information of the opposite kind.

4.4 Sufi Nexus with Contemporary Political Authority

There existed either a direct or indirect relationship between the Sufi saints and the state authority. There are several instances of kings and nobility asking the Sufis for spiritual blessings, along with the general public. The elites of society saw their financial and material support for Sufi institutions such as *khanqahs* and *dargahs* as an act of devotion to God. It was largely with the accession of Rudra Singha (1696 A.D.–1714 A.D.) to the Ahom throne that the Sufis, their shrines, and other Islamic institutions started receiving particular treatment and attention from the Ahom monarchy. Inscriptions on copper plates left by some of the descendants of Rudra Singha reveal that the Ahom monarchs established Muslim *'Satras'* and awarded revenue-free land to numerous *dargahs* and *khanqahs.*[14] J. P. Wade noted the presence of Muslim *'Satras'* in Guwahati, as well as the Ahom capital of Rangpur.[15] S. K. Bhuyan mentions the dispersed Muslim *maqams* and *dargahs,* as well as their state patronage in the Assam valley, in his book *'Annales of the Delhi Badshahate'.*[16] He further says that the Ahom kings granted *'pirpal'* lands to the Muslim *pirs* and theologians for their sustenance.[17] Between 1558

A.D. and 1639 A.D., the Mughals were in charge of Kamrupa, and they began work on upgrading the mosques, *khanqahs,* and temples.[18]

With regard to the Sufi saints and shrines in the study area, both the Bengal Sultanate and the Mughal emperors had a strong tie. As discussed above, a certain number of Sufi saints worked together with the Bengal Sultans to consolidate their political authority. In this scenario, the cooperation of Hazrat Shah Jalal, Shah Ismail Ghazi, and Ghiyasuddin Awliya might be considered as an example. They were able to obtain all their assistance from their royal adherents. In the words of Jagadish Narayan Sarkar, land grants through *'waqf'* (endowment) for the upkeep of *dargahs* all over eastern Bengal became very common during the Mughal period, and today also the descendants of *"mutawallis"* (those who take care of *dargahs*) of those *dargahs* continue to enjoy rent-free lands.[19] Regarding Jalaluddin Tabrezi's relationship with the state apparatus, Tania Begum, in her article, *'The Sufis and the Political Authorities in Medieval Assam: A Historical Study',* mentions that it is unknown as to how he interacted with the local authorities; nevertheless, given his tremendous influence over the region, it appears that the local authorities must have favoured him during that time.[20] Furthermore, the *astana* of Jalaluddin Tabrezi at Pandua was very close to the capital of the Bengal Sultans. As discussed in the previous chapter, Mughal emperor Aurangzeb sent the five *pirs* of Dhubri to accompany the Mughal forces on their expedition to Assam.

There is ample evidence of land grants to the Sufi saints in the study area. The zamindar of Karaibari donated Baklai Mauza to Sufi Shah Kamal.[21] The Deg Dhowa *dargah* was also awarded a land grant in the form of *pirpal* by the royal authority. However, following the demise of the *pir,* the local Mechpara zamindar took possession and control of the *pirpal* property.[22] As per the accounts of *'Pavitra Asam',* Shah Alom, the Mughal emperor of Delhi, engaged the *khadim* in the Panjatan *dargah* of Dakaidal, a few kilometres south-east of Goalpara town. The *khadim* was also provided with 1002.7 bighas of land by the Badshah for the subsistence of the *dargah.*[23] According to a government document, the *dargah* of *Pagal Pir* at Dhupdhara, located at the easternmost corner of Goalpara district, was granted 630 bighas of *pirpal* land for its maintenance.[24] It is also known that the Mechpara zamindar donated a sizable amount of land just in front of present-day Goalpara College to Abul Qasim Khurasani for his shelter as well as for his meditation.[25] During the twentieth century A.D., British authorities also awarded

similar endowments to other Sufi saints of the erstwhile Goalpara district. The most well-known of them is Syed Nasiruddin Baghdadi, who established his headquarters at Jaleshwar in west Goalpara. The zamindar of Lakhipur granted Nasiruddin Baghdadi 800 bighas of land with the intention of building a *khanqah* there.[26] Another instance of such an incident is that the contemporary Lakhipur zamindar also granted the *khanqah* of Asad-ud Daula Shiraji, situated in the Basbari area of western Goalpara, a revenue-free land of approximately fourteen bighas.[27] Even so, it is known that the zamindar would occasionally visit his *khanqah*, seeking his blessing. The *dargah* of Dohela was also granted about 10 bighas of land by the then king of Bijni estate, and the present *khadim* of this *dargah* is still enjoying this vast tract of land.[28] Thus, the kings, their nobility, and other officials patronised and preserved the Sufi saints and their *khanqahs* in this manner. On their part, the Sufi saints also continued to maintain amicable relations with the local authorities and gratefully accepted funding for their advancement. However, many of them stayed out of politics and always opted to work in fields unrelated to politics.

4.5 Impact of Sufi *Khanqahs* and *Dargahs*

A *khanqah* is a structure constructed especially for assemblies of religious instruction and spiritual rehearsal imparted by a Sufi saint. The establishment of *khanqahs* by Sufi saints served as pivotal institutions for the dissemination of religious teachings to their disciples and adherents. The *khanqahs* were also well-known for their humanitarian activities. Food and shelter were provided free of charge to the travellers, mendicants, and beggars. Many Sufi saints built *khanqahs* in different parts of the study area. These included the Pakhritari (Basbari) *khanqah* by Syed Asad-ud Daula Shiraji, the Kherupara *khanqah* by Hazrat Ezadullah Shah, the Bilaspur *khanqah* by Mehboob Ali Chishti, and the Kathalbari *astana* under the Dudhnoi Legislative Assembly Constituency by Hazrat Abdul Bari Chishti. However, there are no traces of these *khanqahs* at the moment, except the Pakhritari *khanqah.* The *khanqah* of Jaleshwar, established by Syed Nasiruddin Baghdadi, was equipped with a spacious *langar khana (*community kitchen), where meals at no cost were offered to visitors, including non-Muslims.[29] Even today, lots of visitors avail all these facilities in the *khanqah* of Jaleshwar. Sufis were regarded as spiritual doctors who treated both mental and bodily diseases by spiritual means like giving amulets *(tawiz),* putting hands on the sick, and breathing on the body.[30] People visited the

khanqahs to ask for these favours and amulets to protect themselves from harm. According to Jagadish Narayan Sarkar, the majority of Indian Muslims believed in the effectiveness of prayers to saints around the beginning of the nineteenth century A.D.[31] *Khanqahs,* thus, have served as a significant centre of cultural exchange.

When the Sufis passed away, shrines were built over their graves, which are known as *dargahs.* Either the Sufi saints themselves used to build up the shrines during their life time, or their disciples afterwards transformed their burial sites into shrines. The *dargahs* of the Sufis are regarded as sanctuaries on earth, where people fulfil their desires and find solace. The devotees believe that the soul of the saint is actually present in the graves, and it hears the requesters, and that it will appeal on their behalf to the Almighty Allah. B. C. Allen observed that even some Hindus had a strong conviction that the *dargah* of Hajo near Guwahati had divine abilities and could fend off bad luck.[32] So, to achieve inner and outer aspirations, such as to assure childbirth, recover from a terminal disease, prevent calamity, succeed in a particular endeavour, etc., *ziyarats* (visits to the Sufi shrines) are undertaken, along with prayers of supplication *(dua)* in the graves. In an effort to ensure fertility, downtrodden women frequently perform sacrifices, burn incense, and tie bricks to trees at almost all the *dargah*s of the undivided Goalpara district of Assam. Even today, many Hindus flock to the *dargahs* in order to seek the blessings of the Sufis, who believe in the magical and heavenly power at work at Sufi shrines. According to Jagadish Narayan Sarkar, Muslim pilgrims visiting *dargahs*, similar to their Hindu counterparts visiting Jagannath and Brindavan, are motivated by religious aptitude, the fulfilment of pledges, or the pursuit of worldly aspirations.[33] It is still customary to honour the Sufis at *dargah* by presenting them with a variety of items, including sheets, candles, *dhoop,* incense, sweets, *payash*, pigeons, cocks, goats, rice, fruits, and more, along with a bouquet of flowers, thereby demonstrating an apparent resemblance to Hindu ceremonies. The commemoration of *'urs',* or the death anniversary of the saints, is the most significant event in every *dargah.* The duration of *urs* varies from *dargah* to *dargah*, and in some cases, the programme lasts for three, four, or even a week. Some *urs* events are only celebrated locally, while others, like those at Jaleshwar and Deg Dhowa *dargahs*, draw thousands of people each year from all walks of life and religious backgrounds from far and wide. During the *urs*, a fair-like event is organised when all the stall owners, regardless of caste or faith, take part in selling their products. As a result, these *dargahs*

function as important pilgrimage sites as well as cultural centres and they are revered by both Hindus and Muslims. This religious reconciliation has ultimately resulted in a more tolerant environment in society.

