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Exploring Unity and Harmony in Esotericism: A Study of the Principles of the Maizbhandari Tariqa

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Abstract

At-Tasawwuf or Sufism is the esoteric aspect of Islam aimed towards giving access to divine knowledge. Esoteric knowledge is the fundamental principle found in all orders of nature. Esoteric knowledge is the divine knowledge that is universal and transcends all philosophical and theological points of view. Unlike exoteric knowledge that depends on contrastive expression of religious forms and ends with multiplicity, esotericism lies in unity. This unity is metaphysical as it overcomes the plurality of religions and opens onto the esoteric interpretation of religion that manifests as social harmony. Sufism, understood through this esoteric heart contributed in shaping the Maizbhandari Tariqa, which grew with spiritual love and transcendental unity to foster social harmony in a religiously diversified region. Its founder, Gausul Azam Maizbhandari Shah Sufi Syed Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari, drew on contemporary Sufi orders to mold the Tariqa into a center of equality and unity. This study evaluates the order in light of Sufism, to examine the perspective of Syed Delowar Hossain Maizbhandari, who gave a theological and philosophical shape to the order. The findings demonstrate that the esoteric principles of Maizbhandari Tariqa promote social unity and harmony through its esoteric framework.

Keywords: Transcendental unity, Esotericism, Religious Unity, Sufism, Maizbhandari Tariqa.

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INTRODUCTION

An exclusivist views religion from an exoteric perspective, unable to grasp the veiled truth beneath its outward representation, an inclusivists, by contrast, recognizes the presence of a spiritual unity and the transcendent nature of the shared truth of the Being. On this view, what determines the differences among forms of Truth is not the Truth itself but the difference among human perspectives. Schuon captures this when he observes that humanity has, for thousands of years, been divided into several fundamentally different branches, each constituting so many complete humanities, more or less closed in on themselves; because the existence of spiritual receptacles so different and so original, demands differentiated refractions of the one Truth (Schuon, 2006, p. 29). In other words, the similarity of this truth is internal, and the distinction is external: also, the manifestation of the Truth is variable, conducive to the community which has received a revelation, reflecting the concept that it is the will of God to express Himself in diversified manifestations.

Though human civilization shares different ideas of the image of God, their devotion is actually towards the Tawhid (oneness of Being). In the Indian subcontinent, varied forms of devotion can be seen. Historical evidence indicates that Islam reached the delta before the arrival of Sufi traditions and the occupation of Bengal by Bakhtyar Khalji. Arabic names of some localities of Chittagong have led some scholars to speculate that people of the coastal regions of Bengal were familiar with Islamic traditions long before the arrival of Ikhtiyar al-Din Muhammad bin Bakhtiyar Khalji. Arab traders had visited the coastal areas as early as the eighth century CE. Sufi traditions generally hold that Sufi teachings contributed to the spread of Islam — not necessarily through direct conversion, but through moral example and reciprocal acceptance from the native community. Historical evidence further shows that some Sufis visited and settled in other parts of Bengal before the Muslim invasion, and people embraced Islam by following the examples of simplicity, egalitarianism, and notions of brotherhood that these holy men established (Karim, 1985, p. 46).

The spread of Islam through the gradual acceptance and conversion of the rural and urban people of the delta has multiple factors, and

one of them, vehemently proposed by the Sufi traditions, is through Sufi masters and their Khanqahs. Widely populated rural Hindu and Buddhist communities have shown solidarity with the Sufi masters who arrived from other countries, owing to their nobility, peaceful co-existence, and the aid and support the great khanqahs provided support that mirrored the spirituality that their own religion reflected. Shared understandings of superhuman entities within both indigenous and Islamic worldviews further facilitated the acceptance of Sufis among Hindu and Buddhist populations. Moreover, the khanqahs themselves operated within an agrarian frontier economy that closely resembled the existing structure of the indigenous non-Muslim communities, so that local populations came to view Islam not as a foreign belief system but as an extension of their own agrarian world. The participation of Sufis, combined with the ruler's initiative to increase cultivable land, rendered Islam synonymous with agricultural development. Consequently, the local populace culturally regarded Islam as a civilization-enhancing ideology rather than an external tradition (Eaton, 1993).

As different streams of Sufism converged and made their way into Bengal, one of them arrived in the rural part of Fatikchari called Maizbhandar, where a unique stream of Sufism began to emerge through a chain of Sufi saints connected with the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Maizbhandariyya Tariqa not only advocates Islam but also promotes principles of egalitarianism and morality, thereby welcoming individuals from diverse religious backgrounds into its community. Hazrat Ahmad Allah, the founder of the Maizbhandariyya Order, permitted individuals of different faiths to join this tariqa without necessitating the abandonment of their own religious customs and practices. This approach enables the Maizbhandariyya shaykhs to foster a love for God, mediate in religious disputes, oppose religious extremism, and cultivate an environment of communal harmony and interfaith dialogue (Alam, 2011).

