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EARLY SUFI-SAINTS OF BASIRHAT SUBDIVISION

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Abstract:

During the period of the Muslim rule, Bengal was a land of Sufi-saints, who mainly came from Central Asia and North India with the objective of propagating the message of Islam in Bengal. Right from the thirteenth century onwards, different Sufi-saints came to Bengal and spread the message of equality, love and harmony. Richard M. Eaton rightly remarked that the early arrival of different Sufis in the delta region played an extremely important role in the growth of Islam in Bengal. In the country of Bengal, not to speak of the cities, there was no town and no villages where saints and Sufis did not come and settle down. However, like other parts of Bengal, the soil of the Basirhat subdivision did not lag behind in welcoming the Islamic preachers and saints. Basirhat is a frontier subdivision of North 24-Pargana district in the state of West Bengal, which is geographically located in the South-Eastern part of the province. As per available records, from the fourteenth century, the Muslim Sufi-saints and preachers came to this subdivision. On the whole, this paper attempts to briefly highlight the life and contribution of some early preachers and Sufi-saints of the Basirhat subdivision.

Keywords: Islam, Bengal, Basirhat, Sufi, Saint, Preacher.

Introduction: The Sufi-saints played an important role in spreading the message of Islam in Bengal. As per available sources, before the Muslim conquest in Bengal, Arab and Persian Sufi-saints with their disciples came to this land. They along with other social works continued their cardinal works i.e. preaching for Islam. They did not return to their homeland and they started to live generations after generations around coastal areas and, to some extent, here and there of Bengal. Among them, the name of Bayazid Bustami (874 A.D.) of Chittagong, Sultan Mahmud Mahisawar (1047 A.D.) of Mahasthan, Bogra, Muhammad Sultan Rumi (1053 A.D.) of Madanpur, Mymensingh, Baba Adam (1158-1189 A.D.) of Bikrampur, Dhaka and Makdum Shah Mahmud Ghaznawi alias Rahi Pir of Mangalkot, Burdwan may be cited in this context. All these Sufi saints left enough traces of their coming to the above mentioned places in pre-Islamic Bengal. But, from after the establishment of the Muslim rule in Bengal in the thirteenth century, Sufis and Islamic preachers rapidly spread all over the land with the message of love, peace and harmony from Arabia, Persia, Central Asia etc. Thus, a large number of Sufis and Islamic preachers

flocked to Bengal in order to mobilize the process of conversion among the common people and ultimately to preach Islam. Professor Richard M. Eaton in his seminal book, '**The Rise of Islam and Bengal Frontier (1204-1760)**' rightly remarked that the early arrival of different Sufis in the delta region played an extremely important role in the growth of Islam in Bengal. Ashraf Jahangir Simnawi stated, "In the country of Bengal, not to speak of the cities, there is no town and no village where holy saints and Sufis did not come and settled down".¹ Therefore, like other parts of Bengal, the soil of the Basirhat subdivision did not lag behind in welcoming the Islamic preachers and saints.

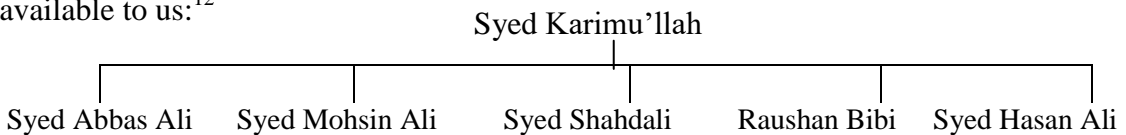
Basirhat is a frontier subdivision of North 24-Pargana district and proposed border district in the state of West Bengal. It is geographically located in the South-Eastern part of West Bengal and the south-western corner of Bangladesh. The Bangaon subdivision lies on its north and South 24-Parganas district and Sundarban to its south. The subdivision is bounded on the east by Bangladesh and on the west by Barasat subdivision. The soil of the Basirhat subdivision proved fertile for the seed of Sufism. However, it is difficult to determine the exact periods of the advent of Islamic preachers and Sufis in the subdivision or how far they contributed to the spread of Islam in the region. Anyway, available records established the fact that Sufi-saints as well as Islamic preachers came in Basirhat subdivision with particular objectives of lighting the flame of Islam since the fourteenth century. In the whole, the paper attempts to briefly highlight the life and contributions of some celebrated Islamic preachers and Sufi-saints of the Basirhat subdivision for the benefit of those who are not familiar with the early history of Islam in the said subdivision.