4.6 Sufi Saints and their Literary Compositions

Several Sufi saints in the study area were both scholars and prolific writers. A few of the saints wrote poems and *ghazals*, in addition to writing numerous books on diverse themes, which definitely expanded the corpus of Bengali and Assamese literature and culture. In the mid-nineteenth century A.D., Sufi Zulqad Ali wrote *"Tarikhul-Haq-Fi-Bayan-e-Noor-ul-Haq,"* meaning *'the path of truth in the description of the light of truth',* or commonly known as the *"Satyar Path."*[34] It was written in Assamese and Arabic scripts. The book is an important source for understanding the development and evolution of Assamese prose literature. Syed Nasiruddin Baghdadi of Jaleshwar was another brilliant and knowledgeable person who wrote poetry in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. He authored a novel, namely "*Ash'ar-e-Haqaiq,"* which is a great demonstration of his brilliance.[35] He was an avid reader and subscriber to newspapers such as *"Al-Ahrar"* in Arabic from Egypt, *"Al-Jamiyat"* and *"Jaminder"* in Urdu from Delhi, *"Hanifi," "Basumati," "Ananda Bazar Patrika"* in Bengali from Calcutta, and *"Arunodoi"* in Assamese from Guwahati.[36] In addition, he would compose poetry and *ghazals* in Persian and Urdu, which led to him being nicknamed *"Mazhar."*[37] Asad-ud Daula Shiraji of the Basbari area wrote many books, among which the most important one is *"Amader Tapashya"* (Our Penance), written in Bengali.

Sufi Abdur Rahman Firuzi was a prolific writer, linguist, philosophical poet, and editor of the weekly magazine *"Biswa-Dut"*[38] (Plate-25). This magazine was published in Assamese and Bengali. He himself was the editor, publisher, and proprietor of the magazine. It was probably the first magazine that the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, published from western Assam. The annual report of the *'Registrar of Newspapers for India',* published by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, released from New Delhi in 1957 A.D., mentioned *"Biswa-Dut,"* a bilingual journal. The Assamese version was supplied to the Assamese readership, while the Bengali version was supplied to the Bengali-speaking readership in Assam, West Bengal, and various states of India. Moreover, he has authored 43 books on

different subjects, both in Bengali, Urdu, and Assamese languages. A few of them have been published, and the majority of them are in manuscript form. Prominent among them are: *"গোৱালপাৰা জিলাৰ ভূগোল" (Geography of Goalpara District), "অসমত মিৰজুমলাৰ স্মৃতি" (Memories of Mirjumla in Assam), "আধুনিক ফটো বিজ্ঞান" (Modern Photo Science), "গাৰো বুলি" (Garo Buli), "মেঘৰ দেশ শ্বিলং, ভ্রমণ কাহিনী)" (Land of Clouds, Shillong: Travel Story), "হাজো পোৱামোক্কা তীর্থ ভ্রমণ কাহিনী" (Hajo Powa Mecca Pilgrimage Story), "মহাযুদ্ধৰ চিত্র" (Picture of the Great War), "আমপাৰাৰ কাব্য অনুবাদ" (Poetic Translation of Ampara), "বিদ্রোহী" (Rebel), "কবিতা কুঞ্জ" (Poetry Kunj), "আদমৰ কথা" (Adam's Story), "তুৰ পাহাৰৰ জ্যোতি" (Light of Mount Tur), "ইছলামৰ মাত" (Voice of Islam), "হজৰত নূহৰ জাহাজ" (Ark of Hazrat Noah), "ৰূহানী তদবীৰ" (Spiritual Care), "উর্দু শিক্ষা" (Urdu Education), "আৰকানে ইছলাম" (Arkane Islam), "এলমে নুহু" (Elme Nuhu), "দেওয়ান-ই-হাফিজ" (Dewan-e-Hafiz), "তৰুণেৰ স্বপ্ন" (Dream of the Youths), "প্রেম মাদুল" (Prem Madul), "প্রেম দুলালেৰ চিঠি" (Letter of Prem Dulal), "খোলা চিঠি" (Open Letter), "সম্মোহন বিদ্যাশিক্ষা" (Hypnosis Education), "তাপশ" (Tapas), "মৰুৰ দুলাল" (Darling of Desert), "সাধনাৰ পথ" (Way of Worship), "খেয়ালি মনেৰ খেয়াল" (Careful Mind), "হোমিও ভেষজ ৰত্নাকৰ" (Homoeo Herbal Gems), ট্রপিকেল ফিভাৰ" (Tropical Fever), "মাশুকেৰ দৰবাৰ" (Mashuk's Court), "ব্যাথাৰ ডাইৰী" (Diary of Pain), "আগুনেৰ খিৰকা" (Fire Crack), "নাৰী কলঙ্কিনী" (Stigmatized Women)*, etc.[39]

Abul Qasim Khurasani of Goalpara town is reportedly known to have composed a few monographs, but unfortunately, these are not extant.[40] Hazrat Yunus Ali Enayetpuri, along with Maulana Makim Uddin, wrote two volumes on *Sharia* and Sufism, titled *"Shariyater Alo"* (The Light of *Sharia*) and *"Ganje Asrar"* (The Treasure of Divine Secrets).[41] Abu Bakr Siddiqui of *Furfura Sharif* produced, published, and distributed Islamic literature, including books, pamphlets, journals, newspapers, and other materials in the local language, particularly Bengali, which were invaluable assets for the Muslim population in Bengal and the Bengali-speaking people of Assam. According to reports, he oversaw and provided funding for the publication of over two thousand books written by diverse authors from Bengal and Assam.[42] The literary creations of Maulana Ruhul Amin are one-of-a-kind, unparalleled, and breathtaking. Ruhul Amin authored a total of ninety-five books covering multiple topics of Islam, with the majority of them being written in the Bengali language.[43] According to another narrative, he wrote 135 books in

Bengali, of which 118 have been published so far.[44] He also wrote several well-known books in Urdu. One of his significant literary works, published in 1935 A.D. in Bengali, is *'Banga O Assamer Pir Awliya Kahini'* (Tales of the Sufi saints of Bengal and Assam). This work is a notable contribution to the historical understanding of Sufism in Bengal and Assam. Other prominent books authored by him are: "ইসলাম ও বিজ্ঞান" (Islam and Science), "তরিকত দর্পণ" *(Tariqat Darpan),* "পীর ও মুরিদি তত্ত্ব" (Pir and Muridi Theory), "হযরত বড় পীর" *(Hazrat Bara Pir),* etc. There are still copies of some of these works available for purchase in the market, which have enlightened the readers. The Sufi saints generally first wrote in Arabic, then in Persian, and subsequently in a variety of indigenous and regional languages. This was done to introduce the locals to the fundamental principles of Sufi doctrine. As a result of these writings, many Assamese and Bengali authors and poets took pride in their use of Islamic terminology. Not only terminology but also Islamic concepts and themes have taken a place in Assamese and Bengali literature.

