How Sufism shaped Bengal's cultural stage

Sufi appropriation of the indigenous performance tradition in pre-modern Bengal

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Mānik and his twin brother Gopta appear at King Jayanūr Bādśāh's palace gate during a Mānik jātrā performance by the Śobhnā Mānik Jātrā troupe in Khulna, 2–3 November 2007. PHOTO: **SYED JAMIL AHMED.**

For about a century and a half after the beginning of the Muslim conquest of Bengal in 1204, the region was torn by strife and tumult. Hence, no serious initiatives could be undertaken by the Muslim rulers in the field of performing arts. However, with the rise of Shamsuddin Ilyas Shah in 1352 and the consequent independence of Bengal from the Sultanate of Delhi, sufficient political stability gradually emerged for the land to prosper through its natural produce, manufacturing and trade. As a result, Bengal emerged as a land of prosperity and abundance. It was in this Bengal that a court poet named Shāh Muhammad Sagīr composed a verse narrative titled *Yousuf-Zolekhā* at the behest of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah (1389–1410), the reigning king of Gauda (north-eastern and northern Bengal). At its core is a simple message that only through unquestioning surrender to Allah and His commands can human passion, such as Zolekha's, find fulfilment in union with divine beauty embodied in Yousuf (Muhammad Enamul Huq, ed., *Yousuf-Zoleka by Shah Muhammad Sagir*, University of Dhaka, 1984).

Based on the Qur'an (Surah al-Yousuf, Chapter 12) and retold numerous times throughout the Muslim world, most famously by the Persian poet Jami (1414–1492), Sagir's composition is indeed inclined towards Sufism in the underlying struggle between Islamic 'orthodoxy' and Sufi 'heterodoxy' in medieval Bengal. For it upholds the teachings of Islam, Islamic ethics and the greatness of the religion through the love story of Yousuf and Zolekha. Here, it is worth remembering that, for the Sufi mystics, Zolekha "simply represented someone purely and madly in love", although, throughout the history of Islamic cultures, she has repeatedly been "blamed, condemned, and vilified by conservative religious authorities in the Islamic world" (Elif Shafak, "Women Writers, Islam, and the Ghost of Zulaikha", *Words Without Borders*, December 2005).

In contrast to the exoteric *(zāhir)* interpretation of the Qur'an, the Sufis insist on an esoteric *(bātin)* interpretation, and the narrative of *Yousuf-Zolekha* arguably exemplifies a veiled Sufi effort to interpret Zolekha's love for Yousuf in the Qur'an as human love for the divine.

In order to understand how, if at all, Sagir's *Yousuf-Zolekha* was performed, it is necessary to examine the text, the testimonies of contemporary Chinese diplomats visiting Bengal and evidence relating to an older text named *Gīta-govinda*.

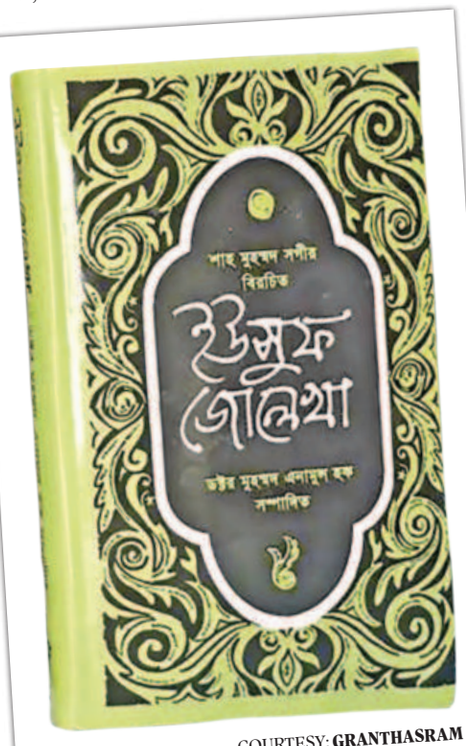
Firstly, an examination of Sagir's text shows that many of its chapters begin with a note specifying a particular *raga* and *tala* (melodic mode and rhythmic pattern in South Asian classical music), indicating that the text was intended to be sung with musical accompaniment. Besides, numerous references to the elite cultural practice of hosting dances performed by courtesans can be found in *Yousuf-Zolekha* (this practice is also evident in medieval Bengali Muslim literary works such as *Saiful Muluk-Badiujjamal* by Dona Gazi, *Lalmati-Saiful Mulk* by Abdul Hakim and *Gul-e-Bakawali* by Nawajish). Moreover, some chapters of the text are composed partly as verse narratives and partly as operatic librettos.

