

South Asia

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Ever since Islam came to Bengal in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (and probably earlier, through individual Muslims' interaction with local bearers of other traditions) it participated, via a merging of Sufi inputs with vernacular strands of Vaisnavism (Vishnuism), tantrism and local folk cults, in a very rich blend of religious beliefs and practices in the lower strata of society. The Fakir, as a sub-section of the Bengali Bāul with a more or less defined Muslim identity, are at present the largest group in Bengal perpetuating this form of 'Islamic syncretistic tradition', to use Asim Roy's phrase.<sup>1</sup> In the complex picture of present-day religious politics of East and West Bengal, and in the context of Bangladesh as the second largest Muslim country in the world, these Fakir seem, somewhat paradoxically, to be both under threat and very much alive as contributors to local spiritual and cultural vitality at a grassroots level.

In territorial Bengal (i.e. the area comprising present-day Indian West Bengal and Bangladesh), folk religious syncretism has over the centuries produced a variety of cults and sects, amongst which the Bāul emerged in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century as a major group strongly influenced by Caitanya Vaisnav devotion and (post?) Buddhist sahajiyā tantrism. After Caitanya, the next figure of historic importance for the Bāul was that of Lālan Shah or Lālan Fakir (?1774-?1890). Whereas Caitanya belongs to a sectarian Hindu movement that extends far beyond Bengal and has its focal mythological anchorage outside Bengal (in Vrindavan and Mathura), Lālan is a product and proponent of purely Bengali syncretism. His hagiography and his teachings tell a story of merging Hinduism and Islam into a universalistic religion transcending the boundaries of any single religion. As such, he is *par excellence* the Bāul figure that all present-day Bāul and Fakir identify with, to a greater extent than with Caitanya. The Kushtiā district (now in Bangladesh) where he spent most of his life and where his tomb is located, is in the heartland of territorial Bengal, and very much a central point in the geographical distribution of the Bāul.

Before addressing Bāul/Fakir syncretism in the present religious configuration of the two Bengals, brief reference should be made to the past development of Bengali Islamic syncretism.

### The development of Bengali Islamic syncretism

The spread of Islam in Bengal<sup>2</sup> was largely rural, village-based, and the result of the interaction of immigrant Sufis with local pre-Aryan and Hindu cults and yogic and tantric practices and beliefs. Such interaction contributed, as early as the 13<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> centuries, both to the development of local forms of what would later be termed 'heterodox cults' and 'folk Islam', and to the expansion of agriculture over a largely untouched territory of jungle, marshes and waterways. Islam thus extended its presence as a religion of the axe and plough, creating settlements and producing something of a 'civilizing' effect. It was, however, far removed from canonical Islam and far more a matter of saint cult. Bengali grassroots syncretism was a case of assimilating a new form of divine force, or grace, into an already multi-form substratum and a case of this addition – Islam – not being intrinsically or transcendently powerful, but one of its being relevant through the charisma of individual leaders. The latter were the Sufi saints who were living embodiments and mediators of the new divine grace, and who did not claim this to replace the older substratum as a new religion. The case is thus not one of straight conversion to Islam, but of

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active/interactive forms of syncretism that depend not on the pre-eminence of a transcendent divinity but on the latter's merging with, and thereby enriching, another pre-existing ordaining of the universe. In this process it is the living saint as a human-and-divine person who is the crucial actor, crystallizing and catalyzing people's aspirations and beliefs in both the other-worldly and this-worldly dimensions of human life. These saints were simultaneously spiritual leaders, warlords and rulers for their constituencies, who would recognize allegiance only to them.

Such local forms of Islamic syncretism flourished in rural Bengal, particularly in the eastern areas, until a new development appeared on the scene of Bengali Islam a couple of centuries ago. Under British rule, there emerged amongst the elites of the Indian subcontinent a sense of religious identity – both Hindu and Muslim. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Muslim upper classes of Bengal, who had clung to an idealized and frozen self-image of ethnic and Islamic purity connected with their immigrant (Turkic, Afghan) origins and deliberately disconnected from the ethnic and religious realities of the local populations, woke up to the reality of their having somehow taken root in the land of Bengal and to the fact that the people over which they ruled were dreadfully un-Islamic by their Koranic criteria.

Vigorous efforts were launched by orthodox Muslim leaders to eradicate the impure vernacular from Bengali Islam. The conversion to 'pure' Islam often went hand in hand with laudable efforts at improving the social and economic conditions of the lowest strata. In some places, open persecution hit the more heterodox groups, calling for total annihilation of all cults of a Bāul type.<sup>3</sup> Such reformist movements continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and are still at work today. Fatwas specifically against the Bāul and Fakir are documented in the literature.

