

## **LOCATING ISLAM IN THE HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE OF SOUTH ASIA: REFLECTIONS ON POLITICS, SOCIETY AND CULTURE**

**SURINDER SINGH, PUNJAB UNIVERSITY, CHANDIGARH, INDIA**

This paper proposes a widening of the scope of Indology, so that it includes South Asian Islam with all its richness and complexity. Our argument is based on the premise that (i) Islam constitutes an important ingredient in the making of Indian culture, (ii) sizeable Muslim communities have evolved in different parts of South Asia since the early eighth century and (iii) a large corpus of literature has been produced on various aspects of Islam during the twentieth century. The paper focuses on three major historical dimensions of Islam viz. the emergence of the Indo-Muslim states, expansion of sufi networks and growth of Islamic acculturation. While analyzing the various approaches to the study of these dimensions, this paper also identifies the ways to deepen existing knowledge on issues of vital interest. In particular, it underlines the need to retrieve the lived experience of Muslim communities from the rich stock of oral traditions that have been handed down across centuries.

Indology is understood as a complex of disciplines that were engaged in reconstructing the history of the Indian subcontinent, with particular reference to language, literature, religion, art and culture. Emerging in Europe during the early nineteenth century, Indology was stimulated partly by the administrative requirements of British colonialism and partly by the romance of the Orientalists for the East. Sanskrit became an essential subject in the universities of the West, while texts of Sanskrit classics began to be published. As research came to encompass Buddhism and Jainism, attention was turned towards Prakrit and Pali. In addition to religion and literature, studies were carried out in chronicles, epigraphy, numismatics and ethnography. However, the vision of the Indologists was confined only to what has come to be designated as Ancient India. By accident or design, they had scrupulously avoided any engagement with Medieval India, perhaps justifying this self-imposed restraint on the grounds that the period was politically dominated by people (Muslims) who were foreign to the Indian subcontinent and also professed a creed (Islam) which had not evolved on Indian soil. This particular trend in European Indology was faithfully replicated by the Asiatic Society of Bengal, which was founded in 1784 and which benefited from the pioneering contributions of William Jones, H. T. Colebrook, H. H. Wilson and James Prinsep (Kejariwal 1988, p. 222). It is true that, during the second half of the nineteenth century, it began to publish the texts of Persian chronicles under the *Bibliotheca Indica* series, yet this effort could not correct the wide imbalance in studies on the Indian subcontinent. It was Munshi Nawal Kishore (1836–1895) of Lucknow,<sup>1</sup> who

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<sup>1</sup> A comparison of the medieval Persian texts, which were simultaneously published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Naval Kishore Press, indicates some sort of tacit competition between the two publishing houses (Stark 2008, p. 301).

established the largest publishing house of Asia and went on to publish a large number of medieval works in Persian that pertained to religion, literature and culture.<sup>2</sup>

### FEATURES OF THE INDO-MUSLIM STATES

Modern historical writing on medieval South Asia started at the beginning of the twentieth century. Several scholars – Indian and British, professional and amateur, imperialist and nationalist – devoted themselves to reconstructing the political history of the subcontinent. They focused either on the rise and fall of dynasties (Ilbarīs, Khaljīs, Tughlaqs and Lodīs) or the individual Mughal emperors, who had enjoyed long reigns and had left behind ample record of their activities.<sup>3</sup> These modern writings saw the medieval ruler as a prime mover of political and cultural developments because, owing to his unlimited power and wealth, he undertook frequent military campaigns and patronized creative arts. At the same time, attempts were made to understand the structure and functioning of the administrative institutions at central and provincial levels. Some studies were exclusively devoted to the revenue system, military organisation and judicial department. A characteristic feature of these works was an overwhelming dependence on Persian chronicles that were accepted as authoritative and authentic. As the influence of Marxism and the *Annales* School increased, particularly during the post-second world war period, a considerable advance occurred in the choice of subjects and methods of analysis. Historians uncovered the oppressive character of the Mughal state that extracted the social surplus from a stratified peasantry through the twin instruments of graded military ranks (*mansabs*) and revenue assignments (*jāgīrs*).<sup>4</sup> Explorations were undertaken into the introduction of new technology, industrial production, commercial enterprises and urban growth. Detailed studies appeared on the different regions of South Asia, with a focus on political structures and socio-economic formations.