It is evident that this Sufi order does not only preach a religion but also attracts people to improve certain human qualities so that the society dwells in harmony, more importantly, and quite similarly with other Sufi traditions, propagates love of God through a spiritual method for the attainment of the Divine more intimately. "The

Maizbhandariyya Sufi Order also introduced the notion of achar dharma, or ideal mannerism based on the spirit of religion" (Alam, 2010, p. 38). The perfected humanity that the Sufi order so clearly promotes reflects its deliberate effort to shape the behavior and character of the followers, aligning them to achieve the love of God and to usher social cohesion and integrity. It is a distinctive way of preaching Sufism and attracting myriads of followers without questioning the religions and the beliefs of the natives. This needed a philosophical ground strongly based on religious equality and spirituality. "The founders of the Maijbhandari tariqa, Bertocci states, developed a fairly elaborate 'Seven Step' (sapta paddati) methodology for the attainment of their view of spiritual perfection, and any basic written description of it that I have seen always alludes to this doctrine reverently as the 'Maijbhandari School of Thought,' alleging it to be a unique contribution to the world's body of spiritual knowledge" (Bertocci, 2006, p. 54). The Maizbhandari Tariqa has gradually grown into a widely venerated shrine and an institution through the mystical charisma of the Maizbhandari saints and through contemporary initiatives that understand the demands of modernity. Through the saints' sustained efforts to engage people of different sects, and through the deliberate construction of a Sufi order that stands against no school of thought, the Maizbhandari Tariqa has come to be understood as a pluralistic order — indigenous to the country yet universal in its broader outlook. Alongside these modern initiatives, the Sufi order has not deviated from its central commitment to uniting souls with the Divine. Consequently, myriads of followers find Maizbhandar as the home to heal their sufferings and pains, and others find it the sanctuary of divinity and unified Truth. "Many debates about the true nature of Islam are beyond the reach of the common people, but they know that their Babas and shaykhs are within their reach and can transform and empower them. Maizbhandariyya shaykhs are perceived as the spiritual guides and healers to them during their good times and during their bad times; the Sufi masters are not only perceived as the propagator of the faith but also the foundation of the very faith" (Alam, 2010, p. 44-45).

Purpose of the Study

This research aims to analyze the core principles of the Maizbhandari Tariqa that have been prominent in promoting social unity and minimizing the conflicts between different schools of thought of the country. To pursue this analysis, the study employs analytical and descriptive methods of research. Written literature on the Sufi order remains limited and dates mainly from the period after one of the Maizbhandari Sufi saints, Syed Delowar Hossain Maizbhandari, initiated a literary movement and formulated the basic principles of the order, giving it strong stability. This study explores the principles, *Tawhid-e-Adyan* (religious equality), *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa* (sovereign spirituality), and the seven principles, to understand the tolerance, pluralism and unity of the Sufi order. The four basic principles are evident in the words of the Sufi saint of the order Syed Delowar Hossain Maizbhandari: "It is a modern reformation in traditional Sufism. The main principle of the followers of this *wilayet* [Spirituality] is to disinterest in transient, to follow the light of the knowledge of the pious by avoiding doctrinal schism and to prefer religious spirits over religious rituals. They believe in the greatness of obedience over ritualistic worship" (Maizbhandari, 2024, p. 249).

RESEARCH QUESTION

1. What fundamental concepts of unity and harmony are emphasized in the esoteric teachings of the Maizbhandari Tariqa?
2. How has the Maizbhandari Tariqa modified its Sufi teachings on unity and harmony?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To identify and analyze the central esoteric principles of the Maizbhandari Tariqa that highlight the importance of unity and harmony.
2. To reveal the spiritual practices within the Maizbhandari Tariqa that contribute to the cultivation of a collective feeling of oneness and peace among its followers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A rational view of religion is limited in that it cannot grasp the veiled Truth that is evidently similar and transcending in every religion. The individual views a religion from the exoteric intimations, symbols, rituals and practices that are incoherent with other religions. That Revelation carries both an outward and an inward projection of Truth is unintelligible to most people — understood instead by the saints, who grasp the veiled Truth through experience, and by the transcendentalists, who grasp it from a pluralistic point of view. "Exoteric truth is limited by definition," Schuon argues, "by reason of the very limitation of the end it sets itself, without this restriction, however, affecting the esoteric interpretation of which that same truth is susceptible thanks to the universality of its symbolism or rather first and foremost, thanks to the twofold nature, inward and outward, of Revelation itself whence it follows; that a dogma is both a limited idea and an unlimited symbol at one and the same time" (Schuon, 1993, p. 42). Esoteric interpretation of Truth, or esoterism, broadly refers to the acknowledgement of an inward similarity of Truth shared by religions of different sects — a viewpoint distinct from common sense and rational philosophy, and most at home in the metaphysical, rather than the terrestrial plane of philosophy. This concept opens a path to understanding the unity of religions in their internal relationships. Exoteric differences only project what a certain community has been enjoined to practice for achieving salvation. By contrast, the esoteric view holds that the way of salvation has an esoteric relation with the ultimate Truth and a clear path to the Absolute. The unity of Religion is to be found first and foremost in this absolute which is at once Truth and Reality and the origin of all revelations and of all truth (Nasr, 1989).

The Maizbhandari Tariqa is one of the streams of the Sufi tradition that originated in the Indian subcontinent and was carried over to the Bengal delta through many Sufi masters. Sufi traditions made themselves acceptable to the natives of the delta through their strong sense of religious equality, social harmony and peaceful co-existence. “Such were the Sufis who made Bengal the cradle-home of their life. They were renowned for their simplicity of life, strength of character, devotion to faith and peaceful pursuits; their khanqahs were rear-giving refuge, their alm-houses were open to all, poor,

destitutes, wanderers and mendicants; they were regarded as having been endowed with super-human powers. Naturally the people were attracted to them and it is in this way that they won over the mass of the Bengali people to Islam." (Karim, 1985, p. 180). The Sufi tradition has traditionally been open to various streams of followers and schools of thought, placing a strong emphasis on the esoteric level of belief. Such mystical orders were accepted and slowly became renowned among the natives due to the mystical aroma that they spread and the openness they showed to all classes of people. These initiations were neither sudden nor haphazard; rather, they followed a steady flow of doctrinal teachings through chains connected to Sufi orders, which were themselves connected to the teachings and principles of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The Sufi *Silsilas* (orders) prevalent here especially the Qadiriyyah, Chishtiyyah, Suharwardiyyah and also Naqshbandiyyah contributed a great deal in the literature, philosophy, theological ideas, doctrines of peace, and upholding of human rights and social justice (Hashmi & Khawaja, 2021, p. 1476).