### The current situation

What is the picture now, considering that in Bangladesh the Muslim population has grown to 90% of the total – the Hindu population having dwindled due to emigration and considering that in Indian Bengal, communal hostility is alive as elsewhere in northern India? More than ever, Bāul and Fakir tradition-bearers invoke the anti-communal teachings of Lālan, whose time was precisely that of growing reformist action in Bengal encouraging in both communities a sense of religious identity fraught with potential for conflict. Lālan was a child and lover of his particular motherland, Bengal, where the 'little people' had traditionally been mutual integrators of creeds and rites rather than opponents on communalistic grounds.

Of the many syncretistic heterodox groups and movements of the past documented in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century literature, many seem to have disappeared. Members of such groups have gone more or less underground under pressure and persecution, so it is difficult to assess what remains alive. But Lālan and Fakir presence is very much a reality alongside that of another universalis-

tic group, the Kartābhajā (in central Bengal). The Bāul and Fakir remain the largest extant group at present, numbering perhaps several hundred thousand persons.

The Hindu Bāul and the Muslim Fakir share the same tenets of an esoteric quest based on the intimate human-divine connection within every human being, cultivated through a philosophy and practices that emphasize the human body as locus and means for finding the essence of God. The path is taught in the traditional guru-disciple relationship where the guru is like the figure of the above-mentioned Sufi saint, in whom the divine is accomplished, merged with the human.

The Fakir call themselves Bāul. The Bāulin a Hindu setting do not call themselves Fakir but Vaisnav – it may be that the differentiation is connected with the influence of the respective surrounding mainstream religions. At any rate, and significantly, it appears empirically that there is more syncretism on the Fakir side than on the Bāul; the latter, in West Bengal at least, leaning more towards a strongly Vaisnav type of devotion, while the Fakir of central territorial Bengal bring together the different strands. As one Fakir of Kushtiā told me: 'There is Allah in every human being. Caitanya is the synthesis of Rādhā and Krisna, thereby there is Allah in Caitanya.'

### Continued syncretism?

There is still considerable interaction in northern Bangladesh<sup>4</sup> between the heterodox Fakir and more mainstream imams, Sufis and *mollahs* (figures of authority in the mosque and the *madrasa*). All-night debates are held between leading proponents of the two approaches. Some orthodox Muslims are known to have substantial affinities with the heterodox tradition.<sup>5</sup> In the lower strata of the population, but also increasingly in the educated urban elite, many people can be attracted to a charismatic Bāul guru, learn Bāul songs, and seek initiation. Thus the syncretic approach within the context of an Islamic country still exists.

However, the syncretic tendency, apparently the 'natural' one of the children of the Bengali motherland, is not the only factor at hand: there is the continued reformist aspiration of mainstream Islam. Many Bāul and Fakir have been subjected to harassment and persecution in recent decades and, at another level, there is the appropriation by institutions of the vivid folklore surrounding the figure of Lālan, increasingly taken over by cultural authorities as part of an official Bangladeshi identity and heritage. The shrine of Lālan at Kushtiā is no longer in the hands of the Fakir wise men; Lālan's anniversary festival is now officially organized by the local authorities. The food, traditionally given free to Fakir and Bāul initiates, had to be paid for at the 1999 festival, a major breach of an age-old rule. The local government has a construction plan underway for a big cultural complex near the shrine. By turning Lālan into a 'respectable' part of Bangladeshi heritage, will the political and religious powers-that-be succeed in sterilizing this still lively force of counterculture in-

herent in Bengali syncretism? Bangladesh is still a frontier land, from an Islamic, cultural, economic, and developmental point of view. As long as the spirit of Lālan is alive, say the Fakir, there is much this counterculture can contribute. ♦



### Notes

- Roy, A. (1983). *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- See Roy, A. and also J.N.Sarkar (1972). *Islam in Bengal*. Calcutta: Ratna Prakashan; Eaton, R. (1994). *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- See S.N. Jhā (1997). Collected articles on persecutions in *Bartikā*. Calcutta.
- I owe this information to Syed Samim, a Dhaka film-maker and a knowledgeable source on Bāul/Fakir matters. I have witnessed similar interaction in northwest Bengal.
- Such as Mansur Ali of Kushtiā, a mainstream erudite who hints at the heterodox Fakir approach in parts of his *Secret Koran* book, published perhaps about 30 years ago.

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