Secondly, the literary account provided by the famous Chinese diplomat Ma Huan shortly after Sagir composed his text demonstrates that, among the various professional classes found in Bengal, one class skilled in singing and dancing was often called upon by the elites to enliven their feasts (Ma Huan, *Ying Yai sheng lan*, cited in P. C. Bagchi, "Political Relations between Bangal and China in the Pathan Period", *Visva-Bharati Annals*, Vol. 1, 1945, pp. 117–118; Ma Huan visited Bengal with Ming expeditions in 1413–15, 1421–23 and 1431–33, and compiled his record between 1425 and 1432).

In another record of Chinese missions to Bengal, compiled by Huang Sing-ts'eng in 1520, it is further observed that when the people of Bengal "invite guests to a formal feast there is dancing and songs by actresses and dancing girls for the amusement of the guests" (Huang Sing-ts'eng, *Si yang ch'ao kung tien lu*, cited in Bagchi, "Political Relations", pp. 124–125).

Thirdly, *Gīta-govinda*, composed in 1200 CE (during the reign of the preceding Hindu Sena dynasty), demonstrates some similarities with *Yousuf-Zolekha*, in that the beginning of each of *Gīta-govinda*'s chapters is also marked with *raga* and *tala*, and that it is composed partly as an operatic libretto and partly as "narrative verses identifying the singer of a song or elaborating its context" (Barbara Stoler Miller, ed. and trans., *Gitagovinda of Jayadeva: Love Song of the Dark Lord, Motilal Banarsidass*, 1984, p. 9).

Bringing these three strands of evidence together, it can reasonably be concluded that the courts of the



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The cover of the seventh edition of Yousuf-Zoleka by Shah Muhammad Sagir, edited by Muhammad Enamul Huq and published by Mowla Brothers in 2021.

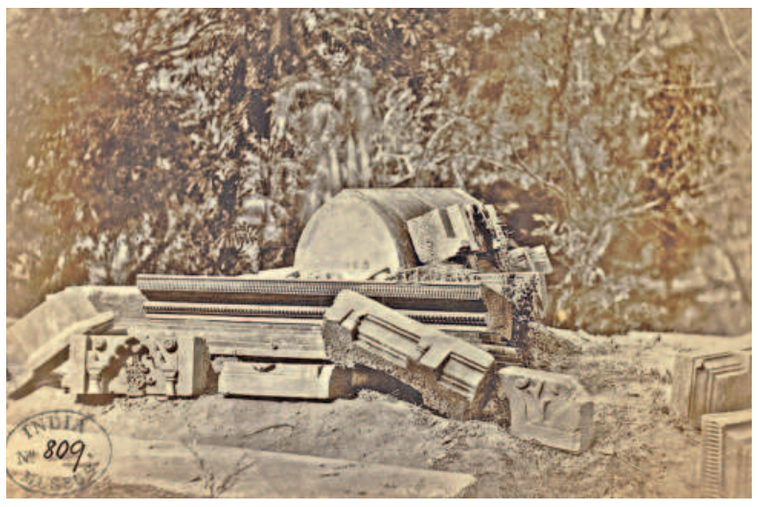
Muslim sultans of Bengal had borrowed the performance idiom of Gīta-govinda by synthesising poetry, music and dance with new metaphorical content harmonised with the belief system of the Muslim rulers. This was similar to the process adopted by the Mughals and the north Indian Muslim feudal lords, through which a form of performance based on the theme of the divine love of Rādhā and Krishna was assimilated to give shape to what is today known as *Kathak* (Gayatri Chattopadhyaya, *Bharater Nrittakala*, Calcutta: Navapatra, 1385 Bengali Era, pp. 251–265).

In a form close to the performance mechanics, if not the idiom, of *Kathak* and *Odissi*, the performance of *Yousuf-Zolekha* in Bengal was possibly presented as a song-and-dance *(nāt-gīt)* performance by a group of dancers representing characters (who mimetically enacted the narrative), accompanied by singers rendering the narrative and instrumentalists providing rhythm and music. The part of the text composed as an operatic libretto may have been presented as a rendition of songs by the dancers in character, accompanied by instrumental musicians. The dancers belonged to the same class as the *deva-dāsis* (temple danseuses), about whom one frequently reads in literature from and about the Sena dynasty in the 12th century, most famously in *Sekasubhodaya (R. C. Majumdar and R. C. Hazra, "Society", in R. C. Majumdar, ed., The History of Bengal, Vol. 1, Hindu Period, University of Dacca, 1943, p. 619; Halayudha Misra, Sekasubhodaya, ed. Sukumar Sen, Asiatic Society, 1963)*.