4.7 Impact of Sufism on Education

The Sufi saints were crucial to the growth of society in terms of education. They dedicated their lives to the dissemination of Islamic knowledge, including the education of the Quran, *Hadith, Fiqh,* Sufism, and other related subjects. Moreover, in order to become a *khalifa,* or successor of a saint in a Sufi organisation, learning traditional as well as religious knowledge was crucial. As a result, a large crowd of followers continued to congregate with practically every saint so that they could meet the necessary prerequisite of gaining an education. According to Syed Abdul Malik, in addition to becoming the embodiment of self-purification, the Sufi saints attempted to educate the populace about Sufi doctrines and methods.[45] John Peter Wade states that there were twelve madrassas near Guwahati and twenty near Rangpur, the capital of the Ahom kingdom, particularly under the rule of Rajeswar Singha.[46] L. Das, in his book *'Education in Assam',* mentions that Muslim conquerors and spiritual luminaries such as *pirs, faqirs,* and *awliyas,* among others, made a significant contribution to the spread of Arabic by building mosques, *khanqahs,* and *dargahs.*[47] Sultan Hussain Shah of Gauda, who ruled this region of Assam from 1502 A.D. to 1519 AD., is known to have built a medieval mosque in Rangamati, which is located in present-day Dhubri district.[48] However, B. C. Allen writes differently about the construction of this mosque, saying, "At Rangamati,

about six miles north-east of Gauripur town, there is a mosque that is said to have been built in 1687 A.D."[49] The Mughal general Mir Jumla, who was in Assam between 1661 A.D. and 1663 A.D., is credited with constructing another historic mosque in the Mankachar locality. These mosques had *maktabs* (primary schools) attached to them for the preliminary Islamic knowledge of the students, where Muslim youngsters received instruction in Islamic and other disciplines, with the *Imam* and *Muazzin* serving as their instructors.

The old Goalpara district of Assam owes a great deal to the educational achievements of the Sufi saints and the centres they founded centuries ago. They built *maktabs* and madrassas next to their *khanqahs*. These institutions of the Sufi saints evolved into hubs for learning, wisdom, and information. The *"Mazharul Uloom Madrassa,"* established at Katarihara of Goalpara district in the year 1927 A.D. by the Sufi mystic Syed Nasiruddin Baghdadi, was one of the more well-known madrassas of this region.[50] Now, it has been converted into M.E. and High Schools, respectively, by the Assam government (Plate-26). During its initial period of establishment, the pupils who came to the madrassa for instruction even received free accommodation and food from him.[51] Furthermore, the Sufi would award scholarships to deserving pupils from all backgrounds, Muslims and non-Muslims, and send them to other institutions for higher learning**.**[52] Through the dissemination of Islamic and modern education, he eradicated the darkness of ignorance from the locality. Sufi Abdul Qadir *Naqshbandi* established Asharikandi M.E. Madrassa and Jhaler Algha M.E. Madrassa in the Dhubri district during the 1950s.[53] Hatipota M.E. Madrassa of Dhubri district was also established by Sufi Abdul Barik Chishti in 1961 A.D.[54] Hazrat Shah Mehboob Alom al-Chishti established Bilaspur Manchuriya M.E. Madrassa in Chirang district in the year 1982 A.D.[55] The Assam government has recently converted all of these madrassas into schools. It is believed that Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, a Sufi-cum-political activist, founded over 33 educational institutions in different areas of lower Assam.[56] A place in close proximity to Jamadarhat, a region of present-day Dhubri district, has been designated as Hamidabad in honour of Abdul Hamid Khan. In 1941 A.D., he set up a Higher Secondary School at Hamidabad (Plate-27). Subsequently, a college was established in this area in 1979 A.D. in his honour. In the 1950s, there was no female education in the west Goalpara area. Therefore, Sufi Abdur Rahman Firuzi established an Assamese medium school named

"Rakhaldubi Girls' Middle School" on his ancestral property at Rakhaldubi in 1957 A.D. in consultation with the local educated people for the purpose of promoting women's education[57] (Plate-28). Pir Abu Bakr Siddiqui of *Furfura Sharif* established numerous educational institutions in Bengal and different areas of lower Assam.[58] After completing his spiritual training, Shah Muhammad Ekramul Haq also worked hard to spread modern education in North Bengal and the western part of Assam.[59] Thus, it can be concluded that the Sufi saints in the undivided Goalpara district of Assam played an important role in the spread of education and culture throughout the area.

4.8 Impact of Sufism on Agriculture

The Sufi saints and their *khanqahs*, or *astanas*, played an important role in the economy of the former Goalpara district. According to R. M. Eaton, when Islam spread among the semi-nomadic tribes of East Bengal, they were brought under the influence of religious, political, and economic spheres through the *khanqahs.* In this process, the state and Sufis helped each other. While the state had no desire to convert them to a particular religion, it did want to bring these tribes into the folds of the state machinery and establish its political and economic influence over them. So, the state gave economic grants to religious persons by assigning revenue-free land for establishing *khanqahs* and their maintenance. In due course, these *khanqahs* were visited by both the tribals and the downtrodden, and they turned out to be the centres of their cultural activities. Thus, according to R. M. Eaton, two developments took place simultaneously. First, these people became sedentary or *raiyati* (cultivators), thereby making the area full of human habitation; second, they came into the fold of Islam.[60]

Muslims of the East Bengal lineage of the former Goalpara district were skilled farmers and diligent workers who quickly converted arid, epidemic-prone, and jungle territory into a thriving green agricultural area, thereby greatly supporting Assam's contemporary agricultural sector. They had pioneered the practice of growing many crops simultaneously, as well as the commercial production of different crops. The growth of cash crops had revived the sluggish agricultural industry and brought about a dramatic transformation in the agricultural system of the undivided Goalpara district of Assam. All of this was made possible to a certain extent by the arrival of the Sufi saints in these desolate locations. The Sufi saints were pioneers in the effort of clearing the forest to

build their *astanas* and, consequently, in the process of human habitation in these areas. It is important to mention here that several *khanqahs*, such as those set up by Syed Nasiruddin Baghdadi, Syed Asad-ud Daula Shiraji, and Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, were established in isolated and deserted places where human habitation and agricultural activity did not occur earlier. They were mostly forest areas. It was due to the setting up of *khanqahs* by the Sufi saints that agricultural production as well as human settlement gradually began to start.[61] Sufism thus emerged as a means of elevating people's spiritual and cultural status within the rural, agrarian context of human existence. Additionally, the *khanqahs* also played a crucial role in the development of urbanisation. For improved communication, a few *astanas* were set up along the river banks. The gradual urbanisation of Goalpara town, Dhubri town, and Jaleshwar can be attributed, to some extent, to the establishment of the *khanqahs* and *dargahs* in these places.

4.9 Sufism and Vaishnavism

The Bhakti movement in medieval India initiated a spiritual and cultural revival, enabling significant interfaith contact between many religious communities. Sufism and Vaishnavism emerged as responses to the dogmatic elements within their respective religious traditions, stressing unwavering dedication to God and the promotion of universal love. Their cross-cultural relationship explains their shared humanitarian approach to universal brotherhood. This shared understanding and interaction is reflected in their spiritual lives as well as in their philosophy, writings, songs, and the arts. They denounced societal inequity and the caste system, and embraced followers of all castes, creeds, and genders. The association between Sufism and Neo-Vaishnavism in Assam has a rich historical background. This included the emergence of Neo-Vaishnavism led by Sankardeva and the development of vernacularised Islam shaped by Azan Faqir. Both Sankardeva and Azan Pir aimed to revive the human aspect of religion, finding strength in the common background of historically influenced consciousness. The extent to which Noe-Vaishnavism influenced the Muslim settlers of Assam can be gauged by the fact that prominent Assamese Muslims, such as Chand Khan and Jayahari, embraced Sankardeva as their teacher. This is also corroborated by the fact that various Muslim *pirs* and *awliyas* in the seventeenth century A.D. authored *zikirs* and *zaris, or marshiyas,* that show clear influences of Assamese Neo-Vaishnava literature.

