

Exploring the Influence of Islamic Sufism on the Life and Teachings of Fakir Lalon Shah: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This study embarks on a detailed exploration of the influence of Islamic Sufism on the life and works of Fakir Lalon Shah, a distinguished Bengali mystic and songwriter. Using a comparative approach, it assesses the parallels between Sufi teachings and Lalon Shah's philosophical tenets and musical compositions. Drawing from primary resources like Lalon's poetic and musical oeuvre, biographical details, and foundational Sufi texts, the research uncovers the deep spiritual and cultural intersections between the two domains. A pivotal area of examination centres on Lalon Shah's advocacy for religious tolerance, inclusivity, and communal harmony, mirroring the Sufi virtues of unity, fraternal love, and compassion. By juxtaposing these teachings with renowned Sufi doctrines, the research underscores the potential Sufi influence on Lalon Shah's perspectives. The findings illuminate the rich tapestry of religious and philosophical foundations that undergird Lalon Shah's teachings, offering profound insights into the myriad influences that forged his singular spiritual trajectory and emphasising his enduring relevance within Bengal's diverse religious and cultural landscape.

Keywords: Islamic Sufism, Fakir Lalon Shah, Spirituality, Religion, Bangladesh.

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Introduction

Sufism, also known as Islamic mysticism, is a multifaceted spiritual tradition that has significantly shaped the cultural and spiritual landscape of Islam. Rooted in the core teachings of Islam, Sufism delves into the mystical dimensions of the faith, emphasising the pursuit of a deeper and more personal connection with the divine. With its origins dating back to the early days of Islam, Sufism has evolved over the centuries, blending spirituality, philosophy, poetry, and devotion to create a unique approach to understanding and experiencing God. Islamic Sufism, also known as Tasawwuf, is a mystical and spiritual dimension of Islam that has played a significant role in the religious and cultural life of Bangladesh. Sufism emerged in the early centuries of Islam as a reaction to the growing materialism and formalism within the Islamic community. It focuses on the inward search for a deeper connection with the divine and aims to attain spiritual closeness to Allah through practices such as meditation, prayers, and ethical conduct.

The Sufi movement in Bengal, emerging during the 13th-century expansion of the Delhi Sultanate, played a transformative role in shaping the region's spiritual landscape through syncretic engagement with local traditions. Sufi saints like Shah Jalal (d. 1341) and others established *khanqahs* (Sufi lodges) that served as hubs for spiritual and agrarian communities, blending Islamic mysticism with indigenous practices (Eaton, 1993). They adopted vernacular Bengali for preaching, composed poetry infused with Hindu-Buddhist metaphors, and integrated rituals such as *zikr* (devotional chanting) with local meditative traditions, fostering a shared spiritual vocabulary (Roy, 1983; Stewart, 2001). By the 18th century, this synthesis crystallised in the Baul tradition, where Fakir Lalon Shah (c. 1774–1890) emerged as a seminal figure. Rejecting caste and institutional religion, Lalon's songs (*Lalon Geeti*) articulated a humanist philosophy centred on

the "inner self" (*maner manush*) and the body as a sacred vessel (*dehatatva*), drawing equally from Sufi concepts of divine unity (*tawhid*), Vaishnava Bhakti devotion, and Sahajiya Buddhist tantrism (Salomon, 2017; Urban, 2001). His works epitomised Bengal's religious pluralism, where Sufi shrines and Hindu *melas* (festivals) coexisted, and where shared veneration of figures like Satya Pir blurred communal boundaries (Stewart, 2001). Despite 19th-century reformist challenges, Lalon's legacy endured as a testament to Sufism's adaptive, inclusive ethos in Bengal, bridging Islamic mysticism and regional heterodoxy (Eaton, 1993). Over time, Sufi orders and brotherhoods became influential in Bangladesh, providing a platform for people to seek spiritual guidance and solace. Some of the prominent Sufi orders that have left a lasting impact on the region include the Qadiriyya, Chishtiyya, Naqshbandiyya, and Suhrawardiyya orders. Sufi saints and preachers often adopted a flexible approach, integrating local traditions and customs within the framework of Islam, which resonated with the people. This syncretic approach made Islam more accessible and appealing to a broader section of the population. Throughout Bangladesh's history, Sufi saints and their followers have played a crucial role in spreading Islamic teachings, establishing religious institutions, promoting social harmony, and advocating for peace and tolerance. They have contributed significantly to the moral and ethical fabric of Bangladeshi society.

Whereas, Fakir Lalon Shah, commonly known as Lalon Shah or Lalon Fakir, was a Bengali Baul mystic and poet who lived during the 18th and 19th centuries in what is now Bangladesh. He is considered one of the most celebrated and revered Sufi saints in the region, and his teachings have had a profound influence on the spiritual and cultural life of Bangladesh. It is literally said that Lalon Shah was not formally affiliated with any Sufi order; his beliefs and teachings were deeply rooted in Sufi principles and mysticism. But, one of the prominent Lalon followers, Nahir Shah

