

# Sufism and Ajan Fakir of Assam

(Translated by Smti Jolly Saikia from original Assamese version.)

**Ms. Rahena Saikia \***

*The name of Ajan Fakir is a familiar name all over Assam. Though a Muslim saint, he is known among and respected by both the Hindus as well as the Muslims of Assam. His unique contribution is the composition of devotional songs in Assamese language known as Jikirs. The Jikirs continue to be sung by Assamese Muslims till date. The Guwahati Station of All India Radio also regularly broadcasts Jikirs sung by well-known singers. It is not unlikely that the Muslim saint was influenced by the tradition and the style of Naam composed by the Vaishnava saint Mahapurush Shrimanta Sankardev.*

*The author of this article points out that Ajan Fakir alias Hazrat Miran Shah along with his brother Hazrat Nabi Shah came from Baghdad to India in spiritual pursuit. They first spent considerable time at the dargah of Hazrat Moinuddin Chisti at Ajmer and then at the dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia at Delhi. According to the author, their association with these two Sufi centers had abiding influence on them. The author also describes Ajan Fakir as a Sufi saint.*

*On the whole, the author has in her article described the main characteristics of Sufism and has also attempted to throw some light on the life and teachings of the saint Ajan Fakir.*



A section of Muslims refuse to accept Sufism as a valid faith. In fact it is indeed a practical and genuine facet of Islam. It is necessary that Tasauf or Sufism be brought closer to Islam as there is no conflict between the Sufi vision or Mahzub and higher traditions and spirituality of Islam. Rather there exists a harmonious relationship between the two. However, a section of Islamic scholars question the need of developing such a relationship between Tasauf or Sufism and Islam. They hold that Islam is a simple and straightforward faith, which does not need any new elements in it. Answer to this doubt is that the religious vision is limitless. It aims at merging with limitless reality. After all should we not pursue our quest through meditation and intense devotion to find the merciful, Supreme Creator of the universe? The power that is also described as *Ekameva-adwitiyam* (The only one and the matchless)!

A question naturally occurs now as to what are the characteristics of a Sufi?

According to some, a person who wears 'jama-i-suf' -- clothes made of Pashmina, is called a Sufi. Others hold that a Sufi is, Saaf I Awwal, which means that he is the one who stands in the rank of moral beings and spiritual seekers. People of the Sufi sect consider themselves as "Ashab-I-Suffar", that is the people whose sole purpose in life is to serve God. There are still others who believe that after Rasul Hazrat Mohammad, anyone who is capable of following the tenets of Islam with full piety can be called a Sufi. 'Saaf' meaning purity or purification or the 'best part' forms the basis of Sufism.

A true Sufi is one who loves God selflessly and spends his entire life in the worship of God by detaching himself from worldly affairs and by remaining indifferent to material comforts and sensual pleasures. His soul is pure and he treats all as equal and spreads the light of knowledge everywhere. Like a duck,

which does not drench itself in spite of living in water, a Sufi though being a part of this world, does not let his mind, spirit and soul be corrupted by worldly temptations and attachments. Their soul is pure and clean or 'saaf' and hence they are called Sufis.

According to some, a flawless worshipper of a high spiritual order is called a Sufi. According to another definition, a Sufi is one who has made himself pure with the love of God by discarding all worldly pleasures and engrossing himself in the pursuit of the love of Allah.

Another school of thought says a Sufi is one whose soul is pure and who has freed himself from all sensual pleasures. It may be mentioned here that in India there still exists a class of Sufis alongside Hindu saints and sadhus who like to practice their religious beliefs away from the public eye.

The main principle of Sufism is honest character and they can be classified into three types:

- 1) A true Sufi is one who is not a hypocrite and who attains satisfaction by obeying the command of Allah.
- 2) One who treats everybody as equal and conducts himself with love and respect of one and all.
- 3) One who disciplines his senses and keeps his mind and soul pure.

In short, a Sufi is one who is free from all attachment except for his love and attachment towards the Almighty.

Sufis can be classified into three types:

- (1) Sufis of the first order whose sole occupation is the worship of God.
- (2) The second class called 'Mutassa-wif' who tirelessly strives to be included in the first group.
- (3) The third group called 'Mustas wif' which keeps itself busy by maintaining the external appearance of the other two classes, by wearing blue, woolen dress of an ascetic. But he is not engrossed in the discipline of Tasauf.

The first two classes of Sufis are called 'Sahib-usul' meaning real Sufis and the third group is referred to as the 'Sahib-Fuzul' meaning a superficial seeker. Present day society is full of such men.