Syed Abbas Ali: Syed Abbas Ali (better known as Pir Gorachand) is considered as the earliest preachers of Islam in Basirhat subdivision. The *mazar* or *dargah* of this celebrated *Pir* is situated at Haroa of the subdivision. During the period of Sultan Firuj Shah of Bengal, Pir Gorachand with his twenty two *Pir* brothers came to Balanda pargana of the subdivision with missionary zeal to light the flame of Islam in the beginning of fourteenth century.² He was born in Mecca in 1265. He was the descendant of Hazrat Abu Bakar Siddiqui, the first caliph of Islam, from mother's line and of Hazrat Ali, the forth caliph of Islam, from father's line.³ He mastered the Qaderia Sufi order under the guidance of his *murshid* or *Guru* Hazrat Shah Jalal Yemani. He came to India with his *murshid* and he was in-charge to propagate Islam in the Haroa-Balanda region. Till his death, he stayed in this region with his great influence on people. Pir Gorachand tried his best to convert independent king Chandraketu of Deula or Devalaya into Islam. However, he failed in his mission but, many local Hindus of that area embraced Islam.⁴ He was martyred in a battle with him in 1373 and he was buried at Haroa on the bank of the river Vidyadhari. Sultan Alauddin Shah of Gaud built a mosque upon his grave and gave 1500 *bighas* of tax free land for its maintenance.⁵ Pir Hazrat Gorachand Razi was a non-communal person and welcomed people irrespective of religion, or caste. Many Hindus were his disciples. His *dargah* is a place of pilgrimage to the Hindus and Muslims alike and the devotees of both communities regularly visit his shrine to pay homage to him through various activities. They offer milk, sweets and various fruits as *shirni* to his *dargah* with great devotion. They also offer *manat*⁶

in the name of Pir. The influence of Pir Gorachand is still so great that many shops and establishment in Haroa region carry his name. Every year, on 12 Falgun *Urs* (death anniversary of a Pir) is celebrated here with much enthusiasm. On this day the Hindu milkmen wash the *mazar* of Pir Gorachand with milk. On the occasion of *Urs*, a huge fair is also held here. A large number of people of different caste and creeds visit this fair and showed their devotion to the *mazar* of Pir. Hospitality is offered for the visitors who came here from distance places of West Bengal as well as other states. Thus, during the time of *Urs*, the *dargah* of Pir Hazrat Gorachand Razi becomes a meeting place of the people of different religion.

Other Pir Brothers of Syed Abbas Ali: Rest of twenty one *Pir* brothers of Syed Abbas Ali spread the message of Islam in different parts of Bengal and among them, three Sufis were engaged in preaching of Islam in Sundarban area as well as Basirhat subdivision. The names of these famous saints were found as Pir Shah Ilyas, Pir Savran and Pir Hasan. They settled in Adharmanik, Hingalgange and Hasnabad respectively where their *dargahs* are still present being respected by people.⁷ Pir Hazrat Daud Akbar Razi alias Gora Sayid who was another companion of Pir Gorachand settled at Sohail of Deganga, the very adjoining place of Haroa.⁸ From here he carried his missionary activities to preach Islam. The exact date of birth and death of mentioned Sufis are unknown to us.