said², “We are affiliated with Chishtiyya Sufi order as Fakir Lalon Shah was.’ Lalon Shah's teachings were characterised by mystical poetry and songs that explored themes of divine love, spiritual enlightenment, and the pursuit of the inner self. His poetry, often written in the Baul tradition, employed metaphors and allegories to convey profound spiritual insights. Also, Lalon Shah emphasised the importance of the inner journey and the quest for self-realisation. He believed in the universal nature of love and considered all human beings equal, transcending religious, social, and cultural boundaries. His teachings promoted the idea of unity and the oneness of God. Lalon Shah's teachings were deeply syncretic, incorporating elements of Islamic Sufism, Hindu Bhakti traditions, and indigenous folk beliefs. His poetry and songs reflected a unique blend of various spiritual influences, making his teachings accessible to people of different backgrounds. Lalon Shah critiqued formal religious rituals and practices, emphasising the significance of an individual's direct connection with God. He believed that true spirituality resided in the heart and soul rather than in outward rituals. Fakir Lalon Shah advocated for social equality, tolerance, and non-discrimination. He denounced caste-based discrimination and encouraged people to embrace humanity and compassion. Lalon Shah is considered one of the most prominent figures in the Baul tradition, a unique form of mystical and devotional music and poetry in Bengal. His songs and teachings have inspired generations of Baul singers and followers. Lalon Shah's message of love, unity, and spiritual enlightenment continues to resonate with people in Bangladesh and beyond. His shrine in Kushtia, Bangladesh, attracts thousands of devotees and admirers every year, especially during the Lalon Shah Mela, an annual festival celebrating his life and teachings. Lalon Shah's legacy remains an integral part of Bangladesh's cultural heritage

² Nahir Shah made the comment during an interview at Rowshan Fakir's Baul meeting.

and spiritual identity, and his influence extends far beyond the boundaries of religious and social divisions.

This paper tries to explore the deep effects of Islamic Sufism on Fakir Lalon Shah and his life, philosophy, and musical traditions. The research examines the beliefs and compositions of Fakir Lalon Shah to compare how they reflect the teachings, practices, and spiritual insights of Islamic Sufism. Lalon's songs, poems, autobiographies, Sufi literature, and traditions will all be used as main materials in the study. To better comprehend Fakir Lalon Shah's legacy within the broader context of Sufi traditions, the research attempts to shed light on the spiritual and cultural linkages between Islamic Sufism and his distinctive manifestation of mysticism. Furthermore, the research investigates Lalon Shah's teachings of religious tolerance, inclusivity, and communal harmony, which resonate with the Sufi ideals of unity, brotherhood, and love for humanity. By comparing these principles with the teachings of prominent Sufi masters, the study aims to highlight the potential influence of Islamic Sufism on Lalon Shah's worldview. The findings of this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the religious and philosophical underpinnings of Lalon Shah's life and teachings. By exploring the connection between Islamic Sufism and Lalon Shah's spiritual journey, this study sheds light on the diverse influences that shaped his unique spiritual path and the significance of his teachings in the broader context of religious and cultural traditions in Bengal.

Islamic Sufism: Essence and Appearance in Bangladesh

The origins and evolution of Sufism in Bangladesh are deeply interwoven with the broader fabric of Islamic history in South Asia. Sufism, a mystical dimension of Islam that emphasises the direct personal experience of God through love and devotion, had its roots in the early periods of Islamic civilisation, tracing back to figures like Rabia Basri of Basra and subsequently the great Sufi saints like Rumi and Ibn Arabi. However, it was through the Sufi

missionaries that Islam was introduced to the Bengal region in the 12th century, a domain now represented by Bangladesh and parts of the Indian state of West Bengal (Ahmed, 1981). These early Sufi pioneers, or 'pirs' and 'fakirs' as they were commonly referred to, played a pivotal role in the propagation of Islam, often harmonising their teachings with the existing spiritual traditions of the region. The synthesis of indigenous beliefs with Islamic tenets gave birth to a unique Bengali Muslim identity, where spiritual practices were deeply colored by Sufi traditions (Karim, 1992).

By the 16th century, Sufi orders, known as 'silasil' (plural for 'silsila'), such as the Chishti, Qadiri, Naqshbandi, and Suhrawardi orders, had established firm roots in Bengal (Eaton, 1993). Khanqahs and dargahs, the Sufi monastic complexes and shrines respectively, became centres of social, spiritual, and educational activities. Particularly, the influence of Shah Jalal in Sylhet and Khan Jahan Ali in Bagerhat, amongst other notable Sufi figures, resulted in the proliferation of Islam in the region as well as the development of the Bengali language and literature (Rahman, 2005). The poetic works of Lalon Fakir in the 19th century exemplify the profound impact of Sufism on Bengali culture, promoting messages of love, unity, and an overarching sense of syncretism that transcended religious divides (Openshaw, 2002). However, while the historical trajectory of Sufism in Bangladesh speaks to its deep integration into the sociocultural life of the Bengali Muslim, there have been moments of tension, especially with orthodoxy and more puritanical interpretations of Islam, pushing back against what they perceived as the heterodox elements of local Sufi practices (Eaton, 1993). Nonetheless, the legacy of Sufism in Bangladesh remains vibrant, evident not only in the annual '*urs*' celebrations at various dargahs but also in the spiritual underpinnings of Bengali music, art, and literature.