In spite of the large corpus of literature on the political history of medieval South Asia, the possibilities for further research have not been exhausted. It is possible to reframe our questions and the manner we choose to answer them. We may go beyond the oft-used official chronicles and try to garner evidence from archaeological sources, regional histories and oral traditions. We may rethink our notions about the differences between the Muslim and Hindu, Turk and Rajput, foreign and indigenous,

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<sup>2</sup> An outstanding example is Amir Khusrau's *Ijāz-i-Khusrawī* which was brought out in 1876. A large prose work comprising five chapters, it contains specimens of elegant prose suitable for various purposes and explains the use of various artifices. It is interspersed with valuable evidence on social and economic conditions prevailing in northern India during the Sultanate period (Mirza 1974, pp. 216–221).

<sup>3</sup> In this context, we may mention the writings of Muhammad Aziz Ahmad, Kishori Saran Lal, Agha Mahdi Husain, Beni Prasad, Banarsi Prasad Saksena, Jadunath Sarkar and A. L. Srivastava. The structure and working of administrative institutions have been studied by R. P. Tripathi, W. H. Moreland, Abdul Aziz, Ishtiaq Husain Qureshi and P. Saran.

<sup>4</sup> In a seminal work, which has exercised tremendous influence on subsequent medieval studies, the author discusses such questions as the ownership of land, function of land grants, share of intermediaries in the social surplus and causes of the agrarian revolts (Habib 1999, pp. 123–35, 179–87, 390–405).

urban and rural, sacred and profane, Persian and vernacular. We may also like to place historical changes in a long term perspective and, thus, discern continuities cutting across conventional time frames. We may examine the efficacy of these proposals by taking a fresh look at the process of state formation in Punjab during the fourteenth century. We find that the Tughlaq rulers, who were related to many Punjabi women, had intimate knowledge of the social structure of the region and this advantage enabled them to initiate new strategies for consolidating their rule. In an attempt to weave a new political fabric, they developed alliances with a variety of local elements – tribal chiefs, rural intermediaries and sufi establishments (Singh 2008b, pp. 21–32). A reading of the following episode shows that local linkages, which were forged by Fīrūz Śāh Tughlaq (reign 1351–1388), enabled him to undertake agrarian expansion in south-east Punjab through a network of canals (Baranī 1862, pp. 567–570; ‘Aff 1890, pp. 124–128). This exercise involved the settlement of new villages, creation of new administrative centres and foundation of new urban spaces. This episode, which occurred in two different places and at two different times, provides us with an opportunity to find whether or not Islam (or for that matter religious particularism of any variety) played any role in the process of state formation as well as of socio-cultural evolution.