Hazrat Jainab Khatun: The grave of *Pirani* (fem. of *Pir*) Hazrat Jainab Khatun is situated in the western bank of the river Ichamati at Taraguniya of Basirhat subdivision. She was born in Mecca in 1279. Celebrated Pir Hazrat Shah Abbas Ali Razi or Makki alias Pir Gorachand of Haroa was her elder brother. She came to India for preaching Islam along with Syed Shahdali, another of her brother.⁹ She was died in Bengal in 1342. She is more popularly known as Raushan Bibi or Raushan Ara among the local people.¹⁰ Most probably she was a celibate. But according to one view, Pir Gorachand Razi gave his sister Raushan Bibi in marriage to Syed Sadu'llah, an ancestor of Titumir.¹¹ Pir Gorachand came to India before his sister to preach Islam. However, it is not known whether the brother and sister could ever meet each other after their arrival in India. Therefore, the view about Raushan Bibi's marriage is not corroborated by facts. However, a short family tree of Raushan Bibi is available to us:¹²



The devotees of Raushan Bibi have built a beautiful *dargah* as a mark of their devotion. The zimmdars (trustee) of the *dargah* have kept the place very neat and clean. Incense-lamp is also burnt regularly at the *dargah*. Sometimes her devotees offer flowers, fruits and sweets at the *dargah* as *manat*.¹³ Every year, in the month of Chaitra, *Urs* is celebrated here with much enthusiasm. On this occasion, a fair is also held here which lasts for nearly ten days. A huge number of people visit this fair, and they are entertained by the bandsmen, qawwal-singers and the night sky, beautifully decorated with fireworks (*atish-bazi*).

According to the opinion of Sokar Ali (b.1266 B.S), a *khadem* of the *dargah*, Raja Krishna Chandra Roy had donated three hundred and sixty five *bighas* of lands in the name of Pirani Raushan Ara.¹⁴ Only a small portion of that land now remains under the supervision of the *khadimdars* (a person who has charge of a tomb).

The existence of some popular stories at Taragunia about Raushan Bibi is indicative of her venerated image in the region. According to one such story, Hazrat Gorachand Razi and his sister Raushan Ara died many years ago. In spite of that Pir Gorachand visits Raushan Bibi's *dargah* on some particular days of the year to converse with his sister. According to local belief, a few years ago, some among the local residents had heard this conversation after midnight.¹⁵ *Pirani* Hazrat Raushan Bibi's *dargah* is a place of pilgrimage to the Muslims and Hindus alike and both offer *shirni* (votive sweets) and *chiraghi* (votive lamp) to the *dargah* with heartfelt devotion. After *Urs*, the devotees receive sacred water from the *dargah* like the Hindu tradition. The Hindu ladies often hang bricks after fastening them with cord at the temple of Goddess Shashthi with the expectation of having children. Such practice is also common among the female devotees at Raushan Bibi's *dargah*.¹⁶

Other Notable Pioneers of Islam in Basirhat: Khan Jahan Ali (a great Sufi saint as well as ruler) was one of the prominent figures in the conquest of the Southern Bengal as well as preaching of Islam. During the reign of Ilyas Sahi dynasty (1435-1487) he became the ruler of south Bengal and organized Islamic tours in different parts of south-eastern Bengal. It is said that a team of his followers preached Islam in the areas of Basirhat and Debhata (presently in Bangladesh).¹⁷ After his death in 1459 Chand Khan, one of his disciples was given the responsibility of preaching Islam in Basirhat as well as Sundarban area. Natui Shah, one of the disciples of Hazrat Shah Jalal (RA), also came for Islam in Sundarban area, who was found to carry his missionary zeal in Syadpur and Jalalpur near Taki.¹⁸ Besides, a good number of Sufis and Islamic preachers settled in the Basirhat locality time to time for preaching Islam. It is found that their spirit abetted the process of conversion among the non-Muslims. The tomb of Hazrat Shahmia and Sahandi Saheb are at Sonepukur of Basirhat and Bakra of Hingalange.¹⁹ They also came to this land for the cause of Islam. Hazrat Syed Shah Waliullah migrating from Bagdad settled at Basirhat during the period of Sultan Hussain Shah and preached Islam at Basirhat, Hasnabad and its adjoining areas.²⁰ His tomb is situated at Astana Road near *Basirhat Shahi Masjid*. Molla Kutubuddin Bagdadi (Bara Bagdadi) came for Islam in Basirhat from Bagdad during the time of Maharaja Pratapaditya.²¹ He was granted a *lakheraj* property of 700 *bighas* as a *murshid* of Badsah of Delhi. His descendants are still living as Kazi families in Basirhat and Satkhira locality.