Sufism, also known as Tasawwuf, is the mystical and spiritual dimension of Islam. It emphasises the inward search for God and strives to achieve spiritual closeness to God. Historically, it evolved as a reaction against the external and legalistic aspects of Islam, focusing on the inward and profound personal experience of the Divine. “Sufism can trace its roots to the earliest days of Islam. Many believe that its tenets are derived from the Quran, the Hadith (sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad), and the early Muslim ascetics who emphasised piety, humility, and love for God” (Lings, 1993). The essence of Sufism revolves around the pursuit of spiritual truth as the believer sees it. “This involves various practices, including dhikr (remembrance of God), asceticism, music, and poetry” (Helminski, 1992). “Over time, Sufism developed various orders or tariqas, each with its methodologies and teachings, but all centred on seeking closeness to God” (Triningham, 1998). A central figure in the Sufi order is the Shaykh or spiritual master. “The relationship between the Shaykh and the disciple (murid) is pivotal, emphasising guidance, love, and mentorship” (Schimmel, 2011). Also, “Sufism has profoundly impacted Islamic culture, especially in literature, art, and music. Famous poets like Rumi, Hafiz, and Al-Ghazali were influenced by Sufi teachings” (Ernst, 1997). Despite its deep roots in Islamic tradition, Sufism has faced criticism from more orthodox and puritanical Islamic movements. “This is because its practices, especially veneration of saints and incorporation of regional customs, have often been seen as un-Islamic” (Sirriyeh, 1999).

Islamic Sufism, also known simply as Sufism, is a spiritual and mystical dimension of Islam that emphasises the inward journey and the pursuit of divine love and knowledge. Sufism focuses on seeking a direct and intimate connection with the Divine through various spiritual practices and rituals. Its teachings and practices are based on the Quran (the holy book of Islam) and the Hadith

(the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad). Here are the Key Aspects of Islamic Sufism:

The Quest for Divine Love and Knowledge: At the core of Islamic Sufism is the pursuit of divine love (*Ishq*) and knowledge (*Ma'rifah*). Sufis believe that the ultimate goal of human existence is to attain proximity to God and to experience His divine presence. They seek to transcend the ego and worldly attachments, directing their hearts and souls toward God's love and knowledge (Ernst, 2011).

Spiritual Practices and Rituals: Sufism employs a variety of spiritual practices and rituals to achieve spiritual growth and closeness to God. Some of the common practices include: ***Dhikr (Remembrance)***: The repetition of God's names or attributes to invoke His presence and attain spiritual awareness. ***Meditation and Contemplation***: Sufis engage in meditation (*Muraqabah*) and deep contemplation to understand the deeper truths of existence and the divine reality. ***Sama (Whirling)***: Some Sufi orders, like the Mevlevi Order, practice the meditative dance of whirling (*Sama*) as a form of remembrance and connection with the Divine (Chittick, 1983)..

Sufi Poetry and Literature: Sufi poets and writers have created a rich body of literature expressing profound spiritual insights and experiences. Some of the most famous Sufi poets include Rumi, Hafez, Attar, and Ibn Arabi. Their poems often use allegorical language to convey spiritual truths and the yearning for divine love (Schimmel, 2009).

Sufi Orders (Tariqahs): Sufism is organised into various spiritual lineages or orders, each tracing its teachings back to a specific Sufi master or saint. These orders provide a structured framework for spiritual development and guidance for their followers. Prominent Sufi orders include the Chishtiya, Naqshbandiya, Qadiriya, Suhrawardiya, and Mevlevi. (Nasr, 2007).

Spiritual Guides (Shaykhs): Within Sufi orders, spiritual guides or teachers, known as Shaykhs or Pirs, play a vital role in guiding their disciples on the path of spiritual enlightenment. These spiritual guides are believed to have attained a higher degree of closeness to God and serve as mentors for their followers (Rumi, 1995).

Sufi Saints in Bangladesh: The contributions of the prominent Sufi saints in Bangladesh go beyond the establishment of shrines and Dargahs. They played pivotal roles in promoting Islamic teachings, spreading the message of love and tolerance, and fostering social harmony. Moreover, their teachings continue to inspire millions of people to seek spiritual enlightenment and practice Sufi principles of love, compassion, and selflessness.

Hazrat Shah Jalal is one of the most revered Sufi saints in Bangladesh. He is credited with spreading Islam in the Sylhet region of Bangladesh during the 14th century. His teachings emphasised peace, unity, and the propagation of Islam through love and spirituality. Hazrat Shah Jalal's shrine, located in Sylhet, is a major pilgrimage site for Muslims in Bangladesh and beyond.

In addition to Hazrat Shah Jalal, several other prominent Sufi saints have appeared with the essence of Islamic Sufism and have made significant contributions to the spiritual and cultural life of Bangladesh. Like, **Hazrat Shah Paran (Shah Farhan Qureshi):**

Hazrat Shah Paran was a revered Sufi saint who arrived in Sylhet, Bangladesh, during the 16th century. He was the nephew and disciple of Hazrat Shah Jalal. His teachings emphasised the values of love, compassion, and service to humanity, reflecting the core principles of Sufism. The shrine of Hazrat Shah Paran, located in Sylhet, is one of the holiest places for Sufi devotees in Bangladesh.