Sufism in the erstwhile Goalpara district of Assam was more influenced by Vaishnavism in Bengal preached by Chaitanya than the Neo-Vaishnavism propagated in Assam by Sankardeva and his disciples. The reciprocal influence of the Sufis and *Yogis* gave rise to the *Qalandari* and *Madari* orders in Sufism, as well as the *Dharma cult* and Vaishnavism in Hinduism. *Madari* and *Qalandari* sects were very popular in the study area at one time. In Bengal and western Assam, the convergence of Sufism and the Bhakti movement led to the emergence of numerous Muslim poets who embraced a Vaishnava tendency. These poets expressed ideas of religious syncretism, tolerance, and synthesis in their poetry. Among them were Syed Mortaza, a Sufi pir and a Vaishnava poet; Lal Mahmud and Chand Qazi, who were Krishna devotees; and the renowned Hasan Raja, who equated *'Radha'* and *'Khoda'* as one entity.[62] Moreover, some Muslims here were influenced by Vaishnavas to such an extent that they became wanderers and self-proclaimed mystics. Over time, they came to embrace some of the tenets and methods of Hindu mysticism.[63] Like the ascetics of Hinduism, they wore an iron ring around their feet and maintained long hair on top of their heads. Akram Khan claims that *Bauls* are simply the Muslim version of Hindu Vaishnavas.[64] These *Bauls* are still to be found in the study area.

4.10 Sufism and Folk Songs

The Sufi contribution to folk songs is immense. Because of its geographical proximity, Bengali language-centred Sufi poetry emerged in the western region of Assam, which is adjacent to the border of Bangladesh and West Bengal. The majority of the Muslims in the undivided Goalpara district exhibit a strong affinity with the centuries-old traditions and practices of the Bengali community of East Bengal, presently Bangladesh. These cultural traits were introduced to the region of Assam through their migratory movements. As a result, this area witnessed the emergence and progression of Bengali Sufi musical culture, which constituted an inseparable component of the Bengali folk heritage. In Bengal, Hindus and Muslims came to share a common language and culture. Chaitanya, the Bengali devotee of Krishna, had a Muslim disciple, namely Thakur Haridas.[65] He introduced the concept of *Krishna-Bhakti* and group singing, accompanied by drums, cymbals, and ektara (a single-string instrument). The close association of this movement with Sufism gave rise to *baul* singers. The Hindu *bauls* sang in the tradition

of Chaitanya, celebrating the union of Radha and Krishna, while the Muslim *bauls* sang Sufi verses. These *baul* Sufi songs still enjoy popularity in the rural Muslim areas of the erstwhile Golapara district. Tania Begum, in this context, mentions in her article that the region witnessed the emergence of three distinct genres of Bengali Sufi and folk songs over time, namely *murshidi, marifati, and baul* songs.[66] They are highlighted below:

4.10.1 *Murshidi* Songs

Murshidi songs are one of the components of the folk culture of *char-chapori* in the study area. These are folk devotional melodies that have their roots in Sufi culture. These songs may be traced back to their origins in East Bengal. Ashutosh Bhattacharya claims that this style of singing was introduced by the Sufi saints of medieval Bengal.[67] According to Ismail Hossain, the *murshidi* songs of East Bengal are said to have evolved from the *'sama'* songs of Iran.[68] These songs primarily originated in Bengal and then migrated to western Assam after being composed in the Bengali language. These songs cannot be traced back to their original composers, and hence their authors are not known. In both Bengal and western Assam, they have simply been transmitted orally from one generation of Bengali Muslims to the next. The word *'murshid'* originates from the Arabic term *'irshad',* which translates to 'instruction'. The individual who imparts instruction or guidance is commonly referred to as a *'murshid'* (master) or *'guru'.* A song that pays homage to a spiritual teacher is often referred to as *'murshidi geet'.* In these songs, the *murshid* is referred to by a variety of names, including *Pir-Saheb, Pir-Keblajan, Rasul, Gosain, Dayal, Dayal Chan, Dayal Guru, Sona Bandhu,* and many more. *Murshidi* songs contain words of supreme devotion, love, dependence, and complete self-surrender to attain nearness to Allah. According to these songs, the disciple is the servant of the *pir,* regardless of gender. *Murshidi geets* hold significant popularity among both the East Bengali and *'Deshi'* Muslim communities in the study area. They are performed primarily by men, and they frequently do so in groups with one person leading and the others following. Typically, they are carried out at night during a *'boithok'* (assembly) or *'sabha'* (meeting) in the home of a *pir* or in the home of a follower, or during the celebration of *urs* in a *dargah. "Sufi-tattwa"* (Sufi-Reality) was the original theme of these songs, but in the study area, topics like spiritualism, *'Nobism'* (Prophethood), *'Bodyism'* (appearance of body), the tragic events of Karbala, the lives

and deeds of *pirs* or Sufi saints, etc., are also covered. Usually, these aspects are explained in a relatively straightforward manner using a few metaphors or symbols. The river, bird, house, and boat are all frequently utilised as metaphors for life, soul, and other aspects of existence. An example of a *murshidi* song is:[69]

"মুর্শিদেৰ চৰণ সুধা
পান কৰিলে হবে ক্ষুধা
কৰো না দেলে দ্বিধা
যেহি মুর্শিদ সেই খোদা।।"

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

Murshidi songs are similar to other spiritual songs from Goalpara, as well as the Assamese traditions of *"Deh Bisarar Geet"* and *"Tokari Geet."* The central theme of both *'Deh Bisarar Geet'* and other spiritual songs of Goalpara and the *murshidi* tradition is the quest of the individual person to find the God inside. Additionally, the metaphor and narrative strategy reveal many parallels. The presence of rivers, boats, and boatmen may also be observed in the songs of *'Deh Bisarar Geet'* and other *Goalporia* devotional songs.

4.10.2 *Marifati* Songs

Marifati songs are the spiritual thematic songs of the Muslim community. According to Ashutosh Bhattacharya, *marifati* songs are a class of religious or spiritual songs composed by medieval Bengali Sufi saints.[70] These songs predominantly found their expression in the *dargahs* and *mazaars* situated in the regions of Bengal, as well as lower and southern Assam. In his book *'Islamiya Aytijya Aru Asom',* Rofiul Hussain Baruah mentions that *marifati geets* (songs) were popular in western Assam, both among Hindu and Muslim communities. He further says that these songs were influenced by Vaishnavism.[71] According to Jasim Uddin, these songs are known to have originated from the *'sama'* music of Iranian Sufi practitioners.[72] These songs persisted through the centuries until the early nineteenth century A.D., when the *'Wahabis'* strongly objected to their production. These songs are the sole sources that offer us a look into mystical perspectives on life. The lyrical themes of these songs encompass several aspects, such as the existential nature of the creator, the underlying factors behind creation, the cosmic order, the human experience, and the intricate connection between humanity and divinity.

