

## Shaykh Jalal-al-din Mujarrad (d. 1340 A. D.) and the Annexation of Sylhet to the Muslim Kingdom of Bengal

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This paper proposes to examine the contributions of a popular Indo-Muslim mystic of the sub-continent who played a key role in the annexation of Sylhet to the Muslim Kingdom of Bengal during the medieval period. The study is made in the light of the information provided in the medieval hagiological literature. Further, the paper will try to remove some doubts of the misleading, sketchy and unrewarding biography of the saints gleaned from the cheap mystic literature and so called pious fables. These fabricated mystic literature and fables are nothing but a collection of miraculous and super natural powers attributed to the mystics who fought against miracle mongering and misleading people by expressing supernatural powers.

The most striking feature in the spiritual history of medieval north-eastern India is the presence of the warrior saints (Ghazi Auliya) or those saints whose real interest was to witness the ultimate reality i.e. God, through hard spiritual labour but who sometimes under certain compulsions also took up arms and participated in military operations. These military operations were sometimes the result of the struggle for supremacy of the Muslim rulers who established themselves in the Western part of Bengal and the independent Hindu Chiefs of eastern Bengal. Sometimes as the hagiologists claim these struggles resulted because of the restrictions imposed on the small Muslim pockets within the territory of the Hindu Chiefs.

The question, however, is that why these saints participated in the armed struggles, which in act is contrary to their teachings. Moreover, the Muslim Saints have a history of non-interference in the political struggles. "At a time when the country was esounding with the din and clatter of the arms of the Ghurids, remarks Professor K. A. Nizami, the atmosphere of their (saint's) humble dwellings acted as a corrective to the political hysteria of the period."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps inspired by the religious Zeal of partici-

pating in the Holy War and Gaining the status of a victor (Ghazi) they entered the battle fields.<sup>2</sup>

Ikhteyar-al-Din Bin Bakhteyar Khilji occupied Nadia in 1203 and we are told that a large number of Muslim missionaries entered into Bengal. The first Muslim saint who entered Bengal and went upto Kamrup was Shaykh Jalal-al-Din Tabrezi,<sup>3</sup> on account of the silent and self-effacing methods accepted by the Sufi missionaries, rightly observes I. H. Qureshi, "it is difficult to reconstruct a history of their efforts in Bengal as it is elsewhere."<sup>4</sup> A century later in 1303, Sylhet district which at that time was a Sarkar of the Subah of Bengal was conquered by the Muslims. In the conquest of Sylhet a group of Muslim saints are said to have played a vital role under the leadership of Shaykh Jalal-al-Din and were reinforced by the troops of Sultan Shams-al-Din Firoz (1301-1322). The hagiographer of the Saint gave the following quatrain about the conquest of Sylhet by Shaykh Jalal,

*Sylhet Ze sharaf falak barabar bashad*

*Her sang daru batab Gauhar bashad*

*Her qatrah bawusat daryaest*

*Her Zaraash aftabe digar bashad.*

*(Sylhet became as honourable as sky*

*Every stone of it glitters like jewels*

*each drop of it is like a river*

*And, every particle of it is another Sun.)*

The district gazetteer of Sylhet records as follows:

*Gor (Sylhet) was conquered by the Muhammadans in A. D. 1384, the last Hindu King, Gaur Gobinda, being overcome more by the magic of the fakir, Shah Jalal, than by the prowess of the officers in command of the expedition, Sikandar Ghazi. After the death of Shah Jalal Gor was included in the Kingdom of Bengal and placed in charge of a governor.*

The date for the annexation of Sylhet given by the gazetteer is not correct. The Dacca Museum inscription of 918 A. H./1512 A. D. which earlier was inscribed on the Shrine of Shah Jalal gives the date as 703 A. D./1303 A. D.

*Baizzate Shaykh-al-Mashaikh Makhdum Shaykh Jalal-al-Din  
Mujarrad bin Muhammad awwal fathet Islam Sarsai Sirihat  
?Sylhet ba daste Sikandar Khan Ghazi baahde Sultan Firoz  
Shah Dal PaiSanhe Sals wa Saba Maitah.....*

*(In the honour of Shaykh of the Shaykhs, revered Shaykh Jalal-*

udin Mujarraad (Calibate) bin Muhammad the area of Srihat (sylhet) was conquered at the hands of Sikandar Khan Ghazi during the reign of Sultan Firoz Shah Dalwai in the year 703 A.H.”)