Hazrat Khan Jahan Ali: Hazrat Khan Jahan Ali was a 15th-century Sufi saint and mystic who played a vital role in the spread of Islam in the southern region of Bengal, particularly in the present-day Khulna and Bagerhat districts. He was associated with

the Suhrawardiyya Sufi order and is credited with the establishment of the Khan Jahan Ali Dargah in Bagerhat, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and a significant pilgrimage destination. Hazrat Khan Jahan Ali is renowned for his contributions to the construction of mosques, tanks, and other architectural marvels in the region. **Hazrat Shah Makhdum (Shah Jalaluddin al-Mujarrad al-Bukhari):** Hazrat Shah Makhdum was the spiritual companion and disciple of Hazrat Shah Jalal, and both arrived in Sylhet together from the Arabian Peninsula. He contributed significantly to the propagation of Islam in the region and is considered one of the earliest Sufi saints in Bangladesh. The shrine of Hazrat Shah Makhdum, located in Sylhet, is another prominent place of pilgrimage and devotion. **Hazrat Shah Sultan Rumi (Shah Sultan Balkhi):** Hazrat Shah Sultan Rumi was a Sufi saint known for his association with the Chishtiya Sufi order. He arrived in the region of Bengal from Balkh (in present-day Afghanistan) during the 12th century. His teachings emphasised love for God and humanity, and his shrine, located in Sylhet, is revered by Sufi followers and devotees.

Besides these Sufi Saints, the **Maijbhandari Sufi** path has had a significant role in the Islamic Sufism of Bangladesh. Maijbhandari Sufism, also known as the Maijbhandari Tariqa or Maijbhandari Silsila, is a distinct Sufi order in Bangladesh. It has a unique blend of Islamic mysticism, folk traditions, and syncretic elements. The core theological and hagiological essence of **Maijbhandari Sufism** is; *Love ('išq, prem)*, *Light (nūr)*, *Stations (maqāmāt)*, *Manifest (ẓāhir)*, and *concealed (bāṭin)*, *ṣarī'a and ṭarīqa*, *Unity (tawḥīd)*, *Spiritual sovereignty (wilāya)*, and *The Maijbhandari tarīqa* (Harder, 2011). Keeping those essences in mind, **Maijbhandari Sufism**, deeply rooted in the cultural and spiritual landscape of Bangladesh, is distinguished by its core belief in the pursuit of a direct and intimate connection with the Divine. At its heart, Maijbhandari Sufism emphasises the esoteric journey of the

individual soul in seeking God's presence within. This Sufi tradition promotes the practice of *dhikr* (remembrance of God), an integral part of Sufi spirituality, through which practitioners engage in repetitive recitations, chants, and meditative techniques to attain a state of spiritual closeness to the Divine. The pursuit of divine love and union is central to Maijbhandari Sufism, underscoring the belief that God's presence can be experienced in the depths of one's heart. This profound spiritual journey is guided by the spiritual leader, known as the "**Maijbhandari Pir**" or "*Baba*" whose role is to provide spiritual guidance and illumination to disciples. While academic literature specific to Maijbhandari Sufism may be limited, these beliefs and practices are consistent with broader Sufi principles of inner awakening and seeking God's presence within the self. The tradition incorporates various folk rituals, including the use of amulets, charms, and healing practices, which are often rooted in indigenous Bengali customs. Maijbhandari Sufism has also influenced Bengali culture, including music, poetry, and art (Haque, 2008). In a broader, cultural sense, **Maijbhandari songs** (*māijlbhāṇḍārī gān* or *gīti*) are the centrepiece of the Maijbhandari tradition. For many years, these songs, rather than scholarly treatises and expositions, have popularised Maijbhandar as a major spiritual centre in Chittagong and beyond. Their circulation and appeal is not limited to any particular section of the populace but spans over the urban and rural, upper and lower, educated and uneducated ranges of East Bengali society (Harder, 2011).

Correspondingly, the core practices of Islamic Sufism and **Maijbhandari Sufism** in Bangladesh are significantly associated with the beliefs and practices of Bauls of Bangladesh, which was introduced by Fakir Lalon Shah. The Bauls are a group of mystical minstrels in Bangladesh, known for their wandering lifestyle and poetic songs. Baul philosophy emphasises the search for the divine within oneself and transcends religious boundaries,

with influences from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sufism. Bauls express their spiritual messages through songs (Baul Gaan), often accompanied by musical instruments. These songs are rich in symbolism and metaphors. Bauls emphasise the individual's direct and personal experience of the divine, often rejecting formal religious institutions. Bauls promote the values of universal love, tolerance, and unity among all human beings (Sarkar, 1993 & Ghosh, 1990). While Maijbhandari Sufism and the Baul tradition are distinct, their syncretic nature and shared cultural context have influenced each other to some extent. The present paper intends to delve into the intersections of these traditions in the context of Bangladesh's cultural and spiritual landscape.