The point not to be missed here is that Huang Sing-ts'eng's observations on the costumes of actresses in 15th-century Bengal are remarkably similar to those of *Odissi* dancers today. In the Chinese record, the actresses are described as having worn "lined cloth in light red colour with decorations of flowers", while "the lower part of their body" was "wrapped" with a "coloured silken sash". They also adorned themselves with pendants, necklaces and bangles richly decorated with precious stones (Huang Sing-ts'eng, *Si yang ch'ao kung tien lu, cited in P. C. Bagchi, "Political Relations between Bangal and China in the Pathan Period", Visva-Bharati Annals, Vol. 1, 1945, p. 125)*.

If Shah Muhammad Sagir's Yousuf-Zolekha is a veiled exposition of the Sufi philosophy of the human relationship with the Divine, Lāili-Majnu by Bahram Khan is explicitly and unambiguously oriented in the same direction. For Laili-Majnu (or Layli wa-Majnun, as it is known in Persian literature) is widely recognised among Muslims as a foundational paradigm of the human relationship with the Divine. Popularly known in the 'West' as "the Romeo and Juliet of the East" (*George Gordon Byron, The Giaour:* A Fragment of a Turkish Tale, London: John Murray, 1814, p. 61, note 3), the narrative of Laili-Majnu recounts the legendary love of Layli and Qayes, who face numerous tribulations because of their love, so much so that Qayes becomes obsessed with his beloved and earns the epithet Majnu (*'crazy'*). The narrative ends with the heart-rending deaths of both lovers.

In Bengal, Bahram Khan composed *Laili-Majnu* between 1543 and 1553, when the poet was a high official under the feudal ruler of Chittagong (south-eastern Bangladesh), and the territory was under Arakanese rule (Ahmad Sharif, *Laili-Majnu by Daulat Wazir Bahram Khan*, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1992, p. 17).



The ruins of the tomb of Sultan Ghiyasuddin Azam Shah (r. 1389–1410) in Sonargaon, near Dhaka. During his reign, Shah Muhammad Sagir composed Yousuf-Zolekha. Photograph: W. Brennand, 1872, Archaeological Survey of India Collections.

The performance idiom of *Laili-Majnu* (16th century) appears to have been similar to that of Shah Muhammad Sagir's *Yousuf-Zolekha* (15th century), because most of the text is composed as narration in verse, with a small part as an operatic libretto, and raga and/or tala is mentioned at the beginning of each episode. In all probability, these song-and-dance performances were presented in *rang-mahals* (performance mansions), where spectators would be seated on rugs and cushions along three sides of a hall, the musicians and singers on the fourth, and the dancers would perform in the space thus enclosed.

This, then, was the song-and-dance performance that the Muslim elites of medieval Bengal had devised in the 15th century: by appropriating an earlier tradition, they had fashioned a means of envisioning the Sufi principle of love (ishq) of the created (asheq, "lover") for the Creator (mashooq, "Beloved"). If religion is "a system of symbols which acts to [...] formulating conceptions of a general order of existence", then it follows that the acquisition of an Islamic identity by the incipient Muslim society of the period under review would have entailed an assertion of a new system of symbols against the previous system of the Hindus. By devising song-and-dance performances based on the Sufi principle of love, the Muslim elites had attempted to displace the conception of existence encapsulated in Radha-Krishna lore, initially with Islamic lore encapsulated in a partly similar 'illicit' relationship, as in *Yousuf-Zolekha*, and then with an altogether different Islamic lore of 'insane' passion, as in *Laili-Majnu*.

Soon after Emperor Akbar's invasion of Bengal in 1575 and its subsequent subjugation by the end of the century, the region was reduced to the status of a province of the Mughal Empire. Consequently, Bengali literary works lost royal patronage, a loss that contributed to the reduction of the song-and-dance performances of the Sultani era to the erotic dances of courtesans (citing contemporary accounts, including *Baharistan-i-Ghaibi* and *Siyar-ul-Mutakherin*, M. A. Rahim observes that "it was the practice of subadars and nawabs to maintain many songstresses and dancing girls"; Muhammad Abdur Rahim, Social and Cultural History of Bengal, Vol. I, Pakistan Historical Society, 1963, pp. 151–152).