They have excellent literary qualities and are written in a clear, straightforward style. Wisdom and poetry coexist with devotion in these songs. These songs are very popular among the elderly people of the *char-chaporis* of western Assam. People involved in the devotional activities also sing these songs. The following excerpt highlights a widely acclaimed *marifati* song within the Bengali Muslim minority residing in western Assam:[73]

"কে তোৰা মুৰিদ হবি আয়
এসেছে পীৰ সাহেব আজ আমাদেৰ পাড়ায়।।"

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

4.10.3 *Baul* Songs

The *baul* songs represent another kind of Sufi folk song in the Bengali tradition. The historical roots of these songs extend beyond the Bengal region, encompassing lower Assam and the Barak valley as well. Regarding the genesis of *baul* songs, Muhammad Enamul Haq is of the view that a distinct form of speculation emerged at Nadiya in Bengal during the 16th century A.D., characterised by stoical features as a result of the amalgamation of Sufi, Vaishnava, and indigenous beliefs.[74] In the words of Girindra Nath Das, Lalon Shah can rightly be regarded as the *'Baul Kobi Guru'*.[75] The *bauls* were members of the lower social strata in both the Hindu and Muslim communities of Bengal. The majority of them were nomadic mendicants, even though there were a few householders among them. The proponents of these songs were those lacking formal education. They did not always have precise mystic speculations due to a lack of professional training. Atis Dasgupta narrates that they denounced all forms of organised religion because they found its attendant rituals and ceremonies, as well as the pedantry and hypocrisy of its adherents, to be unnecessary and distracting from their innate sense of spirituality. This is why the *bauls* refer to their way of life as *"ulta-sadhan,"* or "the reverse path."[76] Girindra Nath Das draws several similarities and differences between the Sufi saints and the *baul* singers.[77] The guru-disciple relationship in this creed is thought to have been adopted from the Sufi system. Due to their stoic mentality, they were above any sectarian, societal, or religious disputes. These songs mostly focus on topics like divine love, the enigma of the human body, introspection, enlightenment, and spiritual awakening. Tania Begum says that these songs were carried to the *char* regions of Assam

by East-Bengal migrants[78] and are still prevalent in the original Goalpara district of Assam. In certain areas, women *bauls* are also to be found. *Baul* songs are known as *murshidi* songs among the Muslims who came from Mymensingh district and settled in the *char-chaporis* of lower Assam. One instance of a *baul* song from this particular area is provided below:[79]

"আত্মতত্ত্ব পৰমতত্ত্ব
গুৰু জানে অর্থ
অজ্ঞাতে তা জানে না
পঞ্চতত্ত্ব বেদৰ বিচাৰ
পণ্ডিতেৰা কৰেন প্রচাৰ
মানুষতত্ত্ব ভজনেৰ সাৰ
বেদছাড়া বৈৰাগেৰ মানে।।"

Translation: The *Guru* knows what the Supreme Being means. Ignorance is unable to discern the significance of the five elements found in the Vedas. The scholars preach that humanity is the essence of Bhajan, and asceticism without the Vedas is meaningless.

Suniti Kumar Chatterji believes that the *baul* and *marifati* songs represent a distinctive and significant expression of Bengali mind and poetic perception influenced by Islam, particularly in its Sufi manifestation in Indian literature.[80] Moreover, given the poetic excellence displayed in a significant portion of these lyrics, they constitute a modest addition to the global literary heritage.[81] Orthodox Muslim clerics and others regard the Muslim *bauls* with suspicion and sometimes display outright hostility against them.

4.11 Sufism and Other Devotional Folk Songs

In addition to the above-mentioned devotional folk songs, Assam continues to benefit spiritually from the Sufi songs of Haider Ghazi, Dil Faqir, Azan Faqir, and some other *marshiyas*. The Assamese *zikir* and *zaris* are not only of great linguistic and literary worth, but also of great musical significance. Azan Pir employed *zari* songs as a means of engaging the local populace during his proselytisation efforts. These songs have popularity across Assam. Other instances where the impact of the Sufis in particular, as well as the Muslims in general, can be vividly observed are the songs of *Manai Zatra, Ghazi Gaan, Bhari Gaan, Moishali Geet, Nao Khelowa Geet, Satya Pirar Gaan, Sona Pirar Gaan,* etc. These songs are spiritual in nature and instrumental in maintaining

communal harmony and integrity in Assam. They are common among both the Hindu and Muslim communities in the study area. Their literary value is also immense. Another kind of song that was until recently popular among the Hindus as well as the Muslims in the study area was the *"Geet of Gorakhnath."* Here, special emphasis was paid to the Sufis and *faqirs.* These songs bear great significance for the unity and integrity of the greater Assamese society. An example of this song is:[82]

"পীৰেৰ মগণৰে ভাই পীৰেৰ মগণ
ভাটি হৈতে আসিল পীৰ, হাতত কাঞ্চন,
হাতত কাঞ্চন পীৰেৰ মুখে ছাপ দাড়ি।"

Translation: O brother, you are deeply engrossed in the thinking of Pir. The Pir, having rounded bear, has come from downstream, carrying valuables in his hand.

4.11.1 *Dhuan Gaan*

Dhuan gaan, also known as *"dhuan geet,"* is a well-known folk song among the Bengali-speaking Muslims of the *char* regions in the study area. The *dhuan gaan* tradition also has its roots in East Bengal. Ismail Hossain states that *dhuan gaan* of Assam is commonly termed *"Faqirali"* in Tangail and western Mymensingh, *"Baul" or "Baula"* in eastern Sylhet, *"Bhab gaan"* and *"Shabda gaan"* in Khulna, Jessore, and Kushtia districts of Bangladesh."[83] During the periods of jute and rice cultivation, farmers involved in the dressing or de-weeding of jute and paddy in the field engaged in collective singing, maintaining a rhythmic cadence with their work. So, these can also be referred to as 'labour songs'. They don't have a central subject. In academic discourse, a wide range of themes are explored, including the enigma of creation, spirituality, the historical event of Karbala, many theological narratives such as the story of Adam and Hawa, the legend of Kalu Ghazi, and even elements from Hindu mythology.[84] The lyrical themes of the songs suggest that they were also influenced by medieval Islamic mysticism. However, in spite of the prevalence of religious imagery and terminology, these songs glorify the triumph of human reality over any particular conviction. An example of *dhuan gaan* with Islamic influence is:[85]

"একদিন জিয়াদ মোৰে ফাঁকি দিয়া নিছে
নবীৰ ৰৌছা ছাইৰে কাৰবালাতে অ'ৰে;
কাৰবালাতে যাইয়া দেখিৰে অ'সব কাফেৰ ঘিৰাইছেৰে
ফোৰাৎ নদীৰ কুলে বইসা আছে।

পানী খাওৱা বন্ধ কৰছেৰে
অ' হায় হাছান-হুছেনৰে।"

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

4.11.2 *Bisshed* Songs

Bisshed songs can also be classified as belonging to the mystical or religious genre. The term *'bisshed'* refers to the act of separating or disengaging, and in this context, it refers to the separation of the soul from the mind, or more specifically, the detachment of the human soul from the supreme soul. *Bisshed* songs are regarded as a sub-type of *murshidi geet.* It's conceivable that the oral custom of *bisshed geet* is a new classification of *murshidi geet* that developed here. Muhammad Abdul Hai claims that though their approaches to life differ, *bisshed* and *murshidi* songs have some similarities. The composers of the *bisshed* songs used the relationship between Radha and Krishna as a metaphor, whereas the *murshidis* wanted to create a personal connection with God.[86] There are similarities between *murshidi geet* and *bisshed geet* in terms of tone, vocabulary, and delivery as well. It is still common to hear *bisshed geet* being sung in the *char* areas of old Goalpara and Kamrup districts. One example of *bisshed geet*, supposedly sung by Krishna, is:[87]

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

4.11.3 *Bhatiali* Songs

Bhatiali geet is one of the popular folk songs prevalent in the *char* areas of western Assam. *Bhatiali* is not a native song to Assam; rather, the Muslims who emigrated from East Bengal during the colonial period brought it here. The word *"bhatiali"* originated from the merger of the words *"bhati,"* denoting the direction downstream, and the suffix

"-ali," indicating the entity associated with the downstream. So, the term *'bhatiali'* refers to a genre of song that is associated with the inhabitants residing in the lower regions of a river. These songs bear some form of connection to the culture of the communities residing along the downstream regions of the river. From a geographical perspective, the area that is now Bangladesh is known as *'bhati'* land, and it is where these songs originated. According to Ashutosh Bhattacharya, the riverine areas of East Bengal are the birthplace of *bhatiali* songs.[88] These songs can be located in medieval literary works such as *'Seka Subhodaya'* authored by Halayudha Misra.[89] Regarding the nature of these songs, Ashutosh Bhattacharya says, "*Bhatiali* songs are mainly songs of pain and despair; just as the pain can be caused by romantic despair, it can also arise from a sense of incompleteness of spiritual life."[90] These songs are about worldly and spiritual love and the various deeds of Radha and Krishna. Wakil Ahmed has categorised the themes of *bhatiali* songs into three distinct groups, such as spirituality, the heavenly romance shared between Radha and Krishna, and worldly love.[91] The songs belonging to the spiritual category exhibit an indirect connection to the philosophical concepts of *'Deh-tattwa'* and Sufi philosophy. In these songs, the words of spirit and body are expressed indirectly under the shelter of metaphors and symbols. They explore the theme of human supplication, wherein individuals express their desire for divine intervention from Allah and their spiritual mentor in order to alleviate the afflictions experienced in this earthly life. These compositions have played a pivotal role in fostering the development of Bengali Muslim Sufi culture in the study area. Below is an example of a well-known *bhatiali* song with Sufi overtones from western Assam:[92]