Similarly, during the period of the Mughals, Sufi-saints had also come to the subdivision for the cause of Islam. Sufi Ramzan Ali came to Basirhat for preaching Islam right before the fight between Man Singh, the commander of Akbar and Pratapaditya, one of the *Bara bhuiya* rulers of Bengal.²² His shrine is situated near M.B.S. Neora High School in Basirhat. The shrine of Pirani Khas Bibi is at Khaspur. She is still remembered for her philanthropic activities in promoting the greatness of Islam. She was descendant of Hazrat Abu Bakar Siddiqui, the first caliph of Islam. During the time of Genghis Khan's invasion of India,

some of her ancestors came to India and settled in the land. She was born in Delhi during the time of the emperor Akbar. When Man Singh was sent to subdue Maharaja Pratapaditya (the ruler of Jessore), she came to Bengal with him and permanently settled in Khaspur of Baduria police station in the subdivision.²³ During the time of Jahangir she was granted the *lakheraj* property. She was died and buried here. Her descendants engaging as *khadem* of her *dargah* are still at the village. Incense-lamps are regularly offered by her devotees at her *dargah*. It is said that the village was named for the majesty of her name. All the local Hindu-Muslim devotees showed great devotion to her shrine. Moreover, the footsteps of a good number of Sufis were noticed to the adjoining areas of the subdivision, who had enough influence on the people of this region.

Conclusion: A good number of Sufi-saints had come to Basirhat subdivision time to time from outside with particular objective from the fourteenth century and permanently settled here during the Muslim rule in Bengal. In fact, they made the subdivision the cradle home of their life. They mostly came as messengers of equality, love, peace and harmony, while some of them were especially sent to this land by their spiritual guides with the particular intention of preaching of Islam and its doctrine. Their honest life-leading, immaculate countenances and refined manners, the ability of performing miracles, easily attracted and enchanted ordinary people of this region towards them. For instances, a large number of common people embraced Islam in the land. In the subdivision the revered Sufis and Islamic preachers earned respect and love from their followers during their living time as well as after their death. The places where they were to be lying buried, are venerated by the people even today. The old *dargah*, *mazars* of the Sufi-saints in the subdivision may be treated as archeological evidences but at the same time they help to ascertain the extent of the Muslim habitations in the subdivision.

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- 3) Jabbar, M.A., *Balanda Chandraketu Itikotha*, Haroa, 1390 B.S., p.11; Ahmed, Wakil, op.cit
- 4) Das, Girindra Nath, op.cit,
- 5) Ali, Md Abbas, *Kabar Alope Basirhat Sahi Masjid*, Basirhat, 1996, p. 127
- 6) The word *manat* literally means service offered to anyone. In our case it means service offered to Pir Gorachand (who died several centuries ago) with the expectation of getting his favour.
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- 10) Siddiqui, Abdul Gafur, *Balandar Pir Hazrat Gorachand Razi*, cited in Das, Girindra Nath, op.cit, p. 328. The page number of Abdul Gafur Siddiqui's book '*Balandar Pir Hazrat Gorachand Razi*' was not mentioned by Girindra Nath Das.
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- 14) *Ibid*; Girindra Nath Das, op.cit, p. 329
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- 17) *Satyer Dishari*, 16th year, 2nd to 4th issue and 17th year, 1st issue, Barasat, December 2016, p. 43
- 18) *ibid*
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