During his days as a prince, Fīrūz Śāh Tughlaq was hunting deer in the suburbs of Thanesar, a town situated between Ambala and Panipat. Having got separated from his armed retinue, he spent the night in a village. His hosts were two brothers, Sādhū and Sahāran, who were landholders (*zamīndārs*). They organized a drinking party in order to assess the qualities of the guest. Their beautiful sister served liquor to the guest, who was enraptured by her beauty. Sādhū’s wife sought to know the identity of the guest, who could be offered the girl in marriage. Fīrūz revealed that he was the cousin of Sultān Muḥammad bin Tughlaq and, as such, he was the heir to the throne of Delhi. Sādhū’s wife proposed that the girl might be married to Fīrūz as he was enamoured by her beauty and their own family would gain material benefits from the alliance. The marriage ceremony (*nikāh*) was performed and Fīrūz returned to Delhi along with his bride. Sādhū and Sahāran, who accompanied their sister to the capital, remained in the constant presence of the prince and embraced Islam (Manjhu bin Akbar 1958, pp. 6–9). As time passed, Fīrūz became the ruler of the Delhi Sultanate. The two brothers-in-law became the disciples of Syed Jalāl al-Dīn Bukhārī,<sup>5</sup> the famous Suhrawardī saint of Uch, who was an intimate friend of the Sultān. Muẓaffar Khān, the son of Sahāran, entered into state service and was posted at Uch. Like his father, he also became a disciple of Bukhārī. One day, Muẓaffar Khān organized a sumptuous meal for a group of mendicants who had assembled in Bukhārī’s hospice (*khānqāh*). Pleased at the conduct of his disciple, Bukhārī conferred the kingdom of Gujarat as a boon on Muẓaffar Khān and his descendants for twelve generations (Manjhu bin

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<sup>5</sup> Syed Jalāl al-Dīn Bukhārī (1308–1384) received his education at Multān under the care of Ruknuddīn Abū Fateh. Having travelled extensively in different parts of the Islamic world, he acquired the title of Makhdūm-i-Jahāniyān Jahāngāst. His hospice at Uch became an active centre of learning owing to his scholarly effort. During his frequent visits to Delhi, he presented the petitions of people for royal intervention. His mystical discourses were available in half a dozen compilations (Sabir 2009, pp. 97–118).

Akbar 1958, pp. 10–11). The process of state formation, as indicated by this episode, reveals a triangular alliance that involved a warrior ruling class, rural intermediaries and prominent sufis.

### STUDIES ON SUFI NETWORKS

In India, historians belonging to the Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, took the lead in reconstructing the history of sufism. In the initial stages, they felt attracted towards the Cīstī order, which had developed a strong network in north-western India during the Sultanate period. They realized that the task could proceed only if a distinction was drawn between genuine and spurious sources. Mohammad Habib's painstaking analysis revealed that only three works – *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, *Khair al-Majālis* and *Siyār al-Awliyā* – were authentic and, therefore, indispensable for explorations in the growth and expansion of the Cīstī order. At the same time, we were cautioned regarding the existence of a large mass of spurious sufi literature. Claimed as mystical discourses (*malfūzāt*) of prominent Cīstīs from Šaiḫ Uṭṭhman Hārūnī to Šaiḫ Nāsir al-Dīn Maḥmūd Cirāgh-i Dehli, each of these was said to have been compiled by their leading disciple. It was alleged that the fabricated works inculcated principles that were at variance with the ideas expounded in *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād* and *Khair al-Majālis* by Šaiḫ Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā and Šaiḫ Nāsir al-Dīn Maḥmūd Cirāgh-i Dehli respectively. Not only this, the authors of fabricated works had committed blunders about well known facts of history. The profusion of spurious works was attributed to a convergence of vested interest of several groups – purchasers, calligraphists, compilers and booksellers (Habib 1950, pp. 401–429).

These findings of Mohammad Habib exercised a strong influence on Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, who emerged as a leading authority on sufism during the post-independence period.<sup>6</sup> Nizami traced the contribution of five major Cīstī saints who constituted an unbroken chain of spiritual genealogy. The discussions revolved around the development of spiritual territories (*wilāyat*), cultivation of extreme poverty, dependence on unasked charity (*futūh*), organisation of hospices (*khānqāhs*), service of humanity, training of disciples and aloofness from the state. The popularity of Cīstīs among the people has been attributed to their understanding of Indian conditions and religious attitudes, besides the willingness to assimilate indigenous customs. On the other hand, the Suhrawardīs stood in sharp contrast to the Cīstīs, owing to their close association with the contemporary rulers and accumulation of wealth. In an attempt to explain the limited sway of the Suhrawardīs, Nizami argues that unlike the Cīstīs, who believed in the control of emotional life as prerequisite to the control of external behaviour, the Suhrawardīs tackled the problem from the other end and emphasized the necessity of regulating actions prior to the control of emotions (Nizami 2002, pp. 191–192).