"উনুৰ ঝুনুৰ বাজে নাও আমাৰ,
নিহাইল্যা বাতাসে ৰে।
মুর্শিদ, ৰইলাম তোৰ আশে।।
পশ্চিমে সাজিল ম্যাঘ ৰে,
দ্যাওয়ায় দিল ৰে ডাক।
আমাৰ ছিড়িল হাইলিৰ পানস
নৌকায় খাইল পাক।।
ও ৰে মুর্শিদ, ৰইলাম তোৰ আশে।।"

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

4.11.4 *Bhawaiya* Songs

Bhawaiya song is a significant traditional song that originated in the northern region of Bengal and the undivided Goalpara district of Assam. Dwijendra Nath Bhakat and Pratima Neogi have identified the Koch Rajbanshi people of these areas as the speakers of this song.[93] These songs are largely popular among the 'Deshi Muslims' and the Rajbanshi people of the study area. The precise origins of *bhawaiya* songs remain uncertain. However, the rightful owners of these songs are the 'Deshi Muslims'. Muslims from East Bengal who later migrated here embraced this as a local effect. Depending on the location, these popular songs are referred to by different names, including *Goalpariya Lokageet, Desi Gaan, Mahuter Gaan, Moishaler Gaan, Gadial Gaan, Patharia Gaan, Dotarar Gaan, Bhasan Gaan,* etc.[94] Although the main idea and theme of *bhawaiya* songs is love, they also cover a wide range of themes, such as devotion, rivers, boats, sailors, happiness and sadness, hope and desire, *mahut-moishal,* and other popular aspects. This tradition also demonstrates a strong association with Bengali Sufi lyrics. *Bhawaiya* songs incorporate Sufi terminology, such as *'Doyal'* and *'Doyal Guru'* to denote a spiritual mentor or advisor. An example of a *bhawaiya* song is:[95]

"দয়াল গুৰু বিনে এই সংসাৰে
কায় কৰিবে পাৰ
গুৰু মোৰ গোসাইয়া ৰে
এক গুৰু হইল পিতা মাতা
আৰ এক গুৰু হইল মন্ত্রদাতা ৰে।"

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

4.11.5 Songs of Ghazi Pir

According to legend, Ghazi Pir was the son of Sonarai, the king of the Sundarbans. He voluntarily abdicated the throne given to him by his father and became popular among the Hindus and Muslims of the medieval era. He was also popularly known as "Zinda Pir." Wakil Ahmed writes that the Muslims of south and east Bengal obeyed Ghazi Pir as the god of tigers.[96] There prevailed some harmonious songs among the Hindu and Muslim communities in Bengal centering him. These songs were also known as the songs of 'Kalu

Ghazi'.[97] Many examples of Hindu-Muslim combined-practices can be found in these songs. These songs subsequently influenced the people of the *char-chaporis* in the study area.[98] By organising *sinni* and *prasad* (offering) in the name of Ghazi Pir, both the Hindus and Muslims sang:[99]

"গাজীমিঞাৰ হাজোত সিন্নী সম্পূৰ্ণ হৈলো।
হিন্দুগণে বল হৰি মোমিনে আল্লা বলো।"

Translation: The *sinni* ceremony of Ghazi Miyan is complete; Hindus say 'Hari' and the believers say 'Allah'.

Another example is:[100]

"মুছলমানে বলেগো আল্লা হেন্দু বলে হৰি,
নিদান কালে যাবৰে ভাই একই পথে চলিৰে।"

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

4.11.6 Songs of Doriya Pir

It is well known that the ancestors of almost all the Muslims residing in riverine areas of Assam converted from Hinduism to Islam. That is why there is an influence of the river god among the Hindu and Muslim communities in the *char* areas. During my interview with Shamsul Alom, aged 103, he informed me that many Muslims of the *char-chaporis* in the study area obeyed this god as "Doriya Pir." While sailing across the river, the sailors left the boat in the name of Doriya Pir.[101] Even today, riverine Muslim communities in certain regions of Assam are seen to arrange *sinni* in order to prevent floods and erosion, publicly pray to the Doriya Pir, and sing songs for the control of rivers. The songs of Doriya Pir have musical and natural sweetness. For example:[102]

"অ' দৰিয়া, ছাৰিয়া দে আমায়
আমি পীৰৰ দেশে যাইব'ৰে হায়
ছাৰিয়া দে আমায়।
দ্বাৰে দ্বাৰে ঘূৰিয়া বেড়াই আমি
কুল-কিনাৰা নাপাই,
আমাৰ পীৰৰ সাথে হৈলে দেখা
যাইব' মদিনায়।"

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

All these folk songs discussed above with Sufistic tones have become obsolete in present-day society as a result of societal advancements and shifts in cultural practices over time. Their eventual elimination has been accelerated by the effects of modern living, the appeal of contemporary music, and the accessibility of inexpensive musical instruments like cell phones, etc. Moreover, the growth of modern education, the proliferation of religious education, and an increased religious consciousness among the people have led to their eventual decline. As a result, these customs and practices are no longer widely embraced by the majority of the Muslims in the study area. However, these songs, belonging to many genres, have undergone a process of evolution and assimilation within the Muslim community of lower Assam over an extensive period of time, leading to peaceful coexistence between various religious and socio-cultural groups.

4.12 Sufism and Folk Tales

The folktales that the Muslims in this area recount contain elements of Bengali and Assamese culture. Some of their folk tales appear to have been influenced by Islamic mysticism. In certain instances, the influence of Hindu tradition is also noticed. The folk tales that had been prevalent among these Muslims until recently include narratives such as the "legend of Hanif Palowan and Ejid," the "fable of Khwaja Khizir," the "story of Hazrat Ali and Siva," etc. The historicity of these narratives remains unverified, both through historical evidence and Islamic *shariah*. The stories of "Layla and Majhnu," "Yusuf and Zuleikha," and "Shirin and Farhad" are a few romantic folk tales of the Muslims. These folktales are still popular cults in some of the pockets of the study area. A few other noteworthy tales are "the legend of Satya Pir," "the story of Kalu Ghazi," "the story of Beula-Lokhindar," "the story of Harun and Raja Gour Govinda," and so on. Historically, Kalu Ghazi was most likely the same person as Ismail Ghazi, a commander of Bengal Sultan Rukunuddin Babrak Shah who was responsible for the downfall of the Kamata monarch Chakradhwaj. In the story of Harun and Gour Govinda, Gour Govinda was the ruler of Gouda who was overthrown by Hazrat Shah Jalal of Sylhet. Harun is beyond traceable in history. These legends contain numerous instances of extraordinary communal concord between Hindus and Muslims. The increasing impact of Sufi literature in Assamese texts is evidenced by the discovery of two Sufi tales in Assamese during the medieval era. *"Madhumalati"* and *"Mrigavati-Charita"* are the names of the two Sufi

romances. According to Maheswar Neog, these two romances garnered such widespread acceptance that subsequent writers frequently included them in their literary compositions.[103]