Stapleton has also accepted this date on the basis of the Dacca Museum inscription<sup>6</sup> and so did K. R. Quaungo.<sup>7</sup>

There is paucity of information about the life accounts of Shaykh Jalal-al-Din Sylheti as he is known among the posterity. None of the contemporary or near centemporary with the exception of Ghauthi Shattaris Gul-ar-i-Abran, a hagiographical work written in 1613 A. D. during the reign of Jahangir gives a short life account of the Shaykh. Perhaps Stapleton and K. R. Qanungo did not had the idea of this work and therefore while the former mostly depended on the Dacca Museum inscription the latter incorporated his accounts with a later work Suhayl-i-Yaman by Nasiruddin Hayder written in 1859. But most of the incidents cited in this work is not acceptable. Nasiruddin Hayder like many others prepared his work centuries after the life and times of Shayhh Jalal-al-Din and has attributed miraculous powers to the Shayhh and his group to give expression to cheap mystic ideas. Professor Muhammad Habib has warned the Medieval Indian Scholars to dismiss such fabricated works by saying that, “there has survived to us from fairly early times a mass of literature about the Chishti and other Indo-Muslim mystics which we have no alternative but to dismiss as fabricated in spite of the fact that it is and has been widely current.”<sup>8</sup>

About the annexation of Sylhet to the Muslim Kingdom of Bengal Suhayl-i-Yaman gives the following account :

*During those days there was a Muslim, Burhan-al-Din, resident in Sylhet, who sacrificed a cow on the occasion of birth of a son. This led to a dispute with local Brahmin who complained to the Hindu Raja. He was enraged and ordered the execution of the infant and mutilation of the father. Burhan-al-Din ran to Gaur, the capital of Bengal. An expedition was ordered against the raja, but because Assam had a reputation of black magic the morale of the Muslim troops was low and they were defeated. An appeal was made to the saint who himself participated in the fight; because of his reputation for spiritual greatness, the Muslim soldiers were reassured and gained confidence. The raja was defeated and Sylhet was annexed to the Muslim Kingdom.”<sup>9</sup>*

K. R. Qanungo says that the story of the cow sacrifice is common among both the Muslims and Hindus alike and very rightly

remarks that, "imperialism whether Hindu, Muslim or Christian never cries a halt half-way in the full swing of its success ; so the poor cow need not be held responsible for the invasion of Sylhet by the Muslims"<sup>10</sup> At no place Ghauthi Shattari in his accounts of saint gives such reasons for the annexations of Sylhet by the Muslims. His description is straight forward and matter of fact. He writes:

*He was of Turkish origin<sup>11</sup> but was born in Bengal, and a Khalifah or spiritual successor of Sultan Syed Ahmad. It is said that one day he requested the spiritual master that as by your spiritual avour I have been successful in killing my animal self ?Jahad-i-Akbar .<sup>12</sup> I wish to fulfil my desire of participating in the Holy War (Jihad-i-Asgbar) in the conquest of a land ruled by the non-believers i.e. Dar-al-Harb and should become victor (Ghazi) or martyr (Shaheed). The master granted his request and despatched a group of seven hundred disciples along with him. All honour is due to God, Wherever he faced some opposition became victorious. The most wonderful thing is this that during all these struggles in the distant areas the only means of livelihood was the warbooty and he led a lavish life. Whatever valley or animal he got, distributed them among fellow beings with a request to stay there and work for Islam. To make it short, among the parganas of Bengal there is gashah called Sirihat (Sylhet). When he reached there only 313 persons remained with him. Gaur Gobinda the master of one lakh foot soldiers and few thousand mounted soldiers was the raja of the gasbah. He was strong enough and the saints fellows were like salt in the food in comparison to the big army of the raja. But when the battle started the miracle according to the divine command, "and we give victory to the small group over a big group by the divine Grace" became manifest and those idol worshippers were defeated and were killed. Those whole area came under the victors. The Shaykh Mujarrad (confirmed bachelor) distributed the entire area among his fellow beings and allowed them to marry and establish their families"<sup>13</sup>.*