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<sup>6</sup> In 1953, Nizami brought out in Urdu a large treatise on the Cīstī order from its origin to the nineteenth century. In addition to nearly 138 articles on various aspects of Islamic mysticism, he has produced in English detailed biographical studies on Šaiḫ Farīduddīn Gaṭī-i-Šakar, Šaiḫ Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā and Šaiḫ Nāsir al-Dīn Maḥmūd Cirāgh-i Dehli (Nizami 1997, pp. 65–75).

Among several sufi orders, musical sessions (*samāʿ*) were organized as a means to intensify spiritual consciousness and hasten the journey of the seeker on the spiritual path. The Cīstīs surpassed other sufi orders in popularizing musical assemblies as indispensable to spiritual growth, though the latter (Suhrawardīs and Qadīrīs) also practiced it to a limited extent. Major Cīstī sources, *Fawāʾid al-Fuʾād* and *Siyār al-Awliyā*, give sufficient space to the practice, while some Cīstī sufis (Šaikḥ Ḥamid al-Dīn Nāgaurī Suwālī and Maulānā Fakḥr al-Dīn Zarrādī) have written books in support of the practice.<sup>7</sup> It is surprising that modern writers, Nizami and Rizvi, have hesitated in accepting the significance of music in the spiritual quest. During the heyday of the Delhi Sultanate, the people of the capital – Qawwāls, sufis and ordinary citizens – treated sufi music as a natural right and asserted it with all the force at their command. On one occasion, they organized a massive demonstration against a royal order prohibiting musical performances. Since this was a unique public protest, we need to have a close look at it.

Sultān Ghiāth al-Dīn Tughlaq (reign 1320–1325) had imposed a strict ban on musical assemblies (*samāʿ*). In fact, he had ordered that if any musical note escaped from the mouth of a Qawwāl, his tongue would be pulled out. As a result, the practice of *samāʿ* was wiped out from the social life of Delhi. In these distressing circumstances, Hasan Qawwāl, who had been appointed as the chief of Qawwāls by Šaikḥ Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā, passed by the hospice (*jamāʿat khānā*) of Šaikḥ Wajih al-Dīn Uthman Siyāh Sunāmī (hereafter Sunāmī). Sunāmī, who was extremely fond of *samāʿ*, invited Hasan Qawwāl to come inside and to sing something in his characteristic style, but in his ears alone. Hasan Qawwāl expressed his reluctance on the grounds that the Sultān had forbidden even the recitation of the Quran in a melodious voice. Sunāmī resorted to persuasion and, fixing the chain on the door, agreed to listen at a low pitch. On hearing the mystical verses, Sunāmī stood up in a state of ecstasy (*wajd*) and requested Hasan Qawwāl to sing in a loud voice. The singer threw all caution to the winds and began to sing without inhibition. In a short time, a large number of people, including two hundred Qawwāls and several sufis, joined the musical assembly. The gathering swelled to thousands of people who could be placed in two categories – those who were swayed by feelings of spiritual ecstasy and those who were interested only in amusement.

The congregation assumed the form of a procession and, led by Sunāmī, marched from Delhi to Tughlaqābād which was a distance of one league (*farsang*). The Sultān learnt that Sunāmī was leading a procession of Qawwāls and sufis, who were singing and advancing in a state of ecstasy. He could not think of punishing Sunāmī and his companions for violating his orders, particularly in view of the large number of participants in the joyful spectacle. He toyed with the idea of punishing Sunāmī for receiving a large payment of money from the previous ruler Khuro Khān. However, the allegation could not be proved as it was revealed that he had, in fact, rejected such an offer with disdain. Forced to change his mind, the Sultān invited Sunāmī and his companions to stay in the palace for three days. At the end of this sojourn, the

<sup>7</sup> In supporting the practice of sufi music, the early Indian Cīstī theorists generally followed the line of Ghazzali. But unlike Ghazzali, they do not demolish the arguments of their opponents. Instead they delineated the benefits which, in their opinion, accrued to the sincere participants in the exercise (Lawrence 1983, p. 89).