Maizbhandari Tariqa, which took initiations from the Qadiriyyah and Chishtiyyah orders, has implemented a reformed set of Sufism in the Maizbhandari village that with its immense popularity dominated over other schools of thought in terms of promoting inter-religious dialogue and religious unity. Although the Maizbhandariyya Sufi Order is orthodox in observing the basic rituals of Islamic tradition, its doctrines are distinct in many respects from those of exoteric Islamic practice. "Examples of the differences include the notion of love, the relation between the Sufis and their devotees, the use of music (*Sema*), the performance of extensive dhikr, and the respect and tolerance for other faiths" (Alam, 2010, p. 44-45). Building on its predecessor orders, the Maizbhandari Tariqa reconstructed a Sufi order whose principles, doctrines, and practices were both accessible and familiar, helping it become the most revered and venerated Sufi shrine in Bangladesh. This further intensifies the necessity to be inclusivist, tolerant and pluralistic in order to survive and flourish as a Sufi order amidst manifold religions and schools of thought. Alongside the non-Sufi Sunni Islamic tradition, Sufi ideologies of different traditions have a great influence upon the daily lives of most Bangladeshi Muslims. Like

in the early days of Islam on the Bengal frontier, Sufis still maintain important connections between Islam and the masses. In fact, a large majority of Bangladeshi Muslims perceive Sufis as sources of their spiritual wisdom and guidance and their *khanqahs* and *dargahs* are the nerve centers of Muslim society. (Karim, 1985, p. 185).

The esoteric principles upon which the Maizbhandari Tariqa is based are *Tawhid-e-Adyan* (religious equality) and *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa* (sovereign spirituality). “In contrast to *wilayet-e-muqayyda* and even *nubuwwa*, both of which were ‘limited in terms of place, person and environment,” *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa* is coterminous with a ‘free Sufism’ and transcends all religious and social boundaries in extending its validity over the whole of mankind (Harder, 2011, p. 92; Maizbhandari, 2024, p. 22). This Sufi order is a reformed order that wholeheartedly advocates for transcending social and religious boundaries through its spiritual wisdom, known as *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa*. This spiritual wisdom and unrestrictive spirituality found their fullest expression in the greatest saint, known as Gausul Azam Syed Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari, who held the power of *Belayet*. Later Sufi saints of the order followed his footsteps and promoted the principles of the order. "Its principle is to treat different religious doctrines with fairness as it views their destination to be the same, despite their differences in ideas and rituals. This spiritual power is an effective driving force for a positive progression both in religious and societal spectrums. Henceforth, it can be understood as the orthodox Islam, a universal spirituality that promotes world peace" (Maizbhandari, 2024, p. 103). The concept of unity in the Maizbhandari context is that there lies a shared destination of different religions: their salvation points are equal and homogeneous. This concept is what Maizbhandari Sufis call *Tawhid-e-Adyan*.

Syed Delowar Hossain Maizbhandari who formulated a literary movement to give a linguistic power to the spirituality and Sufism of the order characterized *Tawhid-e-Adyan* as such:

> It is true that all the religions that exist, even if they are different according to the circumstances, are basically unseparated. Although one may not be uniform to the other in its expression, this is merely an outer appearance, because that which is called religion, that entity of religion is

> unseparated and one, since the goal of all religions is God, even if separate groups are connected with separate religions. This has originated from Allah's power of volition (Maizbhandari, 2024, p. 3).

Perfected humanity is an umbrella term for the initiatives taken by the Maizbhandari Sufi saints to cleanse the souls of the adherents. The spiritual wisdom of the saints has been the source of these initiatives, and their mystical charisma has allured devotees from various sects towards the Sufi order. The aim of Maizbhandari spirituality is to eradicate all forms of abomination from the hearts of individuals by utilizing the wisdom found in the Holy Quran, which is referred to within the text as a cure for the ailments of the heart. Through the role as the savior (ghwath-e-'azmiyyat), Hazrat Ahmad Ullah liberates individuals from worldly attachments and the associated perils, while also directing Divine seekers towards achieving eternal success by filling their hearts with Divine love and inspiration. His statements were both impactful and forward-thinking, designed for the betterment of humanity and to steer them towards the correct path during this period of moral decline. (Maizbhandari, 2024, p. 121).

Syed Ahmad Ullah didn't inscribe the seven principles as his followers find it today but his instructions towards his devotees and the reflection of the principles in his character were captured by Syed Delowar Hossain, a visionary Maizbhandari Sufi, who gave a written form to the principles. "The seven principles or *Usul-e-Sa'ba* were formulated to provide guidance to the practitioners to overcome their animalistic behavior for social and mental well-being. These seven principles (*Usul-e-Sa'ba*) were incorporated into the Maizbhandari Tariqa as a comprehensive training program for the aspirants to help them slowly break the snares of the world to start their spiritual journey to the Divine communion." (Hoque et al., 2021, p. 21). These principles are exoteric practices that have an esoteric essence that brings the practitioners closer to the ultimate and simultaneously cleanses the character of the seeker.

Other exoteric practices that have esoteric influences are *Zikr*, *Sema*, and *Telawat-e-ozud*. "The purpose of *dhikr* is to produce concentration on the godhead and the corresponding diminishment of self-required to enhance the worshiper's spiritual awareness, that

can lead, with the right discipline, to mystical union with the divine or *fana*." (Bertocci, 2006, p. 63).