As a result, the song-and-dance performances of the independent sultans of Bengal became extinct, surviving today only occasionally in the form of *puñthi pāth* performances, in which a man recites the text in a melodic tune before an audience, in a manner not too dissimilar from the style in which Urdu poets attending poetic symposia recite in *tarannum* (Regula Qureshi, "The Chanting of Urdu Poetry", *Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 13, № 3, September 1969, pp. 425–468).

The future course of Islamic performance in Bengal was further affected by an exceptional turn of events, namely the rise of the peasant cultivators of eastern Bengal. Spurred by the phenomenal levels of agrarian and demographic expansion in the region, the peasant cultivators had, by the 17th and 18th centuries, uniquely assimilated Islam as a system of symbols originating in the Arab world into their agrarian worldview, giving rise to their distinct system for formulating conceptions of their general order of existence. Thus, it was the peasant cultivators who emerged as "the dominant carriers of Islamic civilization" in the Bengal delta (Richard Eaton, "Who are the Bengal Muslims? Conversion and Islamization in Bengal", in Rafiuddin Ahmad, ed., *Understanding the Bengal Muslims: Interpretative Essays*, University Press Limited, 2001, p. 43). The notion of the *pirs* is inextricably enmeshed with this class.

The significance of the pirs needs to be understood not only by identifying them as "holy men" but also as "saints whose lives served as metaphors for the expansion of both religion and agriculture" (Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760*, Oxford University Press, 1994, p. 207). Some of them, such as Shah Jalal al-Din Tabrizi, Shah Jalal Mujarrad and Khan Jahan Ali, metaphorically linked Islam with the economy of the hinterland and the politics of the state.



A performance of the indigenous Potuya Gan tradition narrating the stories of Gazi Pir. PHOTO: **SYED JAMIL AHMED.**

Other pirs served the grassroots, the peasant cultivators and the entire range of professions associated with them, in shaping the conceptual framework of their existence, their struggle for subsistence and their culture.

It was around this latter group of *pirs* that the peasant cultivators fashioned an extraordinary corpus of narratives seeking to promulgate their miracles, and performances were mobilised to extol their efficacy. Most important among these *pirs*, who are still venerated through performances in Bangladesh today, are Gāzī Pīr, Mādār Pīr, Khwāj Khizir, Satya Pīr, Mānik Pīr, Sonā Pīr, Ek-dil Shāh, Gorāchānd Shāh, Mā Māi Champā and Bana Bibi.

Satya Pīr, Mānik Pīr, Sonā Pīr and Bana Bibi are also mythical figures, but, as their names indicate, they present a curious anomaly in that all of them combine Bengali names with the appellation of a Muslim *pir*. These *pirs* were created through what Eaton terms 'the process of identification', by which Islamic superhuman agencies actually merged with local Bengali agencies (Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760*, p. 269).

As part of the process of identification, the Bengali Muslim peasant cultivators began to devise their distinct forms of performance from the 17th century by appropriating the mode of performance eulogising Hindu deities and transplanting their own narratives extolling the efficacy of the *pirs. Suffixed with the nomenclature of gān (literally, "song"), these performances can still be seen in Bangladesh today. Based on a long narrative composition in verse, these performances are presented through song, music, dance and explanatory interjections in pro*se. Most of the narratives are sung by a lead narrator, who portrays the actions of the characters in the third Hindu Vaishnava performance known as *krishna jātrā* (*jātrā* performance based on Krishna lore).

Each of these forms of performance, sung narration (*gān*) as well as character impersonation *(jātrā)*, presents a repertoire of tales extolling the *pir* to whom the form is dedicated. One of these is invariably a hagiography of the *pir,* while the remaining tales recount his or her miraculous deeds in rescuing followers in times of crisis. The objective, thus, is to instil faith in the spectators in the efficacious powers of the *pir* and win followers.

Invariably, all these performances extolling the miracles of the *pirs* were challenged by Islamic 'orthodoxy', most prominently with the rise of the Faraizi movement led by Haji Shariatullah in 1818. Consequently, many of the performances based on the miracles of the pirs faced serious challenges and even extinction. Nevertheless, as the Faraizi movement began to lose momentum by the fourth quarter of the 19th century, performances extolling the *pirs* re-emerged with vigour.

More recently, towards the end of the 20th century, all these performances have faced another wave of extreme intolerance from puritanical Wahhabi Islamists. More importantly, with the rise of globalisation and the onslaught of digital technology, all the performances discussed in this brief review may undergo a tectonic shift in terms of their spectatorship, and may eventually die out or metamorphose into vastly different performance vocabularies.

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