Sulṭān offered a large sum of money to Sunāmī by way of gratitude. The saint refused to accept the gift and, instead, left for Ghiathpur where he called on Śaikḥ Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā. It may be noted that this episode occurred after the interrogation of Śaikḥ Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā in a public court (*mahḍar*) regarding the legality of musical assemblies (Jamali 1893, pp. 144–146).

The role of Śaikḥ Ahmad Sirhindī (1563–1624) has been the subject of a contentious debate among historians, who have expressed diametrically opposite views regarding his attitude to the Mughal state, Islamic revival and mystical path. Qureshi, who believed in a unique and separate identity of the Muslim community in the Indian subcontinent, believed that Sirhindī strengthened orthodoxy to the extent of bringing both the Mughal rulers and Islamic mysticism within its fold (Qureshi 1962, pp. 178–181). In contrast, Rizvi (1965, pp. 334–361) asserts that Sirhindī, in spite of his tirade against the Hindus and Shi'ahs, failed to change the secular character of the Mughal state. He argues that Sirhindī's sectarian revivalism failed to gain ground in the face of the ongoing trend of cultural assimilation which was based on pantheism and was articulated by Muḥibullāh Allahābādī, Miyān Mīr, Mullā Śāh Badakhśī and Dārā Śukōh. Friedmann complains that modern historians of the Indian subcontinent, owing to the influence of contemporary politics, had focused on Sirhindī's attitude to the state and religion, which was peripheral to his thought. Therefore, he urges that Sirhindī be treated essentially as a sufi, who had to be assessed within the sufi framework of reference (Friedmann 1971, p. 111). Sharply disagreeing with this approach, Shuja Alhaq insists that it was not possible to examine Sirhindī's discourse on mysticism in isolation from his ideas on the state, religion, Islam and non-Muslims. He not only invalidates the mystical experiences of Sirhindī, but also demolishes his contribution to the development of mystical thought. In his view, Sirhindī identified Islam with political domination and checked the evolution of a pluralistic spiritual culture, leaving no room for sufism to survive (Shuja Alhaq 1997, pp. 326–39, 356).

The study of Eaton on the sufis of Bijāpur represents a paradigm shift in the writings on sufism in South Asia. He refuses to treat the sufis as practitioners and transmitters of esoteric Islam, but instead places them squarely in their regional cultural context. Categorizing them as social types – warrior, reformist, literati, landed and dervish – he examines their social role in relation to rulers, clerics, Islam and non-Muslims. He also suggests that after the disintegration of sufi networks in the eighteenth century, sufi shrines continued to function as “dynamic catalysts” in deepening Islamic acculturation among several convert communities (Eaton 1978, pp. 288–296). These insights generated considerable interest in the history of major sufi shrines. In a full scale study on the shrine of Khwājā Mu'in al-Dīn Cīśī at Ajmer, Currie tried to separate a sober biographical account of the saint from the large mass of legends and to trace the evolution of the shrine as a popular sacred centre (Currie 1989, pp. 117–140). On the other hand, Moini offers a fresh description of the role of the custodians (*khuddām*) who maintained the sanctity of the shrine through elaborate rituals and provided multifarious services to the pilgrims (Moini 2004, pp. 96–126). In recent times, a number of studies have focused on the shrine of Sālār Mas 'ūd Ghāzī at Bahraich. Oral tradition treats the saint as

a martyr, who laid down his life while protecting his followers (cowherds and cows) from the wrath of the local Hindu ruler.<sup>8</sup> The major festivities, which were attended by half a million pilgrims, appear to have been drawn from the Śīrah traditions rooted in Karbālā and the agricultural calendar of the local peasantry (Mahmood 1989, pp. 33–37).

