

Vernacularization of Islam and Sufism in Medieval Assam: A Study of the Production of Sufi Literature in Local Languages

Tania Begum

North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya, India

Abstract: Islam originated in Arabia in eight century and spread all over the world, resulting a mass conversion of the local population in Persia, Byzantine and North Africa. In this region under banner Sufism, Islam as a faith promised enough flexibility and accommodation to be adjusted with the varied socio-cultural backgrounds. Consequently the universal principles of Islam were vernacularised and contextualized or localized form and expression of the Islamic spiritualism emerged in this region. Like the other parts of India, Assam also witnessed the emergence and development of Sufism. The Sufi scholars and saints at first composed the Sufi literature in Arabic language, then in Persian and in later period it the Sufi literatures were written in various local and vernacular languages specially in asamease and bengali language. In assamese, *zikir* and *zari* songs were composed which had the elements of Islamic religion teachings and communal brotherhood. The *marfati murshidi* and *baul* songs and other literature of Bengali languages also contributed in the growth of synthetic cult in this region.

Islam originated in Arabia in eight century and spread all over the world, resulting a mass conversion of the local population in Persia, Byzantine and North Africa. In this region under banner Sufism, Islam as a faith promised enough flexibility and accommodation to be adjusted with the varied socio-cultural backgrounds. Consequently the universal principles of Islam were vernacularised and contextualized or localized form and expression of the Islamic spiritualism emerged in this region. In this regional background, geographical and cultural variation and diverse manifestation of Islam could be seen in the forms of beliefs, thoughts and practices. The indigenous social and cultural traditions started dominating the beliefs and practices associated with Islam. In the Islamic world, the Sufis have been viewed as the agents of vernacularisation of Islam. One of the means of vernacularising the messages of Islam and Sufism was the production of Sufi literature in local language.

The Sufis came to India along with the Muslim conquests and spread throughout the country. Some of the scholars are in the opinion that even they came to India before the Muslim conquerors.¹ Like the other parts of India, Assam also witnessed the emergence and development of Sufism. The

Sufi scholars and saints at first composed the Sufi literature in Arabic language, then in Persian and in later period it the Sufi literatures were written in various local and vernacular languages. The reason behinds this was to attract the local towards the main rules of Sufi tradition.

This article particularly focuses on vernacularisation of Islam and Sufism in medieval Assam by highlighting the production of Sufi literature in local languages especially in Assamese and Bengali language. It shows how the Sufis challenged the Arabo-Persian linguistic hegemony by producing religious literature in vernacular and dialects.

In Sufism, *Sama* occupied a very special position which means listening. These rituals often include singing, dancing, recitation etc. as particular form of worship in Sufism. In Assam this form of Sufi activities were taken by the saints with the touch Assamese idioms and culture such as *Zikirs* and *Zaris*. *Zikir* and *Zari* is one the of the major form devotional songs handed down generation after generation amongst the Muslims of Assam. They represent the teaching of Islam in the pattern of Assamese Vaishnava poetry. The songs aimed at the glorification of Allah or God and at the inculcation of those human attributes and grace which bring peace to the soul and established harmony between man and man.² The writing of *Zikir* and *zari* was introduced by a Muslim saint named Shah Milan, popularly known as Azan Fakir in the seventeenth century.³ The term *Zikir*, derived from Arabic *Ziqr*, literary means singing or remembering Allah's name. It applies both to the musical genre and to the occasion of its performance, the devotional assembly of Islamic mysticism or Sufism.

The *Zari* derivation of *Jari* is translated in Persian and Urdu dictionaries as crying, groaning, and wailing. Such demonstrative expressions of grief are an important part of Muharram celebrations. The *Jari* is also popularly known as *Jarigan* and *Marshiya*. The songs concern to Karbala episodes Hasan-Hosein, Hazrat Ali, Fatema Bibi, Saharbanu and other stories from Islamic history and legends like the stories of Musa and Feraun, the story of Khwaj and Khijir, story of

¹ T. C. Rastogi, *Islamic Mysticim-Sufism*, Sterling Publication Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1982, p. 1.

² Sayed Abdul Malik, *Asomiya Zikir aru Zari*, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 1958, p.1.

³ *Ibid.*, p.1.

Zinda Pir, story of Barpir etc.⁴ These lyrical stories mostly deal with tragic stories and tragic tune. The Jari songs of Assam is total different from those of East Bengal. The tune and lyrics Jari song of Assam is related to Assamese society. For example, the marriage of Hazrat Ali and Fatema Bibi has been carried out following the Assamese ritual in the Jari songs of Assam.