Sufi songs, popularly known among the Maizbhandari community as *Sema*, are devotional songs praising God and the saint for the Divine and spiritual qualities. Primarily, *Sema* is used intentionally to arouse ecstasy and divine love. This practice has given rise to popular Maizbhandari songs. These songs are composed with the singular objective of arousing divine love. Since a Sufi's sole purpose is to enhance his relationship with Allah, he engages in a variety of spiritual pursuits in the path of Allah, among which Sufi songs and Maizbhandari songs are counted, as they can assist him in achieving ecstasy in the love of Allah. (Asgor & Musa, 2022, p. 41).

Telawat-e-ozud (self-reflection) is a rigorous cleansing method where the external attributes such as social behavior are thoughtfully mended to become good human beings. "The Maizbhandari Tariqa teaches the adepts to form a *barzah* or image of the saint to control the unstable mind for the appropriate state of contemplation. By constant meditation on the *barzah*, the adept has to relinquish his own personality and try to achieve union with his *pir*…the adept reaches the state of *fana fi al-sayh*, 'annihilation in the spiritual master'... and the journey thus fueled leads through the *maqamat*, stations, and ultimately to *fana fi Allah*, 'annihilation in God'." (Harder, 2011, p. 54-55).

These practices are a comprehensive training program that creates a spiritual flourish in the hearts of the adepts, catalyzing the growth of an obedient, pious, ethical and receptive mindset that promotes personal well-being and social harmony. All the rituals and rigorous practices in this Sufi order are meant to make piety an intrinsic habitual element of human existence, as 'performing good deeds itself is not the ultimate objective; rather, is to accompany them to the afterlife' (Maizbhandari, 2024, p. 99). Through its many esoterically essential practices, the Maizbhandari Tariqa cultivates a perfected humanity: the human soul reaches a purified state that connects him with the Divine and heralds the individual as a contributor of social peace. Morally perfect individuals have the capacity to show respect to the plurality in religions, as the individual now views the ultimate truth to be present in scattered

beliefs, the individual surely admits the oneness of God and the destination of other religions to be common, therefore creating a sense of accepting and recognizing plurality as a religion of Being.

RESEARCH STATEMENT

Maizbhandari Tariqa, an indigenous Sufi order, has cultivated a unique esoteric framework that prioritizes the inner unity of all faiths over their external differences (Jahangir, 1999; Harder, 2011). In spite of its crucial contribution to promoting communal harmony in one of South Asia's most religiously diverse areas, the philosophical underpinnings of this order are still inadequately explored in scholarly discussions. This research investigates the fundamental esoteric tenets of the Maizbhandari Tariqa - primarily *Tawhid-e-Adyan* (religious equality) and *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa* (sovereign spirituality) - to assess how these beliefs form a cohesive framework for religious pluralism and social unity. The findings will imply that the order's esoteric framework - further implemented through its seven-principle spiritual training program (*Usul-e-Sa'ba*) - serves not only as a theological doctrine but also as a practical approach to dismantling sectarian divisions and fostering moral character. This paper argues that the Maizbhandari Tariqa exemplifies a dynamic model of pluralistic Sufism with significant implications for interfaith dialogue and the larger conversation regarding religion's potential to foster social harmony amidst diversity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes a qualitative research framework, employing both analytical and descriptive methodologies to investigate the esoteric tenets of the Maizbhandari Tariqa and their significance in promoting religious unity and social cohesion. A qualitative approach is particularly suitable in this context, as the topics at hand - Sufi doctrine, esoteric theology, and spiritual practices - are fundamentally interpretative and defy quantification. The meanings inherent in sacred texts, theological constructs, and mystical ideas cannot be sufficiently represented through numerical data or statistical methods; they require meticulous textual analysis,

contextual understanding, and philosophical inquiry. Primary sources form the essential basis of this study, focusing on the theological and philosophical writings of Syed Delowar Hossain Maizbhandari, whose literary contributions systematically articulated the core doctrines of the order. These texts are regarded as dynamic theological documents, scrutinized for their conceptual depth, internal coherence, and doctrinal significance rather than simply as historical records. Secondary sources - encompassing peer-reviewed articles, monographs, sociological research, and digital library materials - are critically examined to position the Maizbhandari tradition within the broader academic conversation surrounding Sufism, religious pluralism, and esoteric philosophy. The analytical approach is employed to deconstruct and assess the doctrinal principles of the order, particularly *Tawhid-e-Adyan* and *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa*, while the descriptive approach delineates their manifestation within the order's spiritual practices, such as *Zikr*, *Sema*, *Telawat-e-ozud*, and the *Usul-e-Sa'ba*.

DISCUSSION

Major Principles of Maizbhandari Tariqa

Drawing directly on the theological writings of Syed Delowar Hossain Maizbhandari, Maizbhandari Tariqa stands on four major principles. First, *Tawhid-e-Adyan* (religious equality) holds that the outward differences among religions conceal a single, unseparated inward truth, since the goal of all religions is God. Second, *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa* (sovereign spirituality) is the doctrine of unrestricted sainthood that transcends the boundaries of place, person, and community placed on *wilayet-e-muqayyada*, extending spiritual validity over the whole of mankind. Third, the *Usul-e-Sa'ba*, or seven principles, function as a structured program of self-purification through which practitioners overcome animalistic impulses on their spiritual journey toward Divine communion. Fourth, the order institutionalizes these doctrines through three recurring spiritual practices: *Zikr*, or remembrance of the Divine, aimed at mystical union or *fana*. *Telawat-e-ozud* or self-reflection aimed to reflect on the character and behavior, and *Sema*, devotional songs sung in a controlled setting; the aim of the setting and the songs are to arouse divine love. These four elements move from

doctrine (*Tawhid-e-Adyan*, *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa*) to method (*Usul-e-Sa'ba*) to embodied practice (*Zikr*, *Telawat-e-ozud*, *Sema*), forming the coherent esoteric system that this study investigates in the sections that follow.