4.13 Impact of Sufism on Assamese and Bengali Languages

The Sufis served as the primary conduit for the introduction of Arabic and Persian terminology into the Assamese and Bengali languages. They initially adopted the Persian language as a means of spreading Islam. Therefore, numerous Persian terms have eventually become part of the Assamese and Bengali languages, as well as some other local dialects. The *'Assam Buranji'* and *'Kamrupar Buranji',* which were retrieved from the home of Sukumar Mahanta in north Guwahati, contain numerous Arabic and Persian phrases.[104] The institutions founded by the *pirs* in various places of the former Goalpara district also patronised Persian, Arabic, and Urdu languages, along with the local languages. As a side effect, it is observed in our daily lives that some of the words and phrases in the Assamese and Bengali vocabulary are of Perso-Arabic origins. In this case, the following terms are just a few examples: *oju, alam, awal, amol, awaz, alim, Ajrail, asman, akhirat, awliya, ekhtelaf, ilm, Iblish, imam, iman, ummat, wazir, ebadat, ofat, ostad, kamal, kutub, kalima,* and many more. A few more words concerning Sufism that have entered the Assamese and Bengali lexicon are *azan, bondegi, behest, dargah, darvesh, dojakh, idd, fereshta, haji, jannat, jaynamaj, jin, Kaaba, kafer, khadim, khanqah, khilafat, qibla, qiyamat, Quran, Khoda, Muharram, masjid, mannat, maut, murid, murshid, nobi, namaj, neki, pori, pir, rasul, roza, sunnat, taqdir, talaq, tawbah, urs, waj, ziyarat,* and many more. Presently, both the Assamese and Bengali people cannot refrain from employing them in their daily lives. Many unique Arabic and Persian terms have replaced Assamese and Bengali words, and the native speakers of those languages can grasp their true meaning when they are used in sentences. Mohini Kumar Saikia, in his book *'Assam Muslim Relation and its Cultural Significance',* has cited a few examples of them, such as *adalat, hakim, ukil, nazir, qazi, peshkar, bakshish, qobul, qadam, garbar, chaukidar, mauzadar, muqardama, ain, qanun, zamin, dakhal, mohar, jarip, barud, banduq, kaman, kheraj, ghazal, fauzdari, dewani, jahaz, hawai-jahaz, hat-bajaar, kagaj-kalam, tauba-tauba, dhan-daulat, maan-ijjat,* etc.[105] The influx of so many new terms has made the Assamese and Bengali languages diverse and rich.

4.14 Sufism and Islamic Revivalist Movements

In the 18th and 19th centuries, some Sufi saints and other scholars initiated a number of reformist movements in order to purify Islamic society and Sufi practices from non-Islamic rituals. Among these movements, mention may be made of *"Wahabi"* or *"Tariqah-i-Muhammadiyah"* by Sayyid Ahmad of Barelvi; *"Faraizi Movement"* by Haji Shariat Ullah, Dudu Miyah, and Titu Mir; *"Patna School"* by Wilayat Ali and Enayet Ali; *"Taiyuni Movement"* by Keramat Ali Jaunpuri; *"Ahl-e-Hadith Movement,"* etc.[106] The emergence of this new trend was also evident in numerous other movements, such as the *"Deobandi Movement," "Aligarh Movement,"* and *"Nadwat-ul-Ulama"* in the nineteenth century A.D., as well as *"Tabligi Jamaat," "Jamaat-i-Islami,"* etc., in the twentieth century A.D. An important aspect of these movements was the need for a more authentic religion by eliminating the non-Islamic excrescences and accretions which were formerly common among Muslims. The *'Census Report of 1881'* provides a detailed description of the religious beliefs and views on Islam held by the general Muslim population in the following ways:[107]

> "The Muslim peasantry of the Assam Valley, like those of Bengal, are extremely ignorant of the elements of their faith. Some of them have never heard of Mahomet; some regard him as a personage corresponding in their system of religion to the Ram and Lachman of the Hindus; others again believe that the word is an appellation expressive of the unity of God; while some of the better educated explain that Mahomet is their Dangar Pir, or chief saint, the minor saints being four individuals named Hoji (Hajji), Ghoji (Ghazi), Auliya, and Ambiya. Abu Hanifa appears as the son of Ali. The Koran is hardly read, even in Bengali, and in the original Arabic not at all; and many of those who have heard of it cannot tell who wrote it."

W. W. Hunter has also voiced a similar opinion in his *'Statistical Account of Assam'.* He says, "In the interior of Goalpara district, a great many have adopted idolatrous practices similar to the Hindus; and the Deputy-Commissioner states that their processions and ceremonies, as well as their worship of village divinities and saints, show that they have practically renounced Islam."[108] The above-mentioned organisations stressed the concept of absolute monotheism *(tawhid)* and rejected any actions that suggested polytheism, such as visiting tombs, commemorating saints and non-Muslim deities, and believing in sorcery and *mantras.* They criticised these practices as *'shirk'*

(associating partners with God) and urged a restoration of the authentic teachings of Islam as found in the Quran and the *Hadith.* Many of the saints and erudite intellectuals of the time journeyed from village to village, teaching the Muslim folks the unadulterated principles of Islam and their obligations as followers. Regarding the spread of the *'Faraizi'* movement in Goalpara district, W. W. Hunter observes, "Many of the Musalmans residing in the towns have joined the *Faraizi* sect, although they are not so fanatical as in Eastern Bengal."[109] B. C. Allen narrates the missionary endeavours undertaken by a well-known Sufi teacher, Abdul Jalal Zulqad Ali, to combat the un-Islamic views and practices prevalent among the rural Muslim population in Darrang district of Assam. It goes like this:[110]

> "After the expulsions of the Mussalmans from Kamrup in 1681 A.D. the simple villagers, who had been converted to the faith of Islam, began to forget the principles of their religion, and to be gradually affected by the customs of their Hindu neighbours. They practiced circumcision and offered prayers after the Muhammadan fashion it is true, but they could not read the Koran, and service was held in the open fields, as there were no buildings set apart for the purpose. They dressed, shaved, and worshipped idols like Hindus; they eschewed beef and declined to kill a cow, and in times of sickness and trouble endeavoured to obtain relief by reciting mantras and singing hymns. The state of affairs is to have continued till 1880, when a preacher called Zalkad Ali or Sufi Saheb, who came from Gauhati and spent some years in the sub-division of Mangaldai, inaugurated a revival of the true Muhammadan faith. Fired by his example the Muhammadans abandoned their Hindu superstitious, allowed their beards to grow, and took to eating beef. Thatched houses were erected to serve as mosques, and the ordinary villager at the present day conforms, outwardly at any rate, to the dictates of the Mohammedan faith."

However, the intensity of the revivalist movements failed to eradicate the remnants of non-Islamic customs and beliefs that had entrenched among a significant portion of Muslims in Bengal and Assam. Superstitions and heresies still persisted. B. C. Allen observed, "They (Muslims) have not, however, succeeded in entirely freeing themselves of the ideas they borrowed from the Hindus, and, when cholera or smallpox appear in epidemic form, secretly recite *mantras,* in the hope that by this means they may be preserved from falling ill."[111] The attempts of these puritan movements were not successful in toto due to several causes. Firstly, the reformers were unable to recognise that many of these indigenous beliefs and practices met certain pragmatic requirements

that their faith did not fulfil. Furthermore, ideological disputes among the religious reformers of different movements led to divisions among themselves and pitted various factions against one another. However, despite this schism, it is undeniable that the Islamic revivalist and reformist movements of the past few centuries infused rejuvenation into the Muslim communities of Bengal and the neighbouring areas of Assam. Jagadish Narayan Sarkar says that the reformists aimed to stimulate the political awareness of the Muslims by advocating for *'jihad'* (struggle) and rebelling against the zamindars and proprietors of indigo plantations.[112] Often, it served as a form of resistance against the British government and the economic exploitation endured by the Muslim population. As a result, religious reforms took on multiple dimensions, including social, political, economic, and communal aspects. Sometimes, they created a setback to the increasing trend of assimilation between Muslims and Hindus. All this culminated in certain Bengali Muslims adopting a religiously and socially exclusive worldview, which had political ramifications in the years that followed.