### UNDERSTANDING ISLAMIC ACCULTURATION

With the establishment of British rule in India during the second half of the eighteenth century, some British officers assumed the task of writing the history of the colonized country. While dealing with medieval India, they were required to grapple with the question of religious conversion to Islam. Elliot attributes the phenomenon to the use of force by fanatical Muslim rulers, while Arnold points to the teachings of Sufis as peaceful missionaries. Indian historians belonging to the nationalist school perceived Islam as a progressive force that attracted the lower social orders. Mohammad Habib (1952, pp. 74–77) relates religious conversion to the urban revolution, which enabled the low caste artisans to enter the growing urban centres as well as move into the fold of Islam, owing to the collective decisions of their brotherhoods.

In recent times, the most significant studies on Islamisation have been produced by Eaton. These studies pertain to two important regions of the Indian subcontinent – south-west Punjab and east Bengal – which had come to acquire a substantial proportion of the Muslim population by the beginning of colonial rule. What was common between these two widely separate regions was that:

- (i) They were situated on the periphery of the Gangetic plain which formed the core area of the Delhi-based Indo-Muslim states.
- (ii) They were inhabited by tribes that practiced pastoralism along with agriculture and were largely free from the influence of caste-based Brahmanical orthodoxy.
- (iii) Islamic acculturation occurred in the context of agrarian expansion that was sponsored by the Indo-Muslim states.
- (iv) The land holding individuals (Muslim Pīrs) and institutions (sufi shrines) played a crucial role in the processes of agrarian expansion and Islamisation, which were rather slow.

In south-west Punjab, Śaikh Farīd (1175–1265), promoted Islamic devotionism based on the amulet-offering (*ta'wīz-futūh*) system. After his death, his shrine at Pakpattan evolved as a popular centre of pilgrimage, where a number of rituals were institutionalized. As soon as the Tughlaq rulers endowed the shrine with land grants, the spiritual heads (*sajjādāh nisīn*) of the establishment began to promote agriculture in the surrounding areas. The pastoral Jat clans, who had migrated northwards from

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<sup>8</sup> This oral tradition, which is commemorated till today in a massive annual carnival, stands in sharp contrast to an important hagiographical account entitled *Mirat-i-Masūdī*. Written in 1611 by Abdur Rahman Cīṣī, it portrays Sālār Masūd Ghāzī as a Muslim warrior, elaborating the stereotypical motif of 'Sword of Islam' (Amin 2002, pp. 32–41).

Sindh to central Punjab, were transformed into permanent cultivators. At the same time, they underwent a slow process of Islamisation, owing to their participation in the rituals of the shrine (Eaton 2000, pp. 203–224). However, the process of Islamisation in Bengal was intimately connected with ecological changes in regional ecology, internal migration and agrarian expansion. The Ganga system gradually shifted eastwards to join the Padma, so that the deposition of silt made the soil fit for rice cultivation. Muslim holy men (Pīrs), who had been given land grants, migrated eastwards and, after clearing the forest, reclaimed the land for rice cultivation. They performed the function of pioneers by mobilizing the labour of tribes, viz. Rajbansi, Pod, Chandal and Kuch. In addition to creating an infrastructure of roads and markets, they established religious institutions like mosques, tombs and monasteries (*khānqāhs*). The local tribals, who played a crucial role in this socio-economic transformation, underwent a gradual process of Islamisation.<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising that the Bengalis perceived Islam as a civilisation-building ideology i.e. a religion of the plough (Eaton 1994, pp. 194–227).