Sufism: the heart of Maizbhandari Tariqa

Love can conquer everything; it was the tool that brought Islam in a Vedantic society and later prepared the ground for it to flourish in the east. The Sufis from foreign lands with unknown languages and cultures brought a message of salvation that was bound to face restrictive measures from the locals. Masud et al. finds that the Sufis established the groundwork for communal harmony and peace. They promoted equality of status, love, and brotherhood among the populace, instructing individuals on how to honor one another's religion, emotions, and practices. The principles of social justice, along with the ideals of equality and brotherhood espoused by the Sufis, drew the attention of Buddhists and lower-caste Hindus. The Sufis profoundly impacted the collective consciousness of the people, attracting them to the Islamic faith through their religious fervor, exemplary conduct, and humanitarian efforts. The khanqahs established by the Sufis throughout every corner of Bengal served as significant centers for humanitarian and intellectual pursuits, playing a crucial role in the advancement of Muslim society in this region. Islam provided a higher social standing in Bengal. (Masud et al., 2017, p. 110).

Many Sufi orders originated in the Indian subcontinent and were later carried to the Bengal delta through Sufis. Maizbhandari Tariqa formed one link in the flowing Sufi chain that began from Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Syed Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari is the founder of the Maizbhandari Tariqa. He initially received initiation from Syed Abu Shahama within the Qadiriyya Tariqa and subsequently, during his spiritual journey, he was granted Khilafat (deputyship) by his master. Upon returning to his native village of 'Maizbhandar', he persisted in his spiritual discipline and dynamic mentorship, which eventually led to the emergence of a new Tariqa. Before long, his spiritual influence drew a multitude of followers and disciples, some of whom were also bestowed with his deputyship. (Muhiuddin, 2020). Today, Maizbhandari Tariqa is

considered an indigenous Sufi which was laid on the Sufi principles that were incorporated in different orders after Sufism crossed its national boundaries and reached different parts of the world.

Maizbhandari Tariqa was initiated in a diversely populated village with Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists. Its formulation and introduction to the local people was important for its acceptance and implementation of the noble Sufism. This distinctive Sufi order was constructed with Sufi mysticism, love, and humanity. Love and humanity form the universal message accepted by every religion and belief. Therefore, the founder was keen to incorporate divine love into this order that Sufism inherently reflected. Religious diversities might propose diversified ways of culture and tradition but this diversity is the view of the outsider who neglects the heart of religions unified on a single truth. The problem with such an understanding, according to Smith, is that "it concerns only the external and observable form which constituted religion and ignored the inner form; the most important part of religion is the relation with the Transcendent." (Smith, 1964, p. 128).

On the contrary, Sufism has been a powerful messenger of transcendental unity that has united humanity regardless of different beliefs to follow the Sufi principles. Sufism is perpetually inclined toward transcending narrow-mindedness, dogmatism, and obstacles, welcoming all with a sincere heart. This openness is the reason it has cleansed the impurities of others' thoughts and has spread across nations to alleviate the pain of the afflicted. For Sufis, love (Ishq) is fundamental; it is believed that love can conquer all. What is achieved through love endures, while victories obtained through force are fleeting; there exists both the anxiety and the strength associated with the potential loss of what has been acquired, and history stands as a testament to this truth. (Islam, 2023).

To mark the presence of the Sufi order amidst a religiously polarized society the Sufis of the Maizbhandari Tariqa needed to take an inclusivist approach. Religious pluralism was evident in the society and followers practiced different cultures and traditions. These cultures were symbols representing the beliefs but were not the intrinsic element holding the religion together. Religions that grew up in different places and among different communities had a common ground that upheld the universality of a truth. Though

exclusivists emphasized more on the outer shell of a religion like the symbols, practices and traditions, Sufis focused more on the divine truth. Sufis believe religions are different manifestations of the divine. “Religions emerge among societies as the divine manifestation or how the divine wants to reveal himself before humans. This can be clearly expressed by saying that the believer whose doctrinal outlook is limited to that of exoterism always maintains a fundamental and irreducible separation between the Divinity and himself whereas the Sufi recognizes, at least in principle, the essential unity of all beings, or-to put the same thing in negative terms-the unreality of all that appears separate from God.” (Burckhardt, 2008, p. 16).

Sufi orders accept the manifestations and doctrines of other beliefs, since their leaders believe that manifestations of the divine may vary from place to place and time to time, even though the source that manifests itself is one and the only. The pathways are varied with categorized concepts but the destination of every path is one. Differences in ethnicity, culture and traditions create revelations that are not similar to one another due to culturally built symbols and practices. Similarly, religious rites and rituals of the prophets varied according to their different circumstances. However, their ethics and spiritual goals were identical even though their personalities and methodologies appeared to be widely varied (Maizbhandari, 2024, p. 106).

Maizbhandari Tariqa has focused more on the inner similarities of the practiced beliefs and respected the existing symbols, traditions and cultures. Divine knowledge is the essential part of every religion and the Maizbhandari Sufi saints have acknowledged the differences accepting the similarity of the truth reflected in the religions. The Sufi order proclaimed *Tawhid-e-Adyan* or the concept of religious equality that views the ethical goals of all religions as analogous and therefore, does not disrespect any religion (Maizbhandari, 2024, p. 105). Sufi saints of this order moved their concentration from religious plurality to emphasizing the purification of the soul. A purified soul was closer to the divine than any other that was vigorously committed to rites and rituals.