Fakir Lalon Shah and His Baulism

Baulism is a philosophical view that a religious sect or cult is accompanied by householders as well as homeless wanderers, neither of whom acknowledges class or caste, special deities, the temple, or sacred places. The human body or cage is their sacred place, like a temple or mosque, where the supreme spirit or divinity exists. Bauls refuse the authority of Hindu scriptures, *Vedas* and *Puranas*, as well as the authority of the Qur'an as interpreted by orthodox Muslims. "The Bauls, like the Sufis, assert that the Prophet taught two types of doctrines, one exoteric (*Zahir*), recorded in the Qur'an and meant for the general public, and the other esoteric (*Batin*),..... *Shari'at*, the Islamic law, is for followers of the exoteric path, while *Ma'rifat*, mystic knowledge, is for followers of the esoteric path. The Bauls regard *Ma'rifat* as superior to *Shari'at*" (Haroonuzzaman, 2010). It is a syncretic religious thought unified by Fakir Lalon Shah in Bangladesh. Baulism incorporates three major religious aspects, such as³ -

First, the influence of Tantric Buddhism is noticed in the Baul sect. In Tantric Buddhism, the sex element and sexual acts

³Influences of three major religions on Baulism have been taken from Bandyopadhyay, P. (1989), Bauls of Bengal. Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd. Calcutta, India

under yogic practices are held as the methods of attainment of the final state of supreme bliss. Like Tantric Buddhists, Baul believes that the extreme state of bliss can be attained through the yogic practices of the union of the seed and the ovum, and in the process of production, the supreme bliss acquires the nature of the five elements, namely earth, water, fire, air, and ether. Thus, it stands as the ultimate substance of the universe.

Second, the Hindu Tantric thought has also found its place in the Baul sect. In Tantric thought, there are two aspects of the absolute reality: the female and the male entities, or Shiva and Shakti. The attainment of the realisation of the absolute reality is the perfect union. Here also, the human body is conceived as the place of both female and male entities.

Third, like Baul's belief, in Sufism, the mystic realisation reveals that the supreme bliss or the absolute is the personal God. The absolute reality can be realised through love.

Thus, the beliefs, customs, and religious practices of the Baul sect hold to some extent the heritage of the Buddhist Sahajiya cult, the Vaishnava Sahajiya cult, Tantricism, and Sufism, that is, the esoteric traditions of Baul. In the Baul religion, “We find a localized association between Islam and Hinduism, in which God is without form and God takes the form of Lord Krishna, in which the purpose of reincarnation is the discovery of the Prophet Muhammad’s truth. We find distinct metaphoric music in which water is life and faith, the world is a home and a prison, the body is a cage, the soul is a caged bird yearning to be free” (Glassie, 2013), and philosophical ideology; humanism. The ideology revolves around the individual search for and importance of a person’s physical body; it is within the body of a human being that the Supreme resides. “Baul philosophy is aimed at achieving the spiritual objectives of the liberation of the soul, and Baul achieves this realization of the Supreme through *Yogic* and *Tantric* techniques. Castes, special deities, temples, the image of divinity,

or religious symbols in sacred places or places of worship have no role to play in Baul's beliefs. Hindu or Muslim Bauls practice almost the same sexual rites that are important to the Baul faith and to a comprehension of their songs” (Haroonuzzaman, 2010). The place of worship of a Baul is a human body. They seek to free themselves from body cages. Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore talked about the Bauls of Bengal in his Herbert Lectures in 1930. According to him, “Bauls of Bengal, there is to be found freedom and independence of mind and spirit that resist all attempts at definition.... According to this cult, to gain real freedom, one has first to die to the life of the world whilst still in the flesh – for only then can one be rid of all extraneous claims. Those of the Bauls who have Islamic leanings call such ‘death of life’ *fana*, a term used by the Sufis to denote union with the Supreme Being. True love, according to Bauls, is incompatible with any kind of compulsion, unless the bonds of necessity are overcome” (Tagore, 1931). *Fana* is the same as the final state of *nirvana* or *bodhicitta* (perfect enlightenment), as adopted in Buddhist *sahajia*, now conceptualised as *mahasukha* (supreme bliss) in Hindu *Vaisnavism*. Bauls have an interest in achieving the perfect indwelling supreme consciousness/bliss by esoteric practice (*Sadhana*) as recommended by their Guru (master).

In the esoteric path of Baul, coitus is more valuable than reproduction for their spiritual perfection and supreme bliss. It is not the sexual union but also the sexual yogic practice, the transmission of sexual energy and substance, transforming lust (*kama*) into devotional love (*prem*), making them free from all worldly desires. That’s why Baul tries to preserve semen by controlling their breath in their sexual yogic practice, and also remains childless. On the prohibition of procreation, Duddu Shah⁴ explains in one of his songs that, “oh mind, I prohibit you to take a partner/ he will give you a lot of trouble, you will have to reborn

⁴Renowned Follower of Fakir Lalon Shah.

again and again/ sons and daughters are born of your own seed and finally cause lots of crying” (Lorea, 2014).

Baul uses the term ‘*Sadhana*’ instead of practice to show their esoteric beliefs and practices. Muchkund Dubey revealed the meaning of *Sadhana* by comparing Baulism with Sufism, and he referred to Fakir Lalon Shah for creating the word, Lalon’s prolifically creative *Sadhana*, “The Baul faith is not a religion, but a *Sadhana* – just as much as Sufism is not a religion but a path of realizing Allah” (Dubey, 1997). It is quite difficult to define the core meaning of Baul *Sadhana* completely. However, Rajeshwari Datta elicited some details about Baul *Sadhana*. She pointed out that “the main features of the Baul’s religious beliefs and practices can be classed as follows: 1) *Guru-vada*, the importance of the preceptor. 2) Complete rejection of all social and religious rules of established systems, of traditions of caste, of class and race, and of the Vedas and the Puranas. 3) *Moner-manus* (man of the heart), i.e., the divine man. 4) The conception of the human forms as the abode of the divine and as microcosms. 5) The process of *Sadhana* (discipline), physical and psychological, for the attainment of spiritual perfection” (Datta, 1978).