4.15 Sufi Saints and Social Reforms

The Sufi saints did not confine themselves to a life of mysticism and spirituality. Rather, they frequently took part in the social, religious, and cultural life of society in a variety of ways. Abu Bakr Siddiqui of *Furfura Sharif* in West Bengal is a prominent Sufi known for his notable contributions to the domains of education, social work, and religious reform. The activities of Abu Bakar Siddiqui had an enormous impact on the culture and society of the people living in Bengal and western Assam.[113] He exerted great effort to eliminate superstition from the minds of the people and foster a scientific mindset among them. He was a patron of several socio-religious magazines and Bengali weeklies, including *"Shariat-e-Islam Darpan," "Mihir-o-Sudhakar," "The Mussalmaan," "Islam Hitoishi," "Banganoor,"* and others.[114] These publications featured discussions and debates on a range of topics, including the importance of women's education, the exploitation of the people by zamindars and moneylenders, and the significance of scientific and technical education. Golam Saklayen writes that, for the benefit of the common people, he also constructed hospitals, community centres, and philanthropic facilities.[115] He became known as *"Mujaddid-e-Zaman"* (Reformer of the Age) due to his reform activities. Hazrat Ruhul Amin of Basirhat was also a prominent social

reformer. He was aware of the problems that the farming community faced. In his periodical *"Sunnat al-Jamat,"* he regularly illustrated the repressive treatment of the zamindars and offered guidance for the liberation of the peasantry.[116] As discussed in the previous chapter, his social reform activities also touched the Bengali-speaking Muslims of western Assam. Hazrat Abul Qasim Khurasani of Goalpara town made a concerted effort to instruct the Muslims in the Goalpara area about the correct methods of performing *namaz* and *roza* while also advocating for the abandonment of all harmful customs that were widespread in Muslim society during that era.[117] Another Sufi, Abdul Hamid Khan Bhasani, fought for the rights of the peasants until his death, raising his voice against the exploitation of the zamindars and moneylenders. He organised multiple gatherings of peasants in lower Assam in the second quarter of the 20th century A.D. Because of his steadfast commitment to addressing the concerns of marginalised people, such as the landless, peasants, labourers, sharecroppers, and exploited and suppressed people in society, he was appropriately given the title of *"Majloom Jononeta"* (leader of the oppressed). So far as the social reforms of Hazrat Ezadullah Shah are concerned, he forbade anti-social practices such as consuming alcohol, smoking tobacco, gambling, thievery, dacoity, and murdering innocent animals, and was largely successful in doing so. Thus, the Sufi saints contributed a lot to society through their social activities.

4.16 Sufism and the Context of Women

In western Assam, as in other regions of the world, there is little information about the contribution of women to the growth of Sufism as well as the direct involvement of womenfolk with Sufism. The historical evolution of Sufism shows relatively little indication of female engagement with Sufism. As a result of the strict observance of the *'purdah'* regulation, it is speculated that medieval Sufi attitudes were unfavourable towards women. According to one of the disciples of Sufi Abdul Baten Jaunpuri who frequently visited the study area, the Sufi saint never saw another woman's face other than his wife and mother.[118] Women were frequently perceived as an impediment to attaining divine communication. As pilgrims, they were only allowed limited participation in rituals. The visit of women to the Sufi shrines still attracts criticism from certain segments of society. It is known from the conversations with the *khadims* of the *dargahs* that all the Sufi shrines in the study area adhered to the prohibition on women

attending the proceedings of the *'urs'* festivals in the past. A few *dargahs* currently have distinct sections set out for female visitors to pray. There are, however, no restrictions on women entering or participating in ceremonial activities at the *dargah* of Nasiruddin Baghdadi in Jaleshwar.

The social perception of Sufis significantly influenced the mindset of women regarding Sufism. The attitude of women towards Sufism was expressed in a variety of ways, and they played a part in Sufism both directly and indirectly as members of the family and society. The Sufi saints married local women, and these women might have contributed by helping their husbands understand regional customs and culture. There have been instances where wives of Sufis converted to Sufism. Sufis exerted influence on many women, acquainting them with Sufism to the point that their conduct prompted their family members to turn to Sufism. Brought up in such a family, children were also exposed to Sufi beliefs. Women have also been performing *zikir, zari, baul, murshidi, and marifati* songs on various platforms since medieval times. However, women were not generally permitted to sing the *murshidi* and other Sufi songs in the *'boithok'* (assembly); but, when the *"boithok"* happened to be with a household member, women could participate in the chorus.[119] Their involvement in the *'sama'* performance and other associated events is also vital. The women also participated in Sufism through a variety of means, such as recounting the extraordinary deeds of the Sufi saints, demonstrating their reverence for the Sufis by giving them presents, and so on. They also expressed their complete trust in Sufis by requesting that they pray for them. Wealthy women bestowed more valuable offerings upon Sufis. At the time when Nasiruddin Baghdadi established a second *khanqah* in 'Badekalpa', a village in the Mymensingh district, there was a very attractive and affluent widow, namely Miss Atajan Saheba, who was drawn to the saint's fame and donated her entire estate to the *khanqah* and proposed marriage to him.[120] The marriage took place. Thus, despite having a smaller role than men in the treatment of Sufism, women still have a significant influence on it. Therefore, it can be claimed that even if women's contributions to the growth of Sufism are not well documented, some female participants in Sufi rites show that back in times past, they aided in the development of the Sufi doctrine, which has remained diffuse and nebulous.

4.17 Sufism of Today

Sufism is not as significant in modern society as it had been throughout its lengthy history. It is evidently in a state of collapse. This is because the classical Sufism, which is now woven together with stories of mystery and supernatural activities, is not very enticing to the modern educated mind. While *tasawwuf* was once a vibrant discipline, it is now primarily ritual-based and has stagnated as a result. A well-educated intellect finds it to be no more appealing. Such mysticism pisses the scientific mind off and makes it dissatisfied. Nowadays, the number of genuine Sufis in the *khanqahs* is extremely small. In the past, a Sufi was highly respected due to his remarkable spiritual accomplishments. But, at present, *'Gaddis'* (positions) have been established in honour of previous Sufis, and persons who assume such positions, usually based on inheritance, are recognised as Sufis. The individual who has obtained *gaddis* in this manner is not closely associated with the genuine Sufism of bygone eras. Moreover, with the passage of time, Sufism has assimilated more native rites and customs, resulting in a complete departure from its basic essence. The association of numerous local, non-Islamic religious elements, the granting of numerous deeds and *waqfs* of property, and the flow of income from various sources have caused the Sufi institutions to degenerate over time. As a result, the majority of *dargahs* in this region have gradually lost their initial divine magnificence and allure among the local Muslim community. At present, women and members of the poorer socio-economic strata make up the majority of visitors to Sufi *dargahs* in this area. It is, therefore, imperative that Sufism be modernised by placing it in the context of present-day social realities and elucidating its philosophy in a way that resonates with modern people, whose primary concerns are both intellectual and spiritual growth. For this reason, the objectives of Sufism should be stated in a scientific way and connected to real-world happenings. This can only be achieved by reinvigorating the spiritual renaissance through intellectual growth. Only then will the appeal of Sufism expand far beyond its current base of support among the poor, troubled, and under-educated.

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[53] Abdus Shahid Sheikh, Age- 64, retired Arabic Subject Teacher of Barkanda Peoples' Academy Higher Secondary School, Alamganj Part- 9, Dist.- Dhubri (Assam), Date of Interview: 14-11-2023 (Tuesday). The informant is also a prominent Islamic writer who is associated with the locality.

[54] Abdus Shahid Sheikh, Age- 64, retired Arabic Subject Teacher of Barkanda Peoples' Academy Higher Secondary School, Alamganj Part- 9, Dist.- Dhubri (Assam), Date of Interview: 14-11-2023 (Tuesday).

[55] Shahid Ali Ahmed, Age- 63, retired School Teacher, Village- Bartalowa, Dist. Chirang (Assam), Date of Interview: 14-10-2023 (Saturday). It should be noted that he himself is a retired teacher of Bilaspur Manchuriya M.E. School.

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