

Religious Syncretism, Conversion and Practices among the Muslims: A Case Study of Hussain Dighi of Uttar Dinajpur District of West Bengal

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Abstract

Religious Syncretism is a capsulated term in which it has been observed blending traits of cultural beliefs and practices. The Hussain Dighi (pond) is located at Daspara Gram Panchayat under Uttar Dinajpur District of West Bengal, India. It is perceived by the locals that Hussain Dighi is sacred. The Dighi is covered by the villages having faith in Islam. Since time immemorial, the oral history claimed that the villagers have converted into Nasya Sekh Muslims from Hindu Rajbansis at the hands of a sacred man called Hussain. According to the view of the local people, they are decedents of tenth generation of NasyaSekh Muslims. A number of rituals and practices have been found in their activities centering on the sacred Dighi and have very much linked with local Rajbansi culture, by and large. As a result it is undoubtedly said that HussainDighi has measured as a productive center of religious syncretism. The paper is based on the secondary as well as primary data.

Key Words: *Hussain Dighi, Religious Syncretism, Conversion, Syncretic beliefs and practices etc.*

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Introduction:

India is characterized by rich diversity. During the arrival of the Aryans, there was an interaction with conflict, cooperation and synthesis of different cultural/religious groups. While Brahminism imposed an exclusionist caste hierarchy on society, other streams like Jainism, Buddhism, Kabir, Nanak and multiple local sects like Jotiba, Khandoba, Tukaram, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Tantra, etc. contributed to the synthesizing of local cultures. While kings, zamindars and upper castes exploited, irrespective of their religion, the lower castes intermingled and led to the development of syncretic traditions. The term syncretism is associated with multi concepts but it has actual relevance with religion. It refers to the synthesis of different religious forms. It is a controversial and challenging term which has undergone many historical transformations in meaning.

Syncretism is an important platform of multi-cultural streams, offers an opportunity to be strong cultural amalgam and multi-confessional harmony. The concept of syncretism is covered by the cultural reciprocity (Das: 2003). Syncretism is also connected with the system of economy, diet, kinship and in politics (Levison: 1994). The term syncretism was originally used by Plutarch for 'fusion of religious cults' which occurred in the Graeco-roman world. 300BC-200CE. Christianity, from its beginning, combined many religious ideas and rituals (Brandon: 1970). Syncretism is the fusion of different beliefs and practices. These colorful mixed kind of beliefs have clearly been seen in Christians, Buddhists on one hand and manifestation of Sufism in Islam is running to strengthen the belief of monotheism. Shaw and Stewart (1994) have viewed syncretism being the "infiltration" of "incompatible traditions", seems to portray a clear reality of syncretism today.

The focus of this paper is on sociological discourse of religious conversion and practices selected with religious shrine of Nasya Sekh Muslims in Bengal taking 'syncretism' in perspective. The paper is based on secondary as well as primary data that is qualitative in nature.

Religious Approach to Syncretism:

The sociological understanding is that religion is universal phenomena. Religion is combination of different beliefs, practices, rituals, spiritualism and symbolic metaphors. Several recognition forms have been found in the religious institution but three are commonly identified. Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism, and Buddhism are ethical religions. Second, Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism are theistic religions. The followers of these religions worship one or many gods. Animism is third, in which the followers believe that spirit can help or harm people (Thio: 1989).

Historical Account of Conversion of Muslims in West Bengal:

It is very difficult to go too far into the Muslim history of Bengal. Historical data in this regard are rather scarce. There is no proper documentary evidence as to when Muslims first entered into this area. History reveals that the existence of various kingdoms was known to the Muslim world even in the remote past. The Bakthiar Khalji's invasion and the subsequent invasion of Ilyas Shah and the Mughals caused penetration of Muslim political forces in India in and Bengal in particular.