Islamic Sufism and Fakir Lalon Shah

Nearly every Lalan devotee in Bangladesh believes that Fakir Lalon Shah was a Sufi saint. Therefore, they prefer to identify themselves as Fakirs rather than Bauls. Another prominent Lalon follower, Shamsul Fakir, pronounced, “*We are fakir, not Baul, as like as Fakir Lalon Shah*”⁵. He argued that Baul’s practice is a primary stage of becoming a Fakir, a knowledgeable person and successful practitioner. He also added that Fakiri is the path of esoteric Sufism. Fakir Lalon Shah was our primary master of the Sufi guide. Fakir Lalon Shah composed a remarkable number of songs that show us the path of Sufi pursuit. A large part of his

⁵ Fakir Shamsul Shah made this comment during an interview at his Pakkola Anonda Dham (a place where every year Baul meetings arranged by him).

work is devoted to various theories and guiding principles of Islamic Sufism, including *Allahtotto*, *Rasultotto*, *Sristitotto*, *Murshidotto*, *Gurutotto*, *Ponchabenatotto*, *Munushtotto*, *Montotto*, *Monototto*, *Attototto*, *Moner Manushtotto*, *Dehototto*, *Jatitotto*, *Parapartotto*, *Chandtotto*, *Rooptotto* (Haroonuzzaman, 2010). More specifically, *Allahtotto*, *Nobitotto*, *Rasultotto*, *Nurtotto*, *Sristitotto*, *Merajtotto*, *Namajtotto* and so on. The Islamic classic Sufistic narrations are also seen in his composition, which are substantial pieces of evidence of Sufi influence on his work. Here is the in-depth analysis on how Islamic Sufism is woven into Fakir Lalon Shah's work -

*“Mukhē paṛarē sadā'i lā ilāhā illāllāha, ā'ina bhējilēna rāsulāllāha”*⁶ (Always saying La ilaha illallah, Rasulullah broke the law),

“Āllāh balō manarē pākhi, bhabē kē'u kārō nāya dukhēra dukhī”. (O the bird of mind, Say Allah, except Him none in this world will empathise with you during your sadness (*ibid*, 2010).

“Nabī nā cinalē sēki khōdāra bhēda pāya (Chowdhury, 2009).” (If you don't know the prophet, then you will be separated from God). *“Rāchula Rāchula balē ḍāki, rāchula nāma nilē baṛa sukhē thāki.”* (Rasul, Rasul, I call out, Happy become as I pronounce his name).

“Yārē bala nabī nabī, nabīkē nirañjana bhābi (*ibid*, 2009).” (To whom say the Prophet is the Prophet, I think of the Prophet as Niranjan – Creator).

“Paṛarē dāyēmi nāmāya, ēdina halō ākhēri (*ibid*, 2009).” (Fall constant prayer, day is the last).

⁶ One of the Sufistic song of Fakir lalon Shah, sung by Baul Tuntun Fakir in the Baul meeting at Manikganj.

“Manasura hēllāja phakira sētō, balēchila āmi satya (ibid, 2009).” (Mansoor Hellaj Fakir said that only truth is relied on me).

“Nabī nā mānē yārā, mōhāyēda kāphēra tārā” (ibid, 2009).” (Those who do not believe in the Prophet, Muhayed, are infidels).

“Yini muraśida sē'itō rāsula, ihātē nā'i kōnō bhula, khōdā'ō sē haya, lālana balē nā, ēmana kathā kōra'ānē kayā.”⁷ (The one who is a murshid is a messenger, there is no mistake in this, he is also God, and he does not care, it is said in the Qur'an).

That's why Fakir Lalon Shah emphasised worshipping one's master. Again, Lolon says,

“Bhaja muraśidēra kadama ē'i bēlā, cāra pēyālā hṛda kamalā kramē habē ujālā (Haroonuzzaman, 2010).” (Worship the feet of Murshid now, gradually will brighten, the heart-lotus in four cups). Here four cups; Phānā phiśa śā'ikha, phānā phira rāsula, phānā phillāha, and bāmākā billāha (Talib, 1968).

The core messages of Fakir Lalon Shah in his above-mentioned songs are related to the essence of Sufism. The singular creator stands unmatched, and to embrace this conviction and subsequently cultivate understanding centred on this faith in Allah, as recognised in Islam, is known as 'Tawhid.' Lalon, functioning as a mystic poet, grounds his philosophical perspective in Sufism, a tradition where adherents hold Allah as the supremely beloved and ultimate entity. Similar to Sufis, Lalon completely engrosses himself in this ultimate entity. Songs that express devotion to Allah unequivocally affirm Lalon's unwavering commitment to Allah. While Allah is an abstract and ever-present entity, this particular philosophy resounds unmistakably within the verses of Lalon's

⁷ One of the Sufistic song of Fakir lalon Shah, sung by Bimal Das Baul in the Baul meeting at Manikganj.