The ultimate goal of Sufism was to elevate the love for the divine in the minds of the followers. Love and compassion would minimize

the distance between the beloved and the lover. Suffering that springs from the separation will be mended only if the gap is narrowed down. The Sufi saints were adept in introducing values, practices and teachings to ignite inactive human qualities to sanctify the polluted human soul. “Sufism contains its end or aims within itself in the sense that it can give access to direct knowledge of the eternal. This knowledge, being one with its object, delivers from the limited and inevitably changing state of the ego” (Burckhardt, 2008, p. 3).

Syed Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari, the founder of Maizbhandari Tariqa, strictly followed the intrinsic constitution of Sufism during the formation of this order. Helping followers achieve spiritual succession and the attainment of divine love is the only aim of this order. In Maizbhandari contexts, exoteric aspects are sets of traditional and symbolic features that cover the real essence of a religion for an outsider. But Maizbhandari Sufis believe that the fundamental aim of every Sufi order should be to develop ethical and moral human beings because “Sufism is a wayfarer for the souls that needed divine ailment and it has worked to bring the created souls near the creation. Practices and rites were often difficult and unintelligible to human understanding; Sufism made its principles simple and easier.” (Burckhardt, 2008, p. 8).

The doctrine of Sufism is the teachings and practices of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The quintessence of Sufi principles was mainly introduced by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), which were later transmitted orally to deputies of the Sufi saints. “This ocean like Maizbhandari Tariqa (Sufi order) was formed with the combination of three spiritual springs of Wilayet coupled with prophetic spring which consists of apparent and hidden teachings and is influenced by *sharia’h, tariqat, haqiqat* and *ma’rifat*.” (Maizbhandari, 2024, p. 199). The spiritual tree has a long chain of Sufi saints connected with the Sufi order. This chain of Sufi saints started with the first Sufi and the Gausul Azam Shah Sufi Syed Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari followed by Syed Golamur Rahman Maizbhandari, Syed Delawor Hossain Maizbhandari, Syed Ziaul Hoque Maizbhandari, Syed Emdadul Hoque Maizbhandari, the present enthroned Sufi saint of the chain. “The path of *tariqat* starts from the level of *lawwama* or self-blaming, as it is the next level

after *shari'a*. This is why it differs from the common understanding of the exoteric people…The Sufi saints are the seekers of purity at the second level of *lawwama* or self-blaming and they follow the path. They avoid conflicts and follow the light of knowledge of the perfected saint. They acknowledge the importance of religious ethics over its rituals and prefer obedience to worship." (Maizbhandari, 2024, p. 217).

The Maizbhandari Tariqa did not confine itself to philosophy and doctrine alone; it also introduced practices such as Usul-e-Sa'ba or the seven principles, Telawat-e-ozud or self-reflection, and *Zikr* or remembrance of Allah to refine human characteristics and make the man a lover of the divine. The seven principles developed by Syed Delowar Hossain Maizbhandari are comprehensive and attainable attributes that furnish the human mind and soul. The animalistic attributes of humans put an invisible veil over the soul that has a hidden connection with the divine. These principles train the practitioner to fight against those animalistic attributes.

According to Syed Delowar Hossain Maizbhandari, "In comparison with other Islamic Sufi methods of self-purification and permanence with Allah, these principles are easier and simpler to practice. They are not contradictory with other universal methods of self-purification; rather they are pragmatic, encouraging and a remedy for the world crisis and a symbol of salvation." (Maizbhandari, 2024, p. 128). Maizbhandari Sufis claim that these principles constitute a revolutionary spiritual method that not only facilitates the purification of the soul but also promotes a sovereign spirituality (*Belayet-e-Mutlaqa*) accessible to individuals regardless of their identity.

The Reflection of Transcendental Unity of Religions in *Tawhid-e-Adyan* (religious equality)

Sufi pluralism assumes a definitive form in the Maizbhandari Ṭarīqa, understood by the order as an intrinsic extension of Qur'anic and hadith teaching on the unity of divine revelation. This trust, according to a widely cited Qur'anic image, was one the heavens, earth, and mountains refused, out of fear, while man alone accepted it — a trust identified with knowledge and tawḥīd (oneness/unity):

> We indeed offered the trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused it and were afraid of

> it… and man accepted it… That trust is knowledge and tawḥīd. (Ghazzālī, 1978)

Divine knowledge cannot be reduced to the exoteric forms of religion; rather, this undifferentiated knowledge connects the esoteric core of every religion, and it is this knowledge that Sufis have praised and promoted as *Tawhid-e-Adyan* or religious equality.

Maizbhandari Sufi saints articulate this concept through *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa*. *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa* or sovereign spirituality upholds the concept of *Tawhid-e-Adyan* or religious unity. Religious unity is the equality of different religious beliefs on the esoteric and spiritual grounds. Chittick situates this position within a wider metaphysical genealogy through Ibn al-'Arabi's doctrine of the Oneness of Being:

> Wahdat al-wujud or the Oneness of Being is a pluralist tendency of Ibn Arabi and his allegation about the unity of religions. His pantheistic leaning in mysticism tells about the existence of the manifested religions or Truth that is the appearance of the non-dual Truth in different forms of religion. The school of wahdat al-wujud, in general, affirmed that there is only One Necessary Being (Wajib al-wujud) and all other beings are nothing but the manifestation of the outward radiance of the Necessary Being. (Chittick, 1989, p. 79)

The saints believe that the outer shell of religions is analogous due to different ways of divine revelation. The saints of *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa* have the quality to unite people of analogous religions under one roof. These saints with their effusion in spirituality and communion promote unity and peace in the society.