In the case of Kashmir, Islamisation has been perceived as a slow process of acculturation whereby individuals and groups terminated their ties with traditional religious culture and adopted a path leading to their adherence to the Quran, prophetic example (*sunnah*) and Islamic law (*sharī'a*). The Rishi movement was an integral component of the process of Islamisation that began in Kashmir with the arrival of sufi orders from Central Asia and Persia. On the one hand, the Rishis maintained a balance between the Islamic law (*sharī'a*) and mystical path (*tarīqa*) and, on the other hand, they paved the way for the gradual assimilation of indigenous ascetic practices into the wider system of Islam. In this development, a crucial role was played by Śaikh Nūr al-Dīn, who drew his inspiration from two diverse sources – Mīr Syed 'Alī Hamadānī and Lallā Ded. He made Islam comprehensible to the unlettered peasants through his devotional verses, which were composed in the Kashmiri language. He established channels of communication between the Great Tradition of Islam and the Little Tradition of the Kashmiri peasant society. Though there were some cases of individual and group conversion, yet the large majority of common people experienced the gradual impact of Islamic acculturation through their contact with the Rishis. Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, this led to the development of a Kashmiri Muslim society, where social identity was defined in Islamic terms, and not by caste (Khan 1994, pp. 221–234).

### ISLAM AND THE LIVED EXPERIENCE

The history of Islam in South Asia is not a virgin field. It has been ploughed by such distinguished scholars like Annemarie Schimmel, M. Mujib, Aziz Ahmad, Ishtiaq Husain

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<sup>9</sup> This process becomes comprehensible in terms of the Islamic syncretistic tradition that evolved in medieval Bengal and was manifested in (i) the rise of the Pīr cult whereby Muslim holy men were venerated for their miraculous power over natural forces and (ii) the contribution of Muslim cultural mediators who disseminated Islamic knowledge through their writings in Bengali (Roy 1983, pp. 67–78, 230–233).



Qureshi and Shaikh Muhammad Ikram. Without appearing to undermine their immense contribution, we must note that they constructed their history of South Asian Islam on the basis of evidence which has been, by and large, drawn from the lives of only those Muslims who occupied an important position in the society. In other words, these Muslims were associated with power, wealth, learning and piety i.e. rulers, theologians, intellectuals and mystics. As a result, the writings of the above historians acquired an elitist slant. It is high time that we take a close look at the lives of non-elite Muslim groups, who were scattered in the vast countryside away from the centres of power. Since these Muslims did not generally figure in conventional documentation, it would be appropriate to examine the oral tradition in vernacular languages in order to extract information about their lives. Once we familiarize ourselves with their lived experience – joys and sorrows, trials and tribulations, sacrifices and struggles, beliefs and customs – we will be able to develop a more realistic and holistic picture of their religious life. We are likely to find that they understood and practiced their religion in a manner that was substantially different from that of the elite classes. This is amply illustrated by the following brief analyses of two folk tales of medieval Punjab, Hīr Rāñjhā and Dullā Bhattī.

The first one is a love legend that revolves around three Jat clans – Rāñjhās, Siyāls and Kheras. Settled on the banks of the Chenab, they had developed strong associations with distinct localities. The protagonists belonged to the families of chiefs (*sardārs*) of the clans, who served as intermediaries between the cultivators and the Delhi-based state. The social life of the clans was governed by unwritten local customs.<sup>10</sup> If an individual walked out of the hereditary domain of the clan, he became insecure owing to the loss of the protection afforded by the clan. A chief enjoyed power and prestige within well-defined territorial enclaves, but had to seek the approval of his clan (*birādarī*) in all matters, including the marriages of his children. The Siyāls did not permit Cūcak (Hīr's father) to give his daughter in marriage to Dhīdō, as they never had such relations with the Rāñjhās and, instead, decided in favour of the Kheras. Notwithstanding these tensions, harmonious relations prevailed among people belonging to different social classes inhabiting a village. In the spinning sessions (*triñjan*), women were drawn from nearly twenty professional castes, but they were not identified by their religious affiliation. The main characters not only bore tribal (non-Muslim) names, but they were also lax in observing the Islamic religious code (Gaur 2009, pp. 123–131). In times of difficulty, they preferred to invoke the Pañj Pīrs (five mystics) as represented by the prominent sufis of Punjab – Bābā Farīd, Śaikh Bahā al-Dīn Zakariyā, Syed Jalāl al-Dīn Bukhārī, Lāl Śāhbāz Qalandar and Khwājā Khidr. It is interesting to note that the patriarchal forces, who were opposed to the union between Hīr and Rāñjhā, invoked Islamic orthodoxy as represented by the local judge (*qādī*) (Padam 1998, pp. 109–113).