songs. Even more, embracing the fundamental creed of Islam, 'La Ilaha Illallah Mohammadur Rasulallah,' is an essential requirement for every Muslim. In addition to invoking Allah's name, Muslims are encouraged to commemorate His messenger, Prophet Mohammad (SM). Since the inception of Bangla Islamic literature, Muslim poets have been composing hymns in praise of Allah (Hamd) and eulogising the Prophet (Naat). In alignment with this tradition, the mystic poet Lalon Shah also penned songs dedicated to both Allah and the Prophet. Fakir Lalon Shah believed that A Murshid is the guide who leads us on the path of Allah. This figure is akin to a Guru and is referred to as a Pir in Persian. Songs dedicated to the Murshid primarily extol the Murshid's greatness. These songs provide insights into Murshid's self-perception, his embodiment, and the crucial role he plays in assisting individuals in crossing the bridge to reach the next world. The next world is the world of Allah.

Comparative Analysis: Islamic Sufism and Lalon's Teachings

Islamic Sufism has had a significant influence on the life and teachings of Fakir Lalon Shah. Sufism, which is the mystical dimension of Islam, has played a crucial role in shaping Muslim society and promoting spiritual health (Nabi & Bukhari, 2022). One of the key figures in Islamic Sufism is al-Ghazali, whose teachings have organised Islamic theology and made Sufism an integral part of Islamic teachings (Gani, 2019). Sufism emphasises the pursuit of truth and the realisation of spiritual communion with God (Nabi & Bukhari, 2022). It promotes the values of patience, gratitude, contentment, and asceticism, which are believed to have a positive impact on individuals' lives (Samad, 2020). Sufism has also had a profound impact on society and civilisation. In Bangladesh, for example, the influence of Sufism is evident in the naming of districts after famous Sufis, which demonstrates the deep-rooted influence of Sufism on the country's culture and ideology (Göktaş, 2023). Sufism has inspired many individuals to

convert to Islam and has contributed to the development of social life and civilisation (Göktaş, 2023). Moreover, Sufism has served as a source of inspiration for poets and artists, such as Peer Naik Alam Shah, who discussed different qualities of Sufism in his poetry (Hafeez & Yunus, 2022).

In modern society, substantive Sufism has emerged as a way to apply the teachings of Sufism in daily activities. Unlike formative Sufism, which is characterised by rituals and ceremonies, substantive Sufism focuses on the substance of Sufism teachings and is seen as more compatible with the busy and mechanistic nature of modern life (Azima, 2022). By embracing substantive Sufism, individuals can still uphold the positive values of Sufism without sacrificing their daily routines (ibid., 2022).

The influence of Sufism extends beyond the boundaries of Islam. Sufism draws inspiration from major world faiths like Christianity and Hinduism, making it a spiritual movement that transcends religious boundaries (Nabi & Bukhari, 2022). It is also seen in Lalon's philosophy. It shares common ground with Christian mysticism and has established networks of mutual influence with other mystical traditions (Solares, 2019). This interfaith influence has contributed to the spiritual health and well-being of individuals both within and outside the Muslim world (Nabi & Bukhari, 2022). Islamic Sufism has had a profound influence on the life and teachings of Fakir Lalon Shah. It has shaped Muslim society, promoted spiritual health, and contributed to the development of social life and civilisation. Sufism's emphasis on truth, spiritual communion with God, and the cultivation of positive values has had a transformative impact on individuals' lives. Additionally, Sufism's interfaith influence has fostered connections between different mystical traditions and enriched the spiritual experiences of individuals from various religious backgrounds. Islamic Sufism had a significant influence on the life and teachings of Fakir Lalon Shah, a prominent philosopher, poet, and musician from Bengal

who lived during the 19th century (Rahman, 2023). Sufism is a mystical branch of Islam that emphasises the inner spiritual experience and seeks to attain a direct connection with the divine. Lalon Shah was deeply influenced by the teachings and practices of Sufism, which shaped his worldview and artistic expressions.

One aspect of Sufism that influenced Lalon Shah was the concept of tradition. According to Hobsbawm, tradition is "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition" (ibid., 2023). Lalon Shah's adherence to Sufi traditions and rituals played a significant role in his spiritual journey and artistic expression. His music and poetry often reflected the themes and teachings of Sufism, such as love, devotion, and the quest for spiritual enlightenment. Moreover, Lalon Shah's engagement with Sufism can be understood through the lens of substantive Sufism. Unlike formative Sufism, which is characterised by specific rituals and ceremonies, substantive Sufism explores the essence and substance of Sufi teachings to be applied in daily activities (Azima, 2022). This approach to Sufism resonated with Lalon Shah's life in modern society, as it allowed him to integrate the positive values of Sufism into his daily life without compromising his engagement with the world. The influence of Sufism on Lalon Shah's life and teachings can also be seen in the broader context of Bengal civilisation. Sufism had a profound impact on the social life and civilisation of Bangladesh, as evidenced by the presence of districts named after famous Sufis (Göktaş, 2023). This demonstrates the enduring influence of Sufism in shaping the cultural and religious landscape of the region and Lalon Shah's role as a prominent figure in this tradition.