Different scholarly writings have suggested that Islamic door was open in the province of Sindh in India during 715 C.E. It has been said that Islam was clearly visible in India in 1020 and 1194. The most authentic and acceptable historicity in connection with the conversion of Muslims in India in general and in West Bengal in particular has been narrated by R.M.Eaton (1997) in his publication namely, "The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760". He claimed, associated with the conversion, four theories were found. The first of these, which he called the Immigration theory; it was not exactly the conversion but the Islamic diffusion. It is viewed, as good number of India's Muslims have claimed, they were the descendents of other Muslims, who had migrated from the Iranian plateau or sailed across the Arabian Sea.

The second theory of Islamization is 'Religion of the Sword' thesis; it primarily emphasized on military force of the diffusion of Islam in India and Bengal in particular but it was debatable. Some scholars were strongly against it like Peter Hardy (1789 as found in Eton: 1997) has observed, those who argued that Indian Muslims are the products of forced conversion failed to define either *force* or *conversion* leaving one to presume that a society can and will alter its religious identity simply because it has a sword at its neck. Precisely, how this mechanism worked, either in theoretical or in practical terms, has never, however, been satisfactorily explained. Moreover, proponents of this theory seem to have confused conversion to the Islamic religion with the extension of Turko-Iranian rule in North India between 1200 and 1760, a confusion probably originating in too literal a translation of primary Persian accounts narrating the "Islamic" conquest of India. The force theory of Islamization was not fit for all geographical areas in Bengal in particular. Dacca was the residence of the Nawab for about a hundred years, but it contains a smaller proportion of Muslims than any of the surrounding districts, except Faridpur. Malda and Murshidabad contain the old capitals, which were the center of Musalman rule for nearly four and a half centuries, and yet the Muslims form a smaller proportion of the population than they do in the adjacent districts of Dinajpur, Rajshahi, and Nadia.

Religion of Patronage theory is the third theory of Islamization. This is the view that Indians of the premodern period converted to Islam in order to receive some non-religious favor from the ruling class—relief from taxes, promotion in the bureaucracy, and so forth. The last, which Eton has termed, Religion of Social Liberation thesis that postulates the rigid and discriminatory nature of Hindu caste system against its lower caste order. When Islam arrived with egalitarian approach which was spread by the Sufis, general masses converted to Islam.

During the late sixteenth century of Mughal period (1574), Muslim conversion was found mainly from rural peasants and artisans of Bengal. In Bengal, Muslim converts were drawn mainly from Rajbansi, Pod, Chandal, Koch, and other indigenous groups that had been only lightly exposed to Brahmanic culture.

In another context, it has been observed by Mukhopadhyay (2003), the lower grade of Koches in northern zone of Bengal, in which they were refused their respectful status in the Hindu fold and attracted to egalitarian approach of Islam and thus they converted to Islam (NasyaSekh).

Conversion by Sufi, Fakir and Darbesh:

In the context of India, another name of Sufis is Fakir and Darbesh. The first Sufi religious order came to India was that of Chistia at the hand of Khawaja Garib Nawaz, during the era of Sultan in 12th century (Saheb: 2003).

In the beginning Sufism developed in Mesopotamia, Arabia, Iran and modern Afganistan. It was formalized by the end of 8th century (Farugui: 1984). The Sufis aim for a direct relationship with God and thus their basic features incorporate from various sources including Hinduism.

Myths, Legends and Oral History of HussainDighi:

The Hussain Dighi is located at Daspara Gram Panchayat of Uttar Dinajpur district of West Bengal, India. As it is claimed by the record of BLRO (Block Land revenue officer, Chopra Circle) that the whole area of Dighi occupies about of 25 big has of land. There is no proper documentary source in relation to the depth and origin of the pond. According to field data, the pond is surrounded by the three villages which are namely Godugochh, Glantigarh and Tepagoan and the villagers are Muslims by faith.

The local term of pond is Dighi. Hence, the Hussain pond is referred to as Dighi. From the perspective of Durkheimian view, it is known as sacred, because it is set apart from other ponds and worshiped by the locals.