<sup>10</sup> The narrative is generally placed in the first half of the fifteenth century. Rāñjhā, the son of the chief of Takht Hazārā, left his home owing to the ill treatment he received from his brothers. He fell in love with Hīr, the daughter of the chief of Jhang Siyāl. He served as a cowherd in her household. Hīr's parents forcibly married her to Saida Khera. Utterly dejected, Rāñjhā became a disciple of Gorakh Nāth. He came to Rangpur in the garb of a mendicant (*jogī*) and eloped with Hīr. However, the fugitive couple was caught. Hīr was poisoned by her parents, while Rāñjhā died of shock.

The ballad of Dullā Bhattī offers a vivid picture of the rural society that flourished in the Sāndal Bār (a fertile tract between the rivers Ravi and Chenab) during the second half of the sixteenth century. The Mughal state, which had established a centralized regime and streamlined the system of surplus extraction, provoked the local potentates (*zamīndārs*) to offer violent opposition. Farīd and Sāndal, the father and grandfather of Dullā Bhattī, were put to death at the orders of the Mughal emperor Akbar.<sup>11</sup> Dullā Bhattī, who had been brought up as a warrior and inherited the control (*zamīndārī*) of twelve villages, continued the tradition of resistance. His military power was based on the ancestral fortress. A large variety of weapons, including matchlocks and gunpowder, were stocked in as many as seven cellars. He could mobilize an armed contingent of 500 retainers. In times of need, he could secure the support of his kinsmen, particularly his maternal uncles, who commanded a strong presence in the neighbouring villages. He also enjoyed the unquestioned support of the people – cutting across the barriers of caste, class and creed – who lived in his domain (*zamīndārī*). He also availed himself of the services of artisans for the manufacture of weapons. Owing to his semi-autonomous status, he exercised a customary claim to agrarian surplus from the peasants who had settled under his jurisdiction. He supplemented his income by undertaking predatory raids against the neighbouring *zamīndārs* as well as by plundering the merchant caravans on the highway (Singh 2008a, pp. 100–105). He was overpowered by a large Mughal force and, after being tricked into an agreement, was poisoned to death at Lahore. In due course, his name was engraved in the collective memory as an eternal symbol of rebellion, bravery and sacrifice.

From the foregoing discussion, it emerges that Islam has enriched the Indian culture in ways that were complex and subtle. Though the makers of the Indo-Muslim states formally adhered to Islam, yet they relied more on forging alliances with diverse local elements, rather than invoking the religious authority of Islam. The sufi orders, represented either by charismatic individuals or resourceful establishments, were not averse to associating with the ruling elite. In the long run, they contributed immensely to the slow process of Islamic acculturation in different cultural contexts. However, it is the lived experience of social groups, loosely designated as Muslim, which enables us to measure the depth of Islamic cultural sedimentation. Though modern historical writings have made considerable headway in locating the role of Islam in the historical experience of South Asia, yet it needs to be adequately reflected in the teaching programmes at the graduate and post-graduate levels, both in India and abroad.

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<sup>11</sup> By the mid-sixteenth century the class of *zamīndārs*, taking advantage of the Mughal-Afghan conflict and the turbulence of the Gakkhars and Niyāzīs, had acquired considerable autonomy in the countryside of Punjab. Later on, the consolidation and centralisation of the Mughal state, which was manifested in the imposition of a measurement-based revenue system, curtailed the autonomy of the *zamīndārs* and provoked them to violent resistance.

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