Among the Sufi saints in Assam, the most notable name is that of Hazrat Miran Shah. He had preached among the people of Assam the five tenets of Islam and called upon the common Muslim people of Assam to follow these principles. The five tenets are:

- 1) 'Shahada' which means reading the 'Kalima' and believing in one Allah, i.e., practicing 'monotheism'.
- 2) 'Salat' which means purifying oneself through 'oju' and reading the 'namaj' five times daily.
- 3) 'Siam' which means observing fast in the month of Ramajan every year and practicing religion according to Sunni and Hanifi Islamic rites.

Hazrat Miran Shah's brother was Hazrat Nabi Shah. They had come from far away Baghdad to Ajmer Sharif, a reputed centre of spiritual pursuit. They had spent some time at the 'dargah' of Hazrat Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti at Ajmer Sharif and the dargah of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia at Delhi. The two brothers then entered Assam's Kamrup district via Gaur region of Bengal. While in Kamrup, they stayed at Hajo for sometime. Here he learnt the primary elementary form of the Assamese language. Thereafter, he reached Gurgaon, the then capital of the Ahom kings, after crossing the Darrang District. Finally, the brothers settled permanently at a place called Sunpura, near Gurgaon.

The Muslim society of Assam during those days was influenced by immoral and irreligious practices. Superstitions ruled the roost and the Assamese Muslims appeared to be moving away from the Islamic philosophy of truthfulness. They were Muslim in name only and discarded the age-old practices of performing the *namaz* and observing fast. Noted Historian Sahabuddin Talish describes the situation thus "As for the descendants of the Musalmans who had been taken prisoner in former times and had chosen to marry locally, they acted exactly in the same manner as of the Assamese and had nothing of

Islam in them except the name.” Sir Edward Gait in his History of Assam echoed similar thoughts. He had written that the contemporary Assamese Muslim Society was Muslim in name only. Against this backdrop Hazrat Miran Shah tried to infuse the spiritual and moral practices in the Assamese Muslim Community by introducing the practice of ‘namaj’ at Sunpura through invocation of ‘Ajan’. Hence, he came to be known as “Ajan Peer.” Prior to his arrival, the practice of reciting ‘Ajan’ in Masjids did not prevail. Ajan Peer Miran Shah also initiated the practice of cultivating mystical and spiritual philosophy of sufism through the medium of songs in Assamese known as ‘**Jikirs**’. Hazrat Miran Shah was a multi-faceted personality; a poet, lyricist, composer of Jikirs, Sufi saint, religious guru, social reformer, traveller, singer and a leader of the Sunni or Hanifi Muslims, all rolled into one. In all his pursuits, his brother Hazrat Nabi Shah ably helped Hazrat Miran Shah. Having been the followers of the Sufi sect of Hazrat Moinuddin Chisti, tracing their family tradition to the times of Hazrat Mohammad, the Shah brothers too were regarded as Chistis. This can be also called a *gotra* name, which could be either derived, from spiritual *diksha* or by birth.

The book called “Ajan Fakir, The poet saint of Assam”; written in English by noted Assamese litterateur Sayed Abdul Mallik is a valuable book. If Ajan Fakir entered Assam via Gaur in Bengal there are reasons to believe that his Jikir compositions have the influence of Bengali Sufi lyricist ‘Lalon Fakir’. The Nam Sankirtans of the Vaishnavites also influenced the Jikirs during those times. Miran Shah Fakir taught the philosophy of Sufism to the Muslims who had settled in Assam since 1205, in a simple yet spirited language of the Jikirs.

**One of the main characteristics of Sufi philosophy or Tasauf is secrecy. Hence, a true Sufi saint refrains from calling himself a Sufi. Rather, he silently worships God and follows his edicts. Sufis thrive on the tradition of Guru Parampara. We hope that Sufi saints like Ajan Fakir and his brother Hazrat Nabi Shah will be able to thrive in Assam during times to come. What the present day society needs is not merely the man who dressed like a fakir but who practices spirituality silently and who remains deeply engrossed in the worship of the Almighty. May the Lord shower his blessings on Hazrat Miran Shah and Hazrat Nabi Shah!**

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- Married to Shri Azimuddin Saikia of Sibsagar (presently in Guwahati), the author did her masters in Political Science from Gauhati University and worked as a lecturer in a girl’s college. However, she has preferred to function as a social activist and freelance journalist. As a social activist, she is close to the Gandhian fraternity. She has written several books aimed at children. A few of these have already been published. A research scholar with varied interests she was founder of “Saraswat Sadhana Santha.”