In the eastern part of Assam which is situated adjoining the Bengal frontier, Sufi literature developed centering Bengali language due to its geographical location. These songs are suggestive of poet's or the singer's mystical vision of the world. The mystics aim to reach God through love and devotion. However, these songs have little to do with the orthodox rites and rituals of the society. The mystical element in them might well be appreciated on an analogy with Sufism. These songs are sung and rendered to the accompaniment of an *ektara* (a one-string musical instrument), a *dotara* (a two-string instrument), khamak, khol, harmonium, khanjani, kartal, ghungur, ramcaki, and so on. The mystic songs are divisible into three categories, namely, Baul, Marfati, and Mursidi.⁵ But, they cannot be held in watertight compartments. In fact, the borderline between these categories is very thin and there is a good deal that is common to all of them. The Baul songs are a common property of the Hindu-Buddhist Yogis and the Muslim fakirs. They express a liberal attitude to all religions. The thematic concerns of these songs are many, and they range from a devotional quest to body mystery, self-knowledge, worldly wisdom and divine enlightenment. Many of them are deliberately arcane and esoteric. The images of human body are highly symbolic and they are exploited purposefully as the means for attaining the heights of mystic reflection.

The Marfati and Mursidi songs are also mystical songs that are very popular with the Bengali Muslim people. Apart from Hinduism and Islam, these songs are influenced by the Buddhist philosophy of life. The Mursids attempt a unique approach to the resolution of the mystery of Creation, as also to the exploration of the divine communion of Man with God. The word *mursid* is a derivative of the Arabic word *irsad*, meaning instruction. One who instructs or prescribes is a *Mursid* and thus he is a spiritual *guru* (instructor or teacher), too. The same spiritual role is believed to be assigned to the bards or singers of Baul and Marfati songs.⁶

A unique aspect of Marfati, Mursidi and Baul songs is that they have a cross-border appeal. This is because when the migrants came from East Bengal and settled in the char areas of Assam, they brought these songs with them. These songs pass down the ages from one generation to another. With time, however, these songs have undergone certain changes in

the char areas. But, these changes do not affect the organic whole or the basic structure and the themes of the songs.

In Assamese society, these kinds of literatures occupy a very important position in basis of its popularity among the Assamese people for more than three hundred years. Like the Vaishnava literature of Assam, these songs and lyrical stories also have its own literary specialty and features. Just like the Vaishnava literatures has made easier to know the verses of Gita, Bhagwat Puran for the Assamese people, the works of Sufi saints has helped the Assamese Muslim people to understand the Islamic philosophy, Quran and *Hadith*. All these work helped Assamese people to from their lives in a new way discouraging caste, community and religious barrier among themselves. Though, the Fakirs mainly used Assamese language form writing the songs, but they bravely used Arabic, Persian and Urdu words and sometimes whole sentence. This has two consequences, firstly some word had been included in Assamese and Bengali language in course of time and secondly they were used in the letters of Ahom royalty and in the conversation of Muslims of Assam.

These Sufi literatures is considered one of major pillar in the cultural and literary element of Assam, which emerged as a indigenous from Sufi activities in Assam connecting Sufi structure and native folk culture of Assam. From medieval period they are rooting for communal brotherhood and humanity among people of Assam.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- [1] Acharya, N. N., *The History of Medieval Assam*, Omsons Publications, New Delhi, 1992.
- [2] Baruah, B.K., *A Cultural History of Assam*, Vol-1, Lawyers Book Stall, Guwahati, 1969.
- [3] Hussain, Ismail, *Asomor Char- Chaparir Lok-Sahitya*, Banalata Prakashan, Guwahati, 2009.
- [4] Hussain, Mahibul, *Hazrat Azan Pir*, Asom Sahitya Sabha, Sibsagar, 1972.
- [5] Malik, Sayed Abdul, *Asomiya Zikir aru Zari*, Gauhati University, Guwahati, 1958
- [6] Nath, D.(ed.), *Religion and Society in North East India*, DVS Publishers, Guwahati, 2011.
- [7] Rastogi, T. C. , *Islamic Mysticim-Sufism*, Sterling Publication Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1982.
- [8] Saikia, M.K., *Assam- Muslim Relation and its Cultural Significance*, Luit Printers, Guwahati, 1992.
- [9] Syiemlieh, D. R., & Sharma Manorama(eds.), *Society and Economy of North East Indian*, Vol-3, Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2006.
- [10] Tamizi, Mohd. Yahya, *Sufi Movement in Eastern India*, Idarah-i-Adabiyat-I Delli, Delhi, 2009.
- [11] Zaman, Assaduz, *Sufi Tradition and Culture: The Growth of Syncretic Shrines in North East India*, Kamakhya Book Stall, Guwahati, 2007

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.52.

⁵ Ismail Hussain, *Asomor Char- Chaparir Lok-Sahitya*, Banalata Prakashan, Guwahati, 2009, p. 34.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.34.