Belayet-e-Mutlaqa is a reformed divine awakening that creates closeness to the reality. After the birth of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) the confluence of Nabuwwat and belayet became restricted, since prophecy was not needed anymore. After the demise of the prophet the dispute and debate about shariah began, conflicts arose, and people started moving away from spiritual affiliation and started focusing more on rituals, rites and cultures. Hossain states, “even individuals who were interested in religion became oblivious of the importance and benefit of wilayat-e-'uzmā, because of the sectarian conflicts and groundless propaganda. Such circumstances demanded the emergence of a spiritual leader. At such a juncture,

the leader of the saints Quṭubul Aqtab Gawthul Azam Pīrān-e-Pir (Hazrat Piran-e-pir Abdul Qader Jilani (r.)) emerged to reignite the spiritual aspiration in the hearts and to conduct reformation," (Maizbhandari, 2024, p. 48). After Ḥaḍrat Pīrān-e-Pīr's death, sectarianism gained further ground even as new Sufi orders continued to emerge. This period coincided, in Bengal, with the establishment of British colonial rule, under which the region's Muslim population became increasingly stratified along lines of caste, class, and reformist versus customary religious practice. The spread of print culture and polemical reformist literature sharpened internal doctrinal disputes even as it consolidated a shared Muslim identity, so that the appeal to a single, undifferentiated "Muslim community" obscured real and often bitter divisions between an urban, reformist ashraf leadership and a rural Muslim peasantry that continued to blend Islamic practice with local custom (Ahmed, 1981).

It is this historically documented fragmentation that the Maizbhandari Tariqa's theologians have in view when they describe the weakening of religious unity, ethics, and morality in this period, against this fragmentation, the Sufi leaders of Maizbhandari Tariqa present Wilayet-e-Mutlaqa-e-Ahmadi. This spirituality prefers Divine wills to the outward religious ordinances, rites, or rituals (Maizbhandari, 2024, p. 61). This Divine will does not reject outward appearances — the exoteric qualities of belief — but embraces the esoteric qualities that center on spirituality, in order to promote social and religious unity and end the division between religious extremists and sectarian societies. Syed Nasr Hossain argues that reading the multiplicity phenomenon of religions in the light of wahdat al-wujud means comprehending that each being in the universe is the theophany (*tajalli*) of a Divine name. Therefore, each religion reveals an aspect of the Divine Names and Qualities. In this regard, the multiplicity of religions is a direct result of the infinite richness of the Divine Being. (Nasr, 1991, p. 148)

Sufi saints of this era indulge in spiritual guidance to aspirants while removing the social discrimination. Spiritual effulgence is the primary goal of the saints used to remove human immoral qualities, habitual elements of human divisiveness, religious disparities, and religious conflicts. This era proposes the unity of religions over the

visible heterogeneous rituals and varied forms. Here is where *Tawhid-e-Adyan* or transcendental unity of religions proposed by Sufism and followed by Maizbhanadari Sufi order advocates inclusivity through *Tawhid*. This influences its followers and devotees to adhere to this generous philosophy of religious pluralism. Moreover, every follower trusts the spiritual capacities of the Maizbhandari Sufis and they know that anyone can receive the blessings of the Sufis. Schuon frames the underlying claim as follows:

> If the purest esotericism includes the whole truth — and that is the very reason for its existence — the question of 'orthodoxy' in the religious sense clearly cannot arise: direct knowledge of the mysteries could not be 'Moslem' or 'Christian' just as the sight of a mountain is the sight of a mountain and not something else. (Schuon, 1963, p. 139)

Sufi mystics or saints acknowledge this direct knowledge as the oneness of the ultimate truth that remains similar in every religious manifestation.

As the philosophy underlying *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa*, *Tawhid-e-Adyan* serves as the bridge the existing belief systems near Maizbhandari Tariqa that pose a challenge to this unique order that openly promotes social coherence and pluralism. "This 'maizbhandar' became the center of spirituality and famous as the birthplace of the great saint, the flag bearer of '*Tawhid-e-Adyan* spirituality', who accumulates the main principle of the religion and avoids religious discrimination and conflicts. It is the residence of the saint, who bridged between the ethics of the religion and its rituals." (Maizbhandari, 2024, p. 81). The name "Maizbhandar" is also significant for its meaning "middle house" that can be metaphorically interpreted as the connector in the middle, uniting two separate streams of beliefs: one that is extremely exclusive and the other that is inclusive. In other sense, Maizbhandar is open for the conservative and the moderate religious community. Therefore, the Sufi order has now become the center of religious harmony that promotes social cohesion, tolerance and respect towards other religions, sects and beliefs, and collective unity.

The core principles like *Tawhid-e-Adyan* and *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa* of this order significantly contributed to creating a Sufi order that is

pluralistic. It made the order an ocean of divine love and when myriads of devotees take a spiritual dive into the ocean, all of their sufferings, pains and divided hearts shape into an invisible form constantly seeking for divine love. Therefore, the lovers of the divine abundantly disperse similar love for every human being. Once the realization of the absolute truth takes a form in their heart, nothing else is capable of breaking the connection. This resonates with Schimmel's (1975) observation that the heart serves as the residence of God; it can also be described as the mirror that reflects God's essence. However, this mirror requires continual polishing through dedicated ascetic practices and unwavering acts of loving obedience, until all impurities and tarnish are removed, allowing it to reflect the original divine light. Maizbhandari Tariqa focuses more on this part of the Sufi tradition than the promotion of power, wealth, and authority. Though different sects of this order do not always follow this claim and emphasize wealth and authority.