Furthermore, the Ni‘matullāhī order, a Sufi order rooted in Persian Shi'ite mystical theology, played a significant role in consolidating the social and theological aspects of Sufism (Tabandeh, 2021). The

reinterpretation and articulation of classical Sufi teachings by figures such as Ḥusayn ‘Alī Shāh, Majdhūb ‘Alī Shāh, and Mast ‘Alī Shāh helped to establish the Ni‘matullāhī order as a force against Islamic fundamentalism in 19th-century Persia (Tabandeh, 2021). While Lalon Shah's specific connection to this order is not mentioned in the references, it provides a broader context for understanding the diverse manifestations of Sufism and its impact on Islamic societies.

The works of globally renowned Sufi writers and Fakir Lalon Shah share foundational mystical themes, despite their cultural and contextual divergences. Central to both traditions is the emphasis on divine love (*ishq*) as a transformative force, with Rumi's ecstatic odes to union with the Beloved echoing Lalon's pursuit of the “*Man of the Heart*” (*maner manush*), an inner divine essence transcending external identity (Schimmel, 1993; Salomon, 2017). Both traditions prioritize experiential spirituality over ritual dogma: Ibn Arabi's concept of “*wahdat al-wujud*” (*unity of existence*) aligns with Lalon's rejection of religious binaries, as seen in his declaration, “*What use is a mosque or temple? The divine resides within*” (Urban, 2001, p. 72; Salomon, 2017). Similarly, Sufi critiques of clerical hypocrisy, exemplified by Bulleh Shah's Punjabi kafis, resonate with Lalon's disdain for caste and creed, underscoring a shared resistance to institutional orthodoxy (Malik, 2018; Eaton, 1993). Both employ poetic metaphor and music as vehicles for transcendence—Rumi's ghazals and Lalon's Baul songs use lyrical abstraction to evoke spiritual longing, bridging the human and divine through art (Capwell, 1986; Schimmel, 1993). Their works also advocate ego dissolution (*fana* in Sufism, *nirakar* in Lalon's philosophy) as a path to universal harmony, reflecting a shared vision of spirituality rooted in inner awakening rather than external doctrine (Chittick, 1989; Stewart, 2001).

Conclusively, Islamic Sufism and Lalon's teachings both represent profound mystical traditions, emphasising a personal and direct experience of the Divine. Islamic Sufism, a spiritual movement within Islam, advocates for a deeper, intimate connection with Allah through love, devotion, and self-purification. It incorporates various rituals, poetry, and practices to nurture this connection, often transcending orthodox religious practices for a more experiential spirituality (Ernst, 1997). Lalon Shah, on the other hand, was a prominent figure in the Bengali Baul tradition. His teachings, embodied in his evocative songs, pivot around the "Man of the Heart" or the inner self, which he often equates with the Divine. While Lalon's teachings emphasise transcending religious and societal boundaries in the pursuit of spiritual truth, they share with Sufism the core idea of seeking a profound, personal realisation of the Divine (Openshaw, 2004). Both traditions, despite their distinct cultural origins, prioritise the inner journey, looking beyond external rituals and dogmas to cultivate a deeper spiritual awareness. Islamic Sufism had a profound influence on the life and teachings of Fakir Lalon Shah. His engagement with Sufi traditions, adherence to substantive Sufism, and the broader impact of Sufism on Bengal civilisation all contributed to shaping his worldview and artistic expression. Lalon Shah's legacy as a philosopher, poet, and musician continues to inspire and resonate with individuals seeking spiritual enlightenment and a deeper connection with the divine.

Conclusion

Islamic Sufism and Lalon's Baul philosophy, while rooted in distinct theological frameworks, converge in their emphasis on transcending dogma to prioritise direct, experiential communion with the Divine—a shared ethos that holds profound implications for contemporary discussions on religious pluralism and cultural dialogue in South Asia. Sufism's Universalist currents, exemplified by its poetic celebration of divine love (*ishq*) and

practices like *dhikr*, historically fostered intercultural exchange in Bengal, where Sufi shrines became sites of shared veneration for Hindus and Muslims alike. Lalon Shah, however, radicalised this pluralism, rejecting all religious labels and institutional hierarchies to assert that the Divine resides not in mosques or temples but within the “Man of the Heart” (*maner manush*)—a vision that challenges sectarian divisions and resonates deeply in a region still grappling with communal. His syncretic legacy, blending Sufi *tawhid* (unity), Vaishnava *bhakti* (devotion), and Sahajiya Buddhist introspection, offers a model for interfaith initiatives that prioritise shared spiritual goals over doctrinal differences. In modern South Asia, where religious identity is often politicised, Lalon’s teachings—and Sufism’s broader history of adaptability—underscore the possibility of harmonizing diverse traditions without erasing their uniqueness. Contemporary cultural revivals of Lalon’s songs, performed across Hindu-Muslim gatherings, and Sufi-inspired peace movements highlight how these traditions can bridge divides, fostering dialogue through art and shared metaphors of inner awakening. By centring humanity over orthodoxy, both Sufism and Lalon’s philosophy provide a counter-narrative to exclusionary identity politics, advocating instead for a spirituality rooted in compassion, ego dissolution, and the universal pursuit of truth—a vision urgently relevant to fostering coexistence in pluralistic societies. Despite their distinct cultural and theological contexts, both Sufism and Lalon’s teachings offer pathways to spiritual realisation, emphasising love, compassion, and the dissolution of the ego in the quest for the Divine.

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