Gauthi Shattari does not give any causus belli for the battle between the Muslim saints and the Hindu Raja as it is given by the nineteenth century work Suhayl-i-Yaman of Nasir-al-Din Haider and since Ghauthi wrote his work centuries before the compilation of Suhayl-i-Yaman. Therefore the latter can be dismissed as fabricated inspite of the fact that it has been widely current and the modern

historians of Medieval Bengal has utilized it. Then the question arises that why the saints with a handful of supporters became successful? Mr. Stapleton is of the opinion that, the presence of numerous saints and Ghazis at this time might even have been due to some definite policy on the part of the Delhi Sultans intent on annexation of Bengal',<sup>14</sup> But this hypothesis of Stapleton is contrary to the concept of Spiritual territory (Wilayat) of the mystics. The Indo-Muslim mystics and the Sultans of Delhi never saw eye to eye. Contact with the Sultans and other worldly people was considered as a great hinderence for spiritual progress. Shayhh Nizam-al-Din Auliya refused to give an audience to Sultan Balban and Shayhh Nasiral-Din Chiragh-i-Dehli refused to comply with the orders of Muhammad Bin Tughluq to go to his second capital at Daulatabad in the Deccan.<sup>15</sup>

K. R. Qanungo after commenting on the process of Muslim conquest of Bengal opines that, "the 'Saints' of Islam completed the process of conquest, moral and spiritual by establishing dargahs and Khangahs deliberately on the sites of these ruined places of Hindu and Buddhist worship".<sup>16</sup> Throughout the history of Muslim-mysticism in India none of the Indo-Muslim saints ever erected dargah or Khanqah on the ruins of the Hindu and Buddhist places of worship. Perhaps influenced by the hyperbolic statement and exaggerated narratives of the fabricated and cheap mystic literature which sometimes also occurs in most of the medieval Persian chronicles Dr. Qanungo formed this opinion. The attitude of Indo-Muslim mystics towards Hindus and Hinduism was one of sympathetic understanding and adjustment. The caste-system, the idea of physical contamination and keeping them outside the caste-cities brought the depressed non-caste people quite closer to the mystic centres or Khanqaha which were mostly erected outside the caste-cities. Bengal was no exception to the general atmosphere of the Hindu Society and therefore when the Muslim mystic missionaries entered Bengal large number of people joined them. Professor Jadu Nath Sarhar has rightly summed up the conditions in Bengal at the time of Shayhh Jalal-al-Din's struggle with the raja of Sylhet. According to him :<sup>16</sup>

*But at the time of the Muslim conquest (1230 A.D.) and for some centuries before it, the religion of masses in East-Bengal and indeed of many of the gentry too - was Tantrik Hinduism, which could be hardly distinguished from the spirit worship and magic of later Buddhism, as still found in Tibet. In the Hindu*

*Period, Sanskrit Scholars, Hindu Physicians, and eminent Brahman priests from the west freely crossed the river barrier and settled in East Bengal; and, in the opposite direction, pilgrims from East Bengal used to visit the courts and famous shrines of West Bengal. But they represented only the thin upper crust of society, and were concentrated in the large towns and rich monasteries of Banga-Desh. But on the fall of Nadia and Gaur to the Muslims even this little interchange of cultures ceased. For sometimes after, the mass of the people east of the Tista and the Brahmaputra remained Hindus, but their religion was not akin to that of the Hindus of Gaur or Rash. They had no learned Brahman priest-hood, no Sanskrit Scriptures, no Vedic ritual. Their worship was almost everywhere conducted by animistic priests or more properly witch-doctors.*