Maizbhandari Tariqa in Comparative Sufi Context

Maizbhandari Tariqa draws the claim of its authenticity from the connected Sufi lineage. The founder of the order, Syed Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari, received his initial Sufi initiation within the Qadiriyya order before returning to Maizbhandar to introduce a new tariqa. Maizbhandari Sufis acknowledge their relation with other prominent Sufi orders such as Qadiriyyah, Chishtiyyah, Suhrawardiyyah, and Naqshbandiyyah Sufi orders. These Sufi orders historically shaped Sufi thought, practice, and social engagement on the Bengal frontier which is why many Sufi shrines in Chattogram and across the country are still venerated by people.

However, where the Qadiriyya and Chishtiyya orders are generally described as emphasizing structured chains of spiritual transmission, veneration of the founding saint, and, in the Chishti case, a strong ethic of service to the poor, Maizbhandari Tariqa distinguishes itself by elevating *Tawhid-e-Adyan* into a central concept of belief rather than a general spirit of tolerance. In this context, the order’s theological position resonates with Ibn al-'Arabi's doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud*, or the Oneness of Being, which similarly holds that all manifest beings are theophanies of the one Necessary Being (Chittick, 1989, p. 79). However, whereas

wahdat al-wujud is primarily a metaphysical account of existence, *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa* reframes this unity as a practical, socially active form of sainthood explicitly intended to dissolve sectarian boundaries among living religious communities in a specific, religiously plural setting.

This comparison suggests that Maizbhandari Tariqa's distinctive contribution to Sufi thought is not the concept of religious unity itself, which has precedents across the wider Sufi tradition, but its systematic institutionalization of that unity through named doctrines (*Tawhid-e-Adyan*, *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa*) and a structured training program (*Usul-e-Sa'ba*) explicitly developed for a multi-religious social context.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings

This analysis of Syed Delowar Hossain Maizbhandari's texts yields three principal findings. First, the esoteric teachings of Maizbhandari Tariqa are not an ordinary collection of tolerant sentiments but a philosophical structure, moving from a metaphysical premise (*Tawhid-e-Adyan*) through a sovereign spirituality (*Belayet-e-Mutlaqa*) to an embodied training program (*Usul-e-Sa'ba*, *Zikr*, *Telawat-e-ozud*, *Sema*). Second, this structure functions simultaneously as theology and as social framework. The practices of the Tariqa are both metaphysical and philosophical ideas that assert the unity of religions. The order manages interfaith relations within a religiously mixed community using these frameworks. Third, when placed alongside older Sufi orders such as the Qadiriyya, Chishtiyya, Suhrawardiyyah, and Naqshbandiyyah, the uniqueness of the Maizbhandari Tariqa lies less in originating the idea of religious unity than in promoting it as an explicit, teachable doctrine suited to the religious plurality of Bangladesh. This indicates the multi-dimensional functionality of Maizbhandari Tariqa. This makes Maizbhandari Tariqa an important case study for sociology and religious studies for its promotion of religious tolerance, social unity and universal humanism.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, this study offers three recommendations for further scholarly and practical engagement.

1. The comparative religion and Islamic studies curricula in Bangladeshi higher education could incorporate Maizbhandari Tariqa's model of *Tawhid-e-Adyan* as a regionally grounded case study in indigenous approaches to religious tolerance and social unity.
2. The interfaith dialogue initiatives operating in religiously diverse districts of Bangladesh may draw on the order's *Usul-e-Sa'ba* training model as a practical, community-based method for building tolerance, since it is already embedded in local devotional life rather than externally imposed.
3. Future research should extend the primarily textual and theological approach taken here with field-based study of how ordinary followers, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, interpret and practice these esoteric doctrines in daily life, which would test whether the pluralistic theology documented in this study matches the lived practice on the ground.

CONCLUSION

Maizbhandari tariqa is unique to Bangladesh and was founded by Syed Ahmad Ullah Maizbhandari, who was initially initiated into the Qadiriyya Tariqa by Syed Abu Shahama. Through spiritual practice and mentorship, he established a new Tariqa in his village, Maizbhandar, attracting numerous followers across various religions. The order's principles emphasize love and humanity, central to Sufism, transcending religious and cultural boundaries. Sufism emphasizes divine love (Ishq) as the essence of unity, which has historically facilitated the spread of Islam and communal harmony in the Indian subcontinent. This tariqa exemplifies this by promoting values of love, brotherhood, and social justice, influencing lower-caste Hindus and Buddhists and fostering religious tolerance and harmony. *Tawhid-e-Adyan*, or the transcendental unity of religions, is central to Maizbhandari Sufism. This philosophy asserts the esoteric unity of all religions,

emphasizing the inner spiritual truths over external rituals and symbols. The order's saints advocate for this unity, promoting peace and social cohesion. The teachings align with transcendental unity of religions, suggesting that all religions share a common ultimate reality despite their outward differences. Through its principles and practices, this tariqa showcases the role of Sufism in promoting social harmony and religious pluralism. *Belayet-e-Mutlaqa* or sovereign spirituality concept emphasizes the esoteric knowledge, love, and unity which transcend religious boundaries, fostering a peaceful and cohesive society. This study highlights the potential of Sufism in addressing contemporary social issues and promoting global peace. More importantly, this paper reveals the capacity of locally originated philosophical ideas in tackling extremism and intolerance in the contemporary society.

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