Our main task was to search out the actual history behind its name. The question was asked to the older generation and received several answers from different persons. The most acceptable answer is being explored here.

It is believed that Hazrat Imam Hussain and Hassan the grandsons of Prophet Muhammad, and both of them being considered as martyrs for the hosting of Islamic flag and tried to carry on them forefather's tradition. They were hurtfully killed by Yazid and not only that, were denied water of the River. The water of Feratkul River has likeness to this pond and thus the locals named it as HussainDighi. Another section of older generation thought that the entire area was under the kingship of Hussain Shah. During his monarchy a pond was dug for the sake of agricultural activity as well and from this perspective such a name was given to the pond.

Since time immemorial, in connection with the name of HussainDighi, another legend is that an unknown beggar (fakir) named Hussain had resided beside the Dighi. As per the view of the locals, he would always keep silence and devoted himself towards God (Allah). He did not feel uneasy if anyone wanted to talk with him. Gradually, in this way, the local neighboring villagers were able to make a rapport with this sacred man. The villagers generally rushed to him, when they felt any health problem and the fakir tried his level best to solved. Hence, this sort of oral history provides another myth behind its name.

History reveals that the northern part of Bengal (commonly known as North Bengal) was occupied by the people of Rajbangsis. As the time passed, the people of the pond got converted into Muslims through the fakir of Hussain. Now, they are tenth generation of converted Muslims and also known as NasyaSekh. At present the person who claimed that his family as the descendent of Hussain fakir has been taking care of this sacred pond and also known as fakir to the locals.

Religious Fair (Mela):

The neighbouring area population of Hussain Dighi is primarily dominated by Nasya Sekh Muslims but from macro perspective, the whole area is surrounded by the diverse religious faiths. We are informed that ritual is a pertinent issue of religion. There are a number of rituals that are observed over the pond. It is celebrated on first Baisak of every Bengali year and a mela (fair) is held around the *dighi* (pond).

However, preparation of this grand fair, that is providing infrastructural facilities like construction of mela huts to accommodate the pilgrims etc. is done under the supervision of present fakir and during the mela time he has the sole responsibility to form a committee.

The huge gathering over the dighi includes people of various affiliations with respect of to caste, class, religion and sex. They are usually coming to the fakir for *mannat* (wish) following their own custom like Islam and Hinduism etc.

The observance of death anniversary of fakir Hussain is known as 'Urs'. This religious occasion is generally followed in the first Baisak of Bengal New Year. At night, the mela committee organizes *jolsa* (religious discussion) in which the local Rajbanshi and Santal people too gladly participate on this holly occurrence.

Hussain Dighi: Different Methods of Practices:

It is already highlighted that the Hussain Dighi area is covered by different religious communities like Muslims and Rajbanshi and also noted that Muslims are converts from the Rajbanshis. They had full of similar social and religious customs and practices which are found during their visit of Hussain dighi. The Nasya Sekh continued their worship of SatyaPir as Satya Narayan Deo and BisahariBibi as Bisahari Debi.

Though the practice of offering the banana with *sindur* (vermilion), *khir* (pies), *nunia chal* (nunina rice), *murga* (male chicken) etc are the example of fusion of Rajbanshi religious traits with Islamic ones that are all acceptable to fakir of this sacred pond. Actually, these are not allowed in Islam theoretically but here we observed these practices due to strong influence of the local Hindu Rajbansi tradition.

Conclusion:

From the above journey, it is to say that Hussain dighi shows broader vision of universal brotherhood among the local NasyaSekh Muslims and Rajbanshis. The number of devotees increase mainly due to its supernatural power. They highly admire the mystic power

and veneration by way of offering banana and *murga* etc by the local people particularly Hindu Rajbanshi and their rationale by the Muslims illustrate the importance of this sacred pond as a great synthesizing shrine and it is also the symbol of communal harmony.

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