*Despised and neglected by the educated Aryan priesthood, with no resident Brahman clergy to look after their religious instruction or conduct their rites properly, the Hindu masses of East Bengal remained as sheep without a spiritual shepherd, just like their Mongoloid Buddhistic brethren of Kamrup and Arakan. Hence, when Shah Jalal (of Sylhet) and other missionaries of the Crescent arrived to preach Islam to them, no worthy priest of Hinduism came forth to accept the Challenge, and the masses of East Bengal were easily converted to Islam on mass from spiritual worship (call it later Buddhism or Tantrik Hinduism as you please, these are only two names for the something). This is the underlying meaning of the legends still current about the early missionaries of Islam in Sylhet and Rajgir (South Bihar) and their success in defeating the local Hinay priests (called Jogis) by superior miracle-working power.*

Sylhet was annexed in the year 1303 A.D. and Shaykh Jalal-al-Din died on 20th Dhu-al-Qada 740 A. H. i.e. 18th May 1340 A.D. During his 37 years stay at Sylhet, some years he spent in the administrative measures and throughout the remaining period he was busy with the prayers and penitences. He kept his followers at many places of Sylhet. In the development of Islam in Bengal and north-eastern India the contributions of Shaykh Jalal-al-Din Tabrozi, Shaykh Nur Qutb-i-Alam and Shaykh Jalal-al-Din of Sylhet are really admirable. But the credit goes more to the Islamic spiritualism, the concept of equality and universal brotherhood,

## Notes & References

1. *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the 13th Century*, Delhi, 1978 (Reprint), p. 261.
2. Taking part in the war or Holy war as the medieval chroniclers describe it was a tradition among the Ulema and intellectuals of the medieval period. Even the greatest of Indo-Muslim saint and pioneer of mystic thought in India Khwaja Mo'in al Din Chishti is reported to have accompanied the army of Sultan Mui al Din Muhammad Bin Sam and fought as a soldier; Minhaj Siraj, *Tabaqat-i-Nasire*, Calcutta, 1864, p. 119. Ulema of Deoband and Delhi fought against the British. A great Naqshbandi Saint of Delhi Mirza Mazhar Jan-i-Janan is also reported to have participated in a battle against the Marathas, Naimullah, *Bisharat-i-Mazhariyak*, (Ms) India Office, No. 220, ff. 10b & 11 a. For his ideas see, F. A. Qadri, *A Muslim Mystic view of Hindu Religion*, *Azad Academy Journal*, Lucknow, Vol. III, No. 4, 1988 April.
3. F. A. Qadri; Shaykh Jalal-al-Din Tabrezi. A suharwardi saint in the North-Eastern India, paper accepted for publication in *Islamic Studies*, Islamabad.
4. *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Sub-continent*, Delhi (Reprint) 1985, p. 73.
5. B. C. Allen, E. A. Gait and others, *Gazetteer of Bengal and North-East India*, Delhi, 1979, (Reprint), p. 420.
6. *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, New Series, Vol. XVIII, 1922, pp. 413 14.
7. "Bengal under the House of Balban" Chapter in *History of Bengal*, Vol II, ed, by Jadunath Sarkar, Patna, 1977, p. 79.
8. *Politics and Society during the early Medieval Period*, Vol. I, p. 401, ed, by K. A. Niazmi, Delhi, 1774.
9. C. F. Shykh Muhammad Ikram, *ox.cit.*, pp. 317 18, also see K. K. Qanungo, *op. cit.*, pp. 79 80.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Nasir al Din Haider calls him "Shaykh Jalal Yamani and the Dacca Museum inscription says, "Shaykh Jalal Mujarrad Kinyae, not Yamani. Perhaps they are not correct. Gauthi Shattari's statement that the Shaykh was Turkish origin and was born in Bengal seems to be correct.

12. The Shaykh is called Mujarrad, a Celibate, who kills his animal self (Nafs-i-Ammarah) in order to devote himself in prayers and penitences. Killing the animal self, according to the mystics is a biggest crusade (Jihad-i-Akbar). Numerous Indo-Muslim mystics remained Celibate including Shaykh Nasir-al-Din Chiragh-i-Delhi.

13. *Adhakar-i-Abrar* Urdu translation of *Gulzar-i-Abrar*, Lahore, pp.124-125.

14. *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, op. cit.

15. For further details see *Comprehensive History of Inaia*, Vol. V, Delhi Sultanate, Delhi 1971.

16. *History of Bengal*, op. cit